

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
Twenty-First Century Humanism

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 4, 2015

Reading

From the Introduction to *Living the Secular Life* by [Phil Zuckerman](#)

... in my work as a sociologist and professor of secular studies, I have sought to thoroughly explore secular people's approaches to life, to probe the ramifications of their worldviews and perspectives, and to shine a light on their experiences, joys, and challenges. I've done all of this with an eye toward connecting such information to the broader social scene, both here in America and in the world at large.

My primary investigative method has been to conduct in-depth interviews with nonreligious people from all over the country and from all walks of life, representing a variety of races, ethnic groups, ages, occupations, sexualities, and class backgrounds. And I've purposely sought out people exhibiting a wide array of secular orientations, from the firmly convinced to the mildly befuddled, from the staunchly atheistic to the serenely indifferent I've interviewed people who have devoted their lives to secularism as well as people who have hardly given it a thought prior to our discussion, and many others in between such extremes.

What I have learned,... is that while secular Americans may have nothing to do with religion, this does not mean that they wallow in despair or flail about in hapless oblivion. To the contrary, they live civil, reasonably rational, and admirably meaningful lives predicated upon sound ethical foundations.

Secular Americans are undoubtedly a remarkably diverse lot, exhibiting a wide spectrum of identities, beliefs, dispositions, and proclivities. But as I've been able to glean through my research, most do share certain key traits and values, such as self-reliance, freedom of thought, intellectual inquiry, cultivating autonomy in children, pursuing truth, basing morality on the empathetic reciprocity embedded in the Golden Rule, accepting the inevitability of our eventual death, navigating life with a sober pragmatism grounded in this world (not the next), and still enjoying a sense of deep transcendence now and then amid the inexplicable, inscrutable profundity of being.

For most nonreligious men and women, to be secular ultimately means living in the here and now—with exuberance, relish, passion, and tenacity—because this is the only existence we'll ever have. It also means being committed to making the world a better place, because this world is all we've got. Being secular means loving family and friends

rather than a deity or savior. Being secular involves seeking to do good and treating others right simply because such behavior makes the world a better place for all. Being secular is about finding joy, splendor, and fulfillment in newborn babies and thunderstorms, peaches and tears, harmony and inner thighs, algebra and forgiveness, squid and irony, without attaching any supernatural or divine masking tape to such inexplicable wonders of life.

And ... most secular folk deeply believe that education and scientific discovery have the potential to enhance life, that democracy and respect for human rights are essential elements of a good society, that justice and fairness are ideals worth enacting, that the earth is to be valued and protected, that honesty, decency, tolerance, integrity, love, altruism, and self-responsibility are attributes to be cultivated, that creative and artistic expression are vital to the human experience, and that life, though at times beset with horror and despair, is intrinsically beautiful, wonderful, sublime.

Sermon

The summer is open space time for me. I allow my mind to wander into new territories unfettered by the weekly sermon deadline that keeps my attention more narrowly focused. One of the ways I scan the theological horizon for new and different ideas is by looking at the new books shelf in the East Greenbush library. On that shelf in July I saw and checked out a book titled *Living the Secular Life* by a sociology professor named Phil Zuckerman.

The section I just read for you from the introduction grabbed my attention. I said to myself – this guy sounds like a UU! So I went to the index and found several references to Unitarian Universalism. As I examined the book more closely and read it I started noticing some similarities and differences from the humanism I grew up with in the Unitarian Fellowship our family attended in Newark, Delaware. I realized Zuckerman was pointing to a newer flavor of Humanism that today I'm calling Twenty-First Century Humanism that I believe has already begun to take root in our UU congregations without being named.

Since the 1950's, Unitarian and predominantly Universalist congregations have been humanist to the core. Few, if any, of our congregations rely on a supernatural understanding of the cosmos, its origins, or its ultimate ends. Few if any of our congregations profess a reliance on or belief in God as a central test of faith for congregational membership. The association of Unitarian Universalist congregations in America organizes itself around purposes and principles this congregation affirms. The sources section specifically identifies humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the

guidance of reason and the results of science and warns us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit as one of our primary sources. Our seven principles have no theological language in them that could be rejected by a Humanist. We draw from many sources, true, which include direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, Jewish and Christian teachings, wisdom of world religions and Earth-centered traditions. None, however trumps the others. All are equally valid sources for us to draw from.

In practice, all of our congregations grant the freedom to their members to seek truth and deeper meaning guided by their own conscience. The values we hold in common align well with secular humanist values. Each of us can find our own theological, sociological, psychological or philosophical source of affirmation for those values.

The relationship between Humanism and Unitarianism runs very deep. Led by early 20th Century Unitarian ministers like John Dietrich in Minnesota, Ray Bragg and Edwin H. Wilson, they drafted the [first Humanist Manifesto](#) in 1933. The manifesto was signed by leading Humanists of the time including fifteen Unitarian ministers, one Universalist minister and philosopher John Dewey. Some of these leaders helped form the American Humanist Association, located in Buffalo, New York.

Michael Werner, past president of the AHA [wrote in 2013](#):

The first five presidents of the AHA were Unitarian ministers, and the Unitarian Universalist Association became the primary promoter, proselytizer, and source of AHA members, at the same time attracting some of the best and brightest of the age to serve as ministers. In the 1950s and '60s, these ministers were responsible for deepening humanist thought and practice, and for bringing many to humanism. A 1963 report titled "The Free Church in a Changing World" indeed suggested that because the identity of the UUA was so dominated by humanism, it should openly identify itself as such and build on identification with reason and science. In 1989, fully 73 percent of UUs identified as either humanists or atheists.

I'm not sure if 1989 was the high water mark for Humanism in our movement or not but those numbers have been in decline ever since. I believe that is, in part, because humanism is evolving and changing. I've had a front row seat to this process as a lifelong Unitarian Universalist whose involvement as an adult started in 1977. My humanism has evolved and changed over that time, too, into what I'll be calling Twenty-First Century Humanism.

Before I begin defining what that might be, I want to outline the overlap between the two different approaches to Humanism. There is much overlap, for example, in the first Humanist Manifesto that both approaches accept. Both:

- regard the universe as self-existing and not created;
- believe that we are a part of nature and that we have emerged as a result of a continuous evolutionary process;
- reject the traditional dualism of mind and body;
- assert that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values;
- agree the religious distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained as a material reality (for example transubstantiation);
- consider the growth and development of the human personality to be the end of human life and seeks that development and fulfillment in the here and now; and
- find no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes that are dependent on a belief in the supernatural or a transcendent being;

I could go on but I want you to hear just how much overlap there is before I start to outline three key differences that have appeared as I've watched from my front row seat over the last thirty-eight years.

The first I'd like to identify is the most disturbing to the humanist agenda: resistance to the primacy of human values. As our species promotes human welfare over the right to exist of just about every other species, we can't eat or can't use for our own benefit, we put our entire ecosystem at risk. The increasing exploitation of every inch of land for human use driving many, many indigenous species to extinction, increasing greenhouse gases that are acidifying the oceans that will destroy all the coral reefs across the globe, overfishing of the oceans, toxic and radioactive waste generation and disposal for future generations to deal with and clean up ... if they can ... are endangering human survival. The pursuit of human self-interest driven by an expanding, unsustainable population size coupled to an insatiable demand for an increasing standard of material progress is not serving the well-being of the planetary ecosystem. The Twenty-First Century Humanists are waking up to this and realizing human values need to be subordinate to an eco-centric value that puts human needs and wants in balance with what the planet can offer without compromising its sustainability. The nineteenth century Unitarian motto, onward and upward forever, doesn't seem to be an option anymore.

The second difference really started appearing in the 1960's as humanists started using mind altering substances and traveling to the East to discover alterations in their consciousness that can happen through different spiritual practices and disciplines. The limits of the scientific, rational mind didn't seem broad enough to embrace what these pioneers of altered consciousness were discovering was possible in human experience. Yes, the caveat in our sources to beware of the idolatries of the mind and spirit still apply, but some of what these people were discovering started being validated in the

laboratory. Yoga and meditation did have therapeutic value. Hypnosis could be used to create behavioral changes. Changes in my experience of consciousness during meditation retreats were unfamiliar to me from my daily life. This exploration continues in earnest today.

The last area I'd like to mention - probably the biggest bone of contention - is radical inclusion. In other words, Humanism isn't just for straight, white males anymore.

That first Humanist Manifesto was framed and signed by straight, white males. At the same time as they were deconstructing traditional religion to make room for humanist values, women, people of African descent and later non-heterosexual and non-cis gender people were beginning to deconstruct straight white male culture and expose its intolerance and rejection of their values and value. The Twenty-First Century Humanists put a priority on bridging and eventually eliminating that value gap.

The most potent example of this gap has been between people of European and African descent in Unitarian Universalism. That gap has been of primary interest to the Unitarian Universalist Association which has been diligently striving to close that gap for over twenty years.

Most of our member congregations look at themselves and feel embarrassed that they are not more racially diverse. Early in the 1960's when white people thought about eliminating segregation, what it meant to them was eliminating barriers that prevented Black people from assimilating into what they defined as mainstream American culture. The banner they championed was 'integration.' That dominant culture of course was defined by and affirmed straight, white men. The Black Power movement of the later 1960's saw through this tacit sublimation of their heritage, history, culture and identity. Since that time so have women, non-heterosexuals, non-gender conforming folks, and other people of color. They realized that the goal of inclusion isn't homogenization.

As a straight, white male myself, unlearning my assumptions, stereotypes, sense of privilege and my blindness to micro-aggressions has been a difficult process even when I see and embrace the value of inclusion and diversity in our congregations. I encounter emotional resistance to changing my language, habits and attitudes. In the 1980's we eliminated referring to God as 'He' in our 1960's hymnbook. I had to sacrifice tradition and poetic meter and beauty which I didn't want to do ... at first. But I did it and got used to the changes.

The hardest part of this process of inclusion though for humanists has been the percentage of people of African descent who are attracted to the Universalist strand in our heritage that embraces a loving, all-inclusive vision of God, that enjoys expressive, theistic gospel music and spirituals that have a devotional quality. The Twentieth

Century Humanists reject the theistic content of the songs but are conflicted by wanting to be open to racial diversity in our congregations.

The Twenty-First Century Humanists, on the other hand, are fine with it. Having grown up in integrated schools and colleges they've had many cross-racial friendships and relationships with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and people who worship nature. They are very comfortable being with people who are different from them and used to going beyond tolerating difference to enjoying it and welcoming it. They are less interested in religious monocultures and enjoy being with people who are different – different and accepting of those differences.

The word resilience is popular today and I think it might be a useful one to describe the Twenty-First Century Humanist. Because they assume a vision of radical inclusion that fulfills our aspiration to welcome everyone, they are much less defensive against having theists and atheists in the same congregation. They can hear diverse religious language being spoken, both theistic and humanistic, because they don't fear their values will be excluded somehow by including those who are different.

They love the word ecosystem as a metaphor for how to build a healthy community. Monocultures, where everyone believes or rejects the same thing, repel them. Ecosystems thrive when they are diverse, full of many different species of believers and unbelievers. In the multilevel and complex relationships in such a system, the whole is healthier and stronger than any of the individual beliefs or unbeliefs.

Where all this gets difficult is in the world of emotions. Some of us have been abused and wounded by religious authorities who seem to own theological terms like God, prayer, grace, salvation, sin, redemption, etc. I know Unitarian Universalist humanists who have very strong negative emotional reactions to these terms. I hope you notice how careful I am to find the most inclusive religious language I can. All this is a work in progress.

There is one emotionally charged word, however, I hope we can all agree on whatever kind of humanist we are or whatever kind of theist we might be. And that is the word 'awe.'

In the last chapter of Phil Zuckerman's book, he settles on this word to describe his emotional experience of transcendence that is what many of us experience and seek language to describe. His language is some of the best I've seen to communicate the equivalent of a humanist spirituality. I close with a few of his inspired words:

When I think of the most important, memorable and meaningful moments of my life-moments when I feel simultaneously ephemeral and eternal, moments that

define who I am and give me my deepest sense of self—I find that the title of “secular humanist” leaves a bit to be desired. Yes. I support and advocate the sane and noble goals of secular humanism. Yes, I am an atheist. Yes, I am an agnostic—at least the kind who suspects that there may be limits to the boundaries of human knowledge. But I am something more. I am often full of a profound, overflowing feeling. And the word that comes closest to describing that feeling is awe.

So at root, I’m an “aweist.”

... Aweism encapsulates the notion that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery, that being alive is a wellspring of wonder, and that the deepest questions of existence, creation, time, and space are so powerful as to inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy, and sublime awe. Aweism humbly, happily rests on a belief that no one will ever really know why we are here or how the universe came into being, or why, and this insight renders us weak in the knees while simultaneously spurring us on to dance

Closing Words (more from Phil Zuckerman)

... [Awe] is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.

If your awe candle has gone out, may you find the spark that will rekindle it here.