Not Your Father's Humanism

by David Schafer, Katy Korb and Kendyl Gibbons

The 2004 UUA General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas, featured a panel presentation by the three HUUmanists named above. They showcased the idea to fellow UUs that the humanism espoused and practiced in our ranks is very different from that of the Manifesto generation, and indeed from the UU humanists of the 1960s and 70s.

David Schafer

You've undoubtedly heard the cliché that every movement carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. This seems to me just a dramatic way of saying "nothing's perfect." But if a *movement* is imperfect, what, if anything, can be done to correct its imperfections? The 20th century Viennese philosopher, Otto Neurath, may have given us a clue when he likened progress in his own field to "rebuilding a leaky boat at sea."

Nature, as always, provides the answer to this dilemma: that answer is *evolution*. If you attended the Humanist workshop at the General Assembly in Quebec City a few years ago, you may have heard me say that if, as it's often alleged, the value of real estate "depends on three factors—location, location, and location"—in nature survival of individuals, groups, and (I would add) organizations depends on three factors—adaptation, adaptation, and adaptation. Adaptation is the key to evolution, and evolutionary change is a central theme in Humanism, and always has been.

Humanism lives in the real world. Humanism is at home in the real world. And the real world is a moving target. Humanism was *born* out of change in the real world. The first Humanist Manifesto, published in 1933, was a pioneering document for its time, an effort to reconcile and synthesize the best in traditional values with the best in emerging knowledge—knowledge of the world and of one particularly important part of the world, ourselves.

The ethical values of Humanist Manifesto I were essentially the traditional values of equality and reciprocity, expressed in their most general and elementary form in the Golden Rule. In calling for these papers, we have named this the value of "mutual fulfillment": we help each other to get the maximum fulfillment from life. The means of implementing this value in Manifesto I were to be those advanced by the Enlightenment: reason and careful observation, or in modern terms, science and the understanding it gives us of our world, including ourselves.

In a book[1] published a few years ago in English by our own Beacon Press, the contemporary philosopher Jürgen Habermas set forth a view of adaptation in society through what he called "communicative action," sometimes translated as "constructive dialogue." Habermas famously said, "Modernity is an unfinished project"—in other words—it keeps changing. Reality, as I have said, is a moving target.

In practical terms this means that Manifestos keep appearing. We now have not only three Humanist Manifestos from the American Humanist Association but also several, most recently in the year 2000, from the secular humanists. We're probably going to be getting them at intervals of every few years, because we are evolving, and we *want* to evolve—we want to continue to adapt, to improve, to keep confronting ever more complex issues in ever more successful ways.

When I speak of "adaptation" in this arena, I certainly do *not* mean that we must give up any of our cherished values of mutual fulfillment, or our cherished search for knowledge through reason and careful observation. What adaptation *does* mean to me is that we must look for ever better, more effective approaches to, and interactions with, whatever situations we may happen to find ourselves in. Here are just four of the "dichotomies" that represent major adaptations that the Humanist movement has undertaken, or, if you prefer, four of the "axes" along which the balance of opposing or complementary emphases has shifted, in the seventy plus years since the publication of Humanist Manifesto I.

The first and most obvious of these, I'm sure you'll agree, is the gender gap, the male-female dichotomy. Of the thirty-four signers of Humanist Manifesto I, half were Unitarian ministers, one was a Universalist, the rest were professional philosophers or scientists, and *all* of them were male! Today, on the other hand, the board of directors of our organization, the HUUmanists, is—I wouldn't say by a Great Design but by the operation of natural processes—half male and half female. And we like it that way. What we're looking for is balance—a "middle way," to use a very old expression—a balance between extremes, a balance that is appropriate for the real world.

A second dichotomy in the evolution of the Humanist movement has been that between socialism, emphasis on the group, and liberty, emphasis on the freedom of the individual. Socialism, representing equality, cooperation, and community, was very strongly expressed in Manifesto I. Remember that this was 1933, when many liberals were friends—and later wartime allies—of the Soviet Union, and there was still widespread romanticism about socialism that caused many liberals to be in denial about some of state socialism's harsher aspects. Over time many people came to feel that there should be more emphasis in Humanism on liberty, freedom, independence, and the individual. It's easy to go to extremes between emphasis on the group and on the individual, and Humanist Manifesto II in 1973, at the height of the Cold War, may have let the pendulum swing too far away from the group.

Third, Humanist Manifesto I naturally placed its major emphasis on what was *new* about Humanism, a "religious humanism" that was explicitly nontheistic and non-supernaturalistic. This may have tended to cause some people to lose sight of the fact that this same "religious humanism" still contained a great deal of traditional content in its ethical values, going back to the Golden Rule. But of course the traditional was less exciting than the nontraditional. So if you take this third dichotomy of the New vs. the Old, the Break with Tradition vs. Continuity with Tradition, emphasis on the new at the expense of the old has sometimes made it more difficult for "religious humanism" to find acceptance in the general community. But there's no reason why we should ignore our common heritage of ethical values. Again, what was needed was a better balance of the New and the Old, and it's present in today's Humanism.

Fourth, Humanist Manifesto I, and the movement that grew out of it, placed justifiable emphasis on the Enlightenment, with its insistence on reason and the intellect—precisely because these had been so terribly neglected in the past. But with the strong new emphasis on reason and the intellect, people occasionally forgot that the philosophers of the Enlightenment also assigned equal importance to what they called the "passions." These were the feelings and emotions, the powerful non-rational, often nonverbal processes that modern neuroscientists would say actually dominate our

behavior at the unconscious level. I'm talking about pain, fear, love, joy, meaning, and fulfillment, and about aesthetic expression and experiences—art, music, literature, dance. We now know that we ignore these non-rational and sometimes nonverbal phenomena at our peril, and at the risk of deeply impoverishing our lives. The fully integrated life, and the complete Humanism, require that we create a balance and a harmony between these extremes, so that the non-rational and the rational complement each other, and the emotions can reinforce and strengthen the intellect.

Humanism has been evolving during the past seventy-some years, toward a more balanced emphasis on (1) active participation of *both* Humanist men and Humanist women; (2) the importance of *both* the group and the individual; (3) *both* the nontraditional Humanist worldview and traditional Humanist ethical values; and (4) the essential roles of *both* reason and the emotions in a full human life.

Katy Korb

"It's not your father's humanism" implies a humanism that has developed in the last generation; its role in our congregations and in our Unitarian Universalist faith needs to be looked at again in a new light. Humanism in our movement, from its triumphant days in the 50s went into eclipse to the degree that I have heard it said that its day is past, that it has no longer any place among us. Perhaps that is true of our father's or grandfather's humanism, more a product of the Baptist bends or recovering Catholicism than of the humanistic vision which began in the Renaissance and, culminating in the Enlightenment, created the free religion whose present expression is Unitarian Universalism. It is humanism that created us, humanism that sustained us, and humanism that is still our essential characteristic today.

This particular organization has gone through several adjustments and evolutions. One of the things that I would suggest we forgot, which led to some of our past decline, was the reason for a former name, "Friends of Religious Humanism." It was a protest, however mild, against the anti-religious attitude of so many self-styled humanists. It was a statement that humanism doesn't have to be secular, doesn't have to be opposed to a religious sensibility. Despite the name, however, our father's humanism was noted for being peopled by those who were always on the alert to call any speaker, any thinker, on the use of metaphorical, poetical, theological language. Our new name, of course, simply means that we are Unitarian Universalists who are also humanists. I can't pronounce it myself, though Sarah Oelberg has done her best for me. It is probably a strong psychological block, and I will have to content myself with saying Unitarian Universalist Humanists.

We're the ones who so declare ourselves, but my own judgment would be that close to 100 percent of Unitarian Universalists are humanists in the true meaning of the term, in the meaning that does not use spiritual as its opposite. The real opposite of humanism, it seems to me is not spirituality—it's not even theism (there have been many theistic humanists in humanism's long history)—but supernaturalism. Modern humanism from its onset in the Renaissance, even as it honored its classical heritage when it was clearly a strain of Christianity, has accepted the scientific world-view and has believed in the ability and the duty of human beings to choose and act upon the good without supernatural intervention. That is what makes a humanist. We don't believe in magic, but we do believe in the ability of human beings in the scientifically understood universe to act wisely and virtuously. We also tend to believe that if we don't there's nothing else that will—or at least nothing on this planet. We cannot look for divine intervention or the breaking or bending of natural law for our benefit. The many things that we do not understand we do not call supernatural, but think of simply as natural things that we do not yet understand. When humanists use the false dichotomy of humanist and spiritual, they may be merely defining the spiritual as supernatural.

The two primary weaknesses of past humanism, I believe, are a too optimistic view of humankind and a too reductionist idea of knowledge. We have learned that although human beings can reason, can choose the good, can work to increase the good and the beautiful in the world, they often will not. We have learned that as finite beings, we can't be always perfectly sure of what is true, even in the material world. Our senses, however enhanced by technological advances, have limitations. We have even learned through scientific experiment and theory that what we think we know can get more than a little iffy. The findings of physics, while expanding our knowledge, have done away with hubris. Nevertheless we still seek the truth with a justified hope of getting nearer to it, we still are convinced that human redemption can only be achieved through human work, and we still know that some of the most powerful tools we can use in that search are reason and critical thinking.

I was talking to a young woman not long ago about my job, and she said that although she admired and respected Unitarian Universalists, she was not one. I asked her what she believed, and she told me. I said I knew some Unitarian Universalists who shared her beliefs, so why was she so sure she was not one? Her answer was that she wasn't sure that what she believed was true, and if she were a Unitarian Universalist, she would have to be able to justify it, and she didn't want to lose it. She was exactly right: our beliefs are not based on what we desire to believe but on the evidence we have gathered, refined through our reason and our tradition and tested within our communities. My response was that I wished more Unitarian Universalists knew as much about their faith as she did.

The source in the UUA bylaws which refers to humanism says something about our teaching ourselves to guard against idolatries of the mind and spirit. I don't have the quote exactly right as I am not one of those who believes that we can turn our responsibility of free thought and belief over to a bylaw, and therefore I have not memorized either the principles or the sources that so many of us seem to be able to repeat these days. However, that is indeed our great gift to free religion as it is institutionalized in Unitarian Universalism. Idolatry is the belief in and worship of that which is not god. To believe in anything without evidence or by twisting the evidence, to believe in something irrationally because it makes us feel good or may have good outcomes is the antithesis of humanism, and I would suggest it is also the antithesis of free religion.

I suspect that the obituary of humanism within Unitarian Universalism has been written much too soon, that we are still its very essence. Our insistence on the integrity of the mind as well as the spirit and with the spirit, will carry us forward, clear-eyed and undaunted, through this time of violence, confusion and fear; the world awaited will be the world attained.

Kendyl Gibbons

I am aware that the title is not intended to be taken literally. And yet, as I reflect on how I might structure my remarks, it occurred to me that I might do worse than to share something of my own story, and take a look at my real father, who was and is in fact a humanist. I want to explore what I owe to his perspective, as well as how my humanism and the humanism of my generation has differed, and I would argue, in some ways transcended the limitations of his faith. My father spent his career as an electronics engineer; he was a scientist, working for the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C. He helped to found and to build, very literally, the Unitarian Universalist congregation in which my siblings and I grew up. He had no patience with supernatural explanations of anything, nor with sentiment, nor with pretense. I would describe his theology, to the extent that he had one, as a kind of Puritan humanist fatalism. He sought to face life unflinchingly, without rescue, without reward, without frills. If bad things happened, it was probably because you had not been diligent in preventing them, but sometimes they just happened anyway, because the world is like that.

He regarded religion as an annoying combination of sentiment, pretense, and irrationality, the resort of inferior minds, intellectual sloth, and personal immaturity; something that any sensible person would simply outgrow. His humanism was minimalist; not so much a faith in humanity as it was an epistemological reductionism that eliminated every unproven premise until nothing but a slender thread of skeptical inter-subjective rationality remained. Mathematical or mechanical elegance was his aesthetic criteria, and fairness his moral standard. He was and is a good man; it seemed to me that in his generation he had many counterparts. My father's humanism inevitably laid the groundwork and framed the starting point of my own religious journey, and his spare, unsparing vision of the world informs me still. I have come to be grateful for the courage of his honesty, and the clarity of his conviction—he never dealt in twaddle, and he did me the honor to assume that I wouldn't either. I am a product of my father's humanism, but my path—and I think our path—has taken me beyond the flat plain of that

minimalist rationalism to a place more fertile, abundant, and hospitable to the human imagination and personality. I still don't accept supernatural explanations for the world I experience, and I still don't look for rescue or reward. But I do live in a realm of multi-dimensional experience that values the evocative, the emotional, the imaginative and symbolic aspects of human existence.

I do not have to make a choice between accepting for myself the literal understanding of religious practices, or else rejecting such practices as foolish and probably dangerous. Instead, I can seek the metaphor that illuminates my own idiosyncratic struggles and sufferings, temptations and terrors. I know that my deepest gladness and sorrows are not rational, and will be best expressed in language that is passionate rather than precise. My humanism, today's humanism, takes for granted the negations of my father's humanism, and goes beyond them to build a positive faith in the potential of the human endeavor not only to attain rational truth, but also to craft meaning through symbol and story. The power of narrative, metaphor, and bodily sensory experience are all utterly human phenomena, and the ways in which they can serve to change us are perfectly natural processes, even if they are not strictly rational. My humanism honors and celebrates these pathways of understanding, for through them we gain access not only to our intellect, but to the power of our longings and commitments as well.

My father's humanism had little room for ceremony; perhaps only as a structure of practical social order, like civil weddings or the granting of diplomas. My humanism recognizes the element of "high play" that makes ritual such an enduring impulse of our natures. It is not to impress some divine, invisible audience that we enact these little dramas, but rather to reinforce and transform the ways in which we collectively construct our world. The struggle for liturgical, theological and pastoral authenticity is of course not a challenge to humanism alone. Where in my father's estimation all other religious traditions were assumed to be probably disingenuous, and if not that, then ignorant, I find my colleagues and others in many faith communities to be wrestling with the same issues of human finitude, injustice, and ambiguity that I do. My humanism recognizes that I may learn some things from those who differ with me in these regards. Where my father's humanism was heroic, mine is hospitable. To acknowledge the reality of our evolved creatureliness is to understand that we as human beings are not always rational, and that there is more to us and to what makes our lives fully satisfying than what we can logically prove. In the end, I think my father's Spartan faith did not nurture the fullness of his humanity, and the community it fostered was the self-congratulatory exclusiveness of those who are persuaded that anyone who differs is wrong. The humanism in which I find my spiritual home cultivates an enriched imagination as well as rational method, and a community of felt connection as well as personal integrity. It is built with gratitude upon the foundations that he laid, but it is not my father's humanism.

1. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984