

## **The Sacred Role of Reason**

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered April 15, 2018*

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I remember an incident when I must have been about ten years old. I must have been, because at the time my younger sister was about three, and it involved a little heated exchange between her and my mother. They were in the bathroom together, and my mother was trying to obtain my sister Barbie's cooperation. (Yes, my parents, clueless about popular culture, name one kid Ken and another Barbie.) Anyway, they were in the bathroom, Barbie taking a bath, objecting to every direction my mom gave. She was being thoroughly uncooperative. Finally, in frustration, I heard my mom exclaim "Listen, who's the boss?" To which Barbie replied without a moment's hesitation the answer that she knew in her bones to be true. "Me." she said, matter-of-factly.

Any of us who have ever tried reasoning with a three year old know how incredibly frustrating – and enlightening – it can be. Frustrating because a typical three year old just doesn't reason things out the way we do, and enlightening because, well, a typical three year old just doesn't reason things out the way we do.

As many of you know, this winter and spring I've been devoting a series of sermons on the six sources of the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism. These are the sources that are spelled out as sort of supporting evidence for our seven principles, which are printed in the front of our hymnal, on the back of our weekly orders of service, and in the opening pages of every issue of the UU World, our denomination's magazine. These principles and sources are all over the place, and form

the foundation of our religious movement. We are a non-creedal religion, but I'm mindful of the quip I heard some years ago, that our adopted principles are about as close to a creed as the word "damnit" is to swearing.

So I want to start by doing a little review of these sources as a way of introducing the source we will consider today: *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.* If you read these sources in order, as they are listed on the bottom half of the back of the order of service, this is the fifth of the six sources.

To understand more fully who we are and what we are about, to really discover the richness, the variety, and the profound depth of our tradition, we turn not so much to our principles but to our sources. They are the wells which quench our collective thirst. Most of us have those that are most significant to us, most of us don't fully embrace all of them, and some of us may feel quite comfortable rejecting one or two of them completely. But our faith tradition is fed by them all in various ways; they all contribute to the spiritual foundation upon which we stand. While our principles state what it is we strive to *do*, the sources define who we *are*.

So a quick review of what we have looked at so far: Our first source, *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*, we saw as both the historical descendant of American Transcendentalism as well as an expression of contemporary mysticism in Unitarian Universalism. It represents one of the essential foundations of liberal religion: that it is not through teaching or doctrine that

truth is revealed; rather, it is our own direct experience of the holy that forms the essential core of truth for each of us.

The second source, *words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love*, tells us that it is in the lives we lead, and in the inspiration from others, that our religious faith is practiced. We know the way we live our lives matters. We know that love is a transforming power, and justice in this world is a religious matter, and we take tremendous inspiration for those who have fought for justice and compassion in every age and land.

Thirdly, we have *wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life*. Implicit in this is the acknowledgement that there is no one exclusive path to truth, and even though many of us have turned away from traditional religious teachings or institutions, there is wisdom to be gained from centuries of religious thought and practice, especially when we are faced with difficult ethical decisions, or when feeling a need to deepen our spiritual lives.

Then we have *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves*, which is, of course, the primary religious tradition of the culture in which we live and the historical context in which Unitarianism *and* Universalism developed. We also acknowledge that within the teaching of Christianity is the primary injunction to practice faith by loving our neighbors as ourselves, a teaching that is very relevant even if we don't embrace all aspects of Christian theology.

Then we come to today's 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*. Next week we'll be looking at an additional source that is not listed in the earlier editions of our hymnbook, because it was added to the list after this book was published – a testament to the fact that our tradition is indeed a living tradition. The principles and sources were originally adopted in 1985, our current hymnbook was first published in 1993, and the sixth source was added in 1995. That source is *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 this source, we find an eternal and contemporary need to find connection with the world of nature from which we are often separated, particularly inviting the changing seasons to guide our spirits.

It would be simple to say that of these sources, we simply pick which ones are relevant to us and incorporate them into our own free and responsible search for truth. While that is true, we must also remember that these sources are not just for us as individuals – they constitute the evolving tradition of Unitarian Universalism and they have each, in their own unique way, shaped our faith. This is perhaps no more true than it is with the source that we look at today – humanist teachings. Even though its presence has waned in recent years in our congregations, humanism has had a singularly powerful influence on both Protestantism and on Unitarian Universalism, an influence that is easy to overlook.

Presenting this source is a challenge for me. As many of you know, I have a strong affinity with the concept of humanism as a philosophy and a religious path. In fact, I often describe my personal theology as “humanist

mystic.” Humanism is the door through which I entered Unitarian Universalism, and where I find my ultimate resting place when caught in theological quandaries. Humanism forms, for me, the closest single model for religious truth there is.

Yet saying that I have trouble embracing the language of this source as an expression of what I find most inspiring in humanism. The active language here is negative and restricting – we are counseled to heed and warned against – in contrast to what is generally more positive, affirming, and inspiring language in our other sources. I believe that humanism is much more than a counsel and a warning; it can be uplifting and inspiring as well. Through a vital and affirming humanism, we can fill our sometimes empty lives with purpose and mission, and be called to love the world and our fellow beings with intense passion. But the negative language of this source was crafted specifically to include some counsel and warning for our tradition, for one of the hallmarks of liberal religion is that rationality and critical thinking don’t get checked at the door. Throughout the ages, religious belief has all too easily become irresponsible – literally unresponsive to truths discovered elsewhere – and belligerent in advocating its right to dictate its one form of truth above all others. More than anything else, humanism has held up for us the value of critical thinking, and given us a vital check on the lure of blind faith.

So even though the language of this source doesn’t fully or accurately define what humanism is and can be, today I do want to embrace this source for what it is: a counsel and a warning against idolatries of the mind and spirit. I’m doing this cognizant that humanism is sometimes mistakenly maligned for being negative and uninspiring, and the language of this

source may unfortunately reinforce this misperception. Hoping that my treatment will not contribute to this misperception, what I want to underscore today is how important this counsel and warning is to our tradition, both historically and in our continuing journey as a faith community.

We'll consider humanism in both its classical and contemporary sense. Classical humanism is more of a methodology – a process by which truth is discerned – than it is a belief. As a methodology, humanism goes back at least to the reformation and was the path by which Protestantism was formed. Even people who we Unitarian Universalists regard as antithetical to liberal religion, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, were humanists in their time. Following the introduction of the printing press, humanists of the Reformation emphasized source texts for learning, rather than the teachings of the priests. They learned to read the Bible on their own. They were called humanists because they emphasized the intelligence and dignity of the individual human as capable of learning for him/herself. (Back then, only him.) Prior to this the church maintained that people could not be trusted to learn for themselves, so this was a radical new method of placing faith in human beings to learn and know.

This classical humanism shaped the Unitarian and Universalist churches from the start. Earl Morse Wilbur, the turn-of-the-century historian who founded what is now Starr King School for Ministry did extensive research on the various Unitarian churches that sprang up in Eastern Europe during the Reformation in the quest to find out what unified all the differing forms of Unitarianism. What he found was an underlying commitment to three things: freedom, reason, and tolerance. These, he

maintained, were the hallmarks of the Unitarian movement from its inception in all its forms – in Transylvania, in Poland, in England, and in America. In the wake of the centuries of oppression that most of Europe endured, these three values were expressions of a new humanism in religion – humanism that emphasized the freedom of each individual to practice religion as he or she saw fit, reason as a method of discerning truth against the prescribed teachings, and tolerance of other people’s religious beliefs.

The other sort of humanism, that which is more of a belief than a method, came about much later, and is more unique to our tradition. The roots of this humanism were planted in Unitarianism in the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the “radical” wing of Unitarian thought finding expression in the Free Religious Association, which advocated an equality of all religions and sought to separate Unitarianism from its core identity as a Christian religion. Humanism was perhaps best articulated by some voices that were often ignored – early women Ministers on the western frontier. In Des Moines, Iowa, Rev. Mary Safford, who became known as the leader of the “Iowa Sisterhood” of Unitarian ministers, preached what she called a “religion of morality on fire with a love for humanity.” She was supported by the Western Unitarian Conference, out of Chicago, in part because she and other women were largely ignored back in Boston. The Western Conference was also more supportive of the radical wing in general, perhaps echoing the spirit of the expanding frontier. The humanist movement became, as a result, something of a Western phenomenon in this country – though over the years this geographic distinction has largely disappeared.

Rev. Safford was followed in Des Moines by Rev. Curtis Reese who, probably because he was a man, became more widely known as a spokesperson for the emerging humanist movement. Together with Rev. John Deitrich, who served the Unitarian Church in Spokane prior to moving to Minneapolis, Reese articulated humanism as “a religion of democracy.”

The essence of this humanism was that it maintained that God was, at best, a model for creation – not the source – and at worst a simple delusion. Humanism placed human beings at the center of religious life. Whether or not one left any room for God, humanists maintained that our primary concern is on the human being, on human experience, and our primary mission is to make human life more fair and just. Rather than focusing on nebulous concepts like spirits and the afterlife, humanists believed that religion is primarily concerned with the concrete world of the here and now.

As a philosophical movement, Humanism came of age in the 1930s with the creation and adoption of *The Humanist Manifesto*. A bold call for a whole new way of thinking, its preamble reads:

The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of a candid and explicit humanism.

This language echoes the spirit of optimism in the physical, biological, and psychological sciences of the time. In the fifteen points that followed, the manifesto set forth a bold agenda for re-visioning religious life in

accordance with the scientific findings of the day. Thirty four persons, including the philosopher John Dewey, signed the manifesto, all of them men and half of them Unitarian or Universalist ministers. Today, I wonder what they would think of the various renewed evangelical movements that seem to dominate much of religion in public life.

Humanism in UU churches is usually expressed as a form of *religious* humanism, as opposed to *secular* humanism, which disassociates itself from religion completely. Religious humanism, as its name implies, acknowledges a place for religion, and only requires that the focus of that religion should remain on human experience. As the twentieth century went on and various forms of humanism, atheism, and agnosticism became more commonplace, humanism became the norm in many UU congregations. New forms of worship were developed – and sometimes renamed things other than “worship” – that omitted “God” language, prayer, and other theistic images. Amongst Unitarian Universalists who like to engage in theological or philosophical discussions, one of the key questions of identity became “Are you a humanist or a theist?”

Over this question the pendulum has swung back and forth in the past few decades about our basic identity. For a generation of religious exiles who came of age either before, during, or immediately after World War II, humanism became for them a way to keep the practice of religion alive in a way that didn’t ask them to compromise their rational thinking. It is this spirit that led to the restrictive language in this source. Many UU humanists have seen all too well how unchecked religious belief can lead one to completely abandon rational thinking. Unitarian Universalism,

especially in the West, became a refuge from the more traditional churches which seemed to many to be stuck in the past.

Yet in recent years, some have noticed, the pendulum has swung back in the other direction. Amongst many of the traditionally humanist churches, theistic concepts and practices such as prayer and God language have become more commonplace. Ritual and emotion have become at least as dominant as rational thinking and discussion groups in our churches, and some of us lament this change. Indeed, when I went to seminary, at Wilbur's Starr King School for Ministry, and declared myself a humanist, I often felt like an outsider as most of my colleagues were more interested in reclaiming traditional religious language than they were in keeping it safely at arm's length. (Today's spirit hymn)

As I said, regardless of our own impressions of the importance of religious language, this warning to heed and counsel, particularly against "idolatry of the mind and spirit," is essential to liberal religion, for it is the one thing that will help prevent us from being caught in the world of a three-year-old mind that thinks it is the boss of everything. Traditionally, "idolatry" referred to people's unquestioning devotion to their particular version of God. Equally damaging and deranged are idolatries of the self – taking humanism to fundamentalist extremes by believing that any one of us, or any one model of human behavior, is perfect. We see this happening in many of the big fundamentalist mega-churches of our day, where pastors give some lip service to praising Jesus, but go to much further lengths praising their own parishioners as being superior, saved, or perfectly redeemed. Many so-called Christians these days don't so much

worship Christ as they worship, well, Christians. Yet of course that is a topic for another pulpit.

But we Unitarian Universalists, if we don't take seriously this counsel and warning, are susceptible to the same kind of idolatry – we run the risk of creating a religion in which we simply worship ourselves. The eminent science writer and notorious atheist Richard Dawkins does not embrace the term *humanist* for this very reason. After all, what kind of arrogance would assume that human life is the center of the universe? I think this, like our source, offers a good caution – and yet as a human being it makes sense for me to orient my ultimate concerns towards human life, so long as I remain conscious that I do so subjectively.

A few years ago, there was a popular book and movie called *The Secret*, a pseudo-documentary that purportedly revealed a long-secret fundamental law of the universe called “the law of attraction.” This film seemed to resonate with many UUs and others with similar, liberal values. The movie, of course, was anything but a “secret,” that was just part of its marketing appeal, as was its underlying message of the idolatry of the self. The so-called law of attraction, which admittedly contains a kernel of truth, holds that each person creates his or her reality by his or her thinking – what you think about is what your life becomes. Unfortunately, they took this idea to absurd lengths by engaging in the worst forms of self-absorption to be found in a self-absorbent consumer culture. If you dream about that huge house on the ocean, it will become yours. This, conveniently, relieves one of the responsibility to consider how much one's place in society contributes to what one has, or what costs will be borne by future generations for irresponsible consumption. But more dangerous

than its illogical process was its ego-centrism, expressing the attitude that the only thing that matters in making your decisions is what you want. This is idolatry of the self, every bit as irresponsible as idolatry to a false God.

Some observers of Unitarian Universalism criticize us, ironically, for too quickly and too easily jumping on the latest fad when it comes to personal fulfillment. It seems that at least since the 1960s, some new trend comes along about every ten years or so, often times sold by some enterprising salesman. To the extent that we actually take some of these trends seriously, we earn such criticism. And that is a pity. Humanism, we need you to help us be ever on our guard against idolatries not just of the mind and spirit, but of the ego itself. We need to continue to embrace reason and the knowledge we derive from the scientific method as a necessary part of a free and responsible search for truth. When we pay attention to science and reason, they do indeed teach us that we humans are not the ultimate or even most important life in this universe; we are, in the words of one of our principles, but a part of a vast interdependent web.

However our pendulum continues to swing, whether we choose to hold worship or Sunday services or discussion groups, whether we listen to sermons or theme talks or lectures, whether we offer prayer or meditation or moments of silence, I believe that the legacy of humanism teaches us that these questions are not nearly as important as how we come together in religious community. Whether you believe in God or not, whether you pray or not, the essence of Unitarian Universalism, and of liberal religion, is that people matter. It is our lives that matter – how we love, how we live, how we express our compassion, and how we greet each new day. Integral to this is practicing our faculty of reason and suspicion, to be ever

careful and discerning in our search for truth. If that's not sacred and holy, I don't know what is.

As I said earlier, humanism is much more than the “counsel” and “warning” our source states. Perhaps that is the subject for another sermon – or ten. In many ways, the tradition of humanism has become so omnipresent in our communities that it is almost like the water in which fish swim – we almost don't notice it anymore, and sometimes take it for granted. But it is magnificently present in this community of seekers, this group of “freethinking mystics with hands.” I can think of no better time to be reminded of this as today, this month when we celebrate our accomplishments and promise as a liberal religious community in Yakima and consider our financial commitments for the coming year. The human element is what we are about, as Annie Dillard reminded us: “We are here to abet creation and witness to it; to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.”



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