

## **“THE SIX SOURCES, HUMANISM IN PARTICULAR”**

a sermon given at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

by the Rev, Ken Sawyer

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This sermon is the third and probably the final one for now in a series that began two weeks ago when I talked about the Purposes and Principles of the denomination to which this church belongs, the UUA. I focused on the seventh principle, that we unite to affirm and promote the interconnected web of human existence of which we are a part. Then last week, Erin preached on the first principle, that we unite to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

You can find all seven of the principles in the front of the hymnbook, just before the hymns begin. And you will note that actually, those seven principles take up less than half of the document. Under the principles is a section that begins, “The living tradition we share draws from many sources.” And then it lists six. Well, actually, in the hymnbook it lists five, because that’s how many we acknowledged at the time the book was published.

Indeed, if you’ve ever noticed, the hymnbook is arranged into those five areas. The first 101 hymns are about the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life. It contains hymns like “O Life That Maketh All Things New,” “Mysterious Presence, Source of All,” “For the Beauty of the Earth,” and celebrations of the seasons of nature.

Then we’ve got a section that celebrates “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transcending power of love.” It’s not that that emphasis is the only source our tradition draws from, but neither is it one of a hundred. It’s a big deal with us, and you can read the concerns it contains at the bottom of the pages: commitment and action, love and compassion, in time to come, freedom, labor and learning, peace, justice, and stewardship of the earth.

Another of our six sources of religious sustenance is “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” This is not a common affirmation in the religions of our country and world. From the earliest days of Unitarianism in New England, advanced thinkers like Emerson were trying to learn what they could from Hindu texts.

This remains an interest we have, and it remains one we struggle with more than with most. We cherish the thought that the wisdom of all sages can add to the depth and breadth of humanity’s religious understanding, but care is required, and respect for the origins of that wisdom. We go on pioneering and learning at the task, while we sing words by Tagore, Confucius, the Buddha, and Rumi.

And then there is the sizable section of hymns that reflect our respect for “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” We are in touch with the degree to which this church evolved from Christian beginnings; that we continue to live in a predominantly Christian country; that Unitarians and Universalists for centuries have found guidance, wisdom, and inspiration in the words and the model of Jesus of Nazareth, and that a significant number of us still do.

And we know that many of our members bring with them to our community a sense of the continuing personal importance of the Jewish faith tradition. The best of both traditions can enrich us all.

Of course, trying to say what that best is in ten words or less, one is bound to leave a whole lot out, as some grumblers have noted. But the goal of universal love is certainly deep in our Universalist as well as our Unitarian traditions. And once we get to singing, we have “Amazing Grace,” “A Mighty Fortress,” “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” “By the waters of Babylon,” and the songs of the Christian and Jewish holidays. Let me skip the fifth source for a little while and go on to the sixth, the one that isn’t in the hymnbook, though there are certainly songs there that would fit.

The document just as you see it in the hymnbook was adopted overwhelmingly by the continental General Assemblies of the UUA in 1984 and 1985. But in 1995, by vote of the General Assembly, which acknowledged that among the sources we draw from are “spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” In the latest survey of UUs continentally, people who identify their theology as nature-centered make up the second-largest group among us.

To imagine what hymns that section would have included, you can start with the heading in the back of the book for Pagan hymns like “The Earth, the Water, the Fire, the Air,” “Chant for the Seasons,” the one native American song, and many of those listed in the topical index under “Nature and the Countryside.”

Last year the UUA published a book, *Essex Conversations*, that contained 31 papers on UU religious education that had been part of a conference on the north shore. Some of the chapters are quite good, and I expect we will find ways of putting some to thought-provoking use around here.

One is by my colleague, Makanah Morriss, co-minister of our church in Laramie, Wyoming. (Yes, we have a church in Laramie. Just last Sunday I attended services at our UU fellowship in Billings, Montana. I mention this in case you find yourself on the road on a Sunday morning. Even in places where you might not expect it, there may well be a UU congregation and probably a real warm welcome.)

Makanah offers an interesting perspective on the Purposes and Principles, as we call the whole page, principles, purposes, and the couple sentences at the end. She had been to a conference where “it occurred to the participants ... that [the] six Sources perhaps should come first in our Principles and Purposes, followed by our Principles. It seemed to these folks, and it definitely seems to me, that in actuality our seven principles have come out of our individual and collective experiencing of the wisdom and insight of the six Sources.

The six sources are what offer to me the sacred attraction to be a Unitarian Universalist. It is our inherent pluralism as a religious people that attracts most if not all folks to our liberal religious path in a culture where most mainstream denominations pursue only two or three sacred sources at the most. Ours has been a religious heritage open to many streams of religious and spiritual insight. In our Principles and Purposes we clearly claim this heritage and this gift to our followers.

“I believe that the core of our evolving Unitarian Universalist faith is our use of these Sources of sacred wisdom. These sources will offer to us current answers and continuing questions as we grapple with life’s basic issues. [They] invite us into dialogue

with the past, with the writers and teachers through the ages who have pursued each path. They invite us into an experience of the present as we engage in the different spiritual disciplines each has to offer. They open us to visions of the future as we look for ways to create a world of justice, equity, and compassion.” [176-177]

An optimistic outlook that Makaanah hopes will inform religious education in our churches for young and old alike. At least I like the novel attempt to get us to focus our eyes on the bottom half of the page.

But what happened to the other source, “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” All our hymns this morning are from that section. When I said that in the latest survey of UUs showed nature-based believers coming in second, there were twice as many humanists, almost half of those surveyed.

But it isn’t clear exactly what that nearly half was declaring. As a word, humanist can include much of Christian theology ever since the Renaissance. Or it can refer narrowly to a religious and philosophical movement that has had a significant impact on American society, especially on Unitarianism. As an indicator of the confusion, if you turn to Humanism in the hymnbook’s topical index, the first suggestion is “God of Grace and God of Glory”; whereas some people would suggest that humanism is a faith that has no place for God.

That question, among others, was the source of much discussion among humanist leaders in our movement and outside in the 1920s and ‘30s. The fullest expression of what consensus was possible among many of them appeared in 1933 as the Humanist Manifesto. Another new book from the UUA, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism*, sets that document in its historical context and measures its effect. The book was written by former UUA president Bill Schulz, now head of Amnesty International USA.

In the long run, the major effect of the humanist movement was the partial transformation of Unitarianism. This did not come with strong opposition from those who thought that belief in God should be a necessary part of being a Unitarian. And indeed, some of the humanists did believe in God, or a cosmic power, or the Ideal, or whatever. But most were nontheists, not deniers, just convinced that the religion was the effort of humans to create greater happiness on earth.

Schulz notes that “Within Unitarianism, the controversy subsided in 1936 with Frederick May Eliot’s election as president of the American Unitarian Association (AUA). Religious humanism was now a fully accepted theological option within the denomination. But as a separate, stand-alone movement, it never grew very large. By the mid 1930s, for all practical purposes, religious humanism as an independent institution had been catapulted into effective decline.” [88]

It had started out as a force within Unitarianism, championed by a handful of ardent ministers, all of whom came out of more conservative, Protestant religious traditions. For a while it picked up some adherents outside Unitarianism, but as Bill notes, in that larger incarnation religious humanism faded quickly, though in modest form it struggles on as an independent organization. But for the most part, religious humanism settled comfortably into our movement, where it has contributed much, though in updated version of the Manifesto’s outlook.

I like to think it was tempered and reformed by encounter with our other sources. The first, the experience of transcending mystery and wonder, was sometimes inadequately included in a manifesto whose signers were often (not always) more concerned with religious belief than religious experience. The social action emphasis was there in the Manifesto from the beginning, but by now most religious humanists are less convinced that socialism is the full and only answer. More notice is now paid to the tragic dimension in life than it was by earlier humanists. The emphasis on nature has moderated the Manifesto's insistence that "all associations and institutions exist for the fulfillment of human life." [xxvii]

But as Bill Schulz notes, "consider religious humanism's courageous faith that the future of the world is in human hands – not those of an angry God or inexorable fate. Humanism beckons us to believe that we can make a difference to history.... [And] what kind of people would Unitarian Universalists be without humanism" generous contention that the blessings of life are available to all, not just the Chosen or the Saved, and that they appear not in the miraculous or extraordinary but in the simple dress of everyday? [xiv]

Religious humanism remains a vital, vibrant part of our UU mix, our way of trying to make faith in the world, aided by a rich array of wonderful sources, and our own experiences, and the company we share.