

**Beacon Unitarian Church**  
**Service for June 2, 2024**  
***Humanism in Our Lives***

**Rev. Meg Roberts, John Hagen and Marilyn Medén**

As part of our Unitarian series on the sources we turn to for our inspiration and learning, we'll explore how humanism affects our lives. Meg will put this in the context of our movement's history, and Marilyn and John will share their stories. We'll invite you in small group conversation to consider what humanist ideas you connect with.

**Reflections**

***Humanism – A brief overview of its development in Unitarianism***

**By Rev. Meg Roberts**

The living tradition of Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources. Today we're focusing on humanism.

The roots of humanism were present from the very beginning of Unitarianism in the 1600s: the use of reason in religion and freedom of belief. It existed within Christianity, including a belief in God. By the mid-1800s, Unitarianism opened up to possibilities beyond a traditional understanding of God (who intervened in human history and prescribed how humans are to live). Then Charles Darwin's 1859 introduction of the theory of evolution led to a contentious debate about whether God was behind the evolutionary process, or the God-concept was no longer needed to explain change and growth. It took until 1917 for the first Unitarian ministers, John Dietrich and Curtis W. Reese to articulate what would be the roots of religious humanism. This led to a raging debate between theists and humanists.

It was the 1933 Humanist Manifesto that helped its growth. Religious humanism affirms life rather than denies it. It seeks to establish the conditions for a satisfactory life for all (not merely a few). It affirms the role of reason in religion and the use of the scientific method for validating facts about our universe (rather than any supernatural explanation).

What was key at that point in our history is that it wasn't about Unitarianism switching from being a religion of theists to a religion of atheists. Instead, the Humanists were asking the existing Unitarian community to draw the circle wider to include agnostics and atheists along with theists.

During the 1950s and 60s, there was a growth of many lay-led fellowships where humanism was strong. By 1998, 46% of Unitarian Universalists in North America identified as humanist (the highest of any of the theological options given in the survey). A third Humanist Manifesto was released in 2003, updated by our understanding of human's interdependency within our

eco-system; and shifting the previous Manifesto's uncritical optimism about human nature, to instead acknowledging our capacity to be constructive and destructive.

Now, there continues to be many humanists in our congregations, alongside Buddhists, Pagans, various forms of theists, and others who draw from many sources. We continue to keep the circle wide.

Marilyn sent me a link to the [Humanist UK](#) organization who sum up the five core features of a humanist approach to life. Their descriptions are much more detailed than this, but here's my summary:

- About human beings: "Humanists have a scientific but also a sympathetic, generous, and cautiously optimistic understanding of human beings."
- Understanding the world: "Humanists believe that the world is a natural place with no supernatural side." We adjust our beliefs of the world through rational scientific investigation, and sharing and challenging ideas.
- The one life: "Humanists believe we should have the freedom to shape our own lives, finding happiness in the one life we have and supporting other people to do the same."
- Humanist ethics: Morality and norms evolved from our species living together in communities (rather than being given by an outside source). So many cultures share similar values, like happiness, freedom, love, respect, honesty and justice. We need to consider the consequences of our actions and how others would want to be treated.
- Role in society: "Humanists believe human beings alone are responsible for improving the world: we cannot expect help to come from elsewhere." That increases the importance of working for human rights, freedom of belief, and optimism that human beings do have the capacity to build a better world.

With that background, I've asked two of our congregation to speak a bit about how they came to be humanists and how they live those beliefs.

### **On Living A Humanist Life by John Hagen**

Approximately seventy years ago as a young idealistic member of the New Westminster YMCA, [Young Men's Christian Association], I got very involved in various programs as a leader and organizer, in self help and self realization activities. For example I taught basketball skills, ran social educational programs for young adults and became a mover and shaker in a wildly successful young adult outdoor and social activities group. I didn't know it by name but that was the start of my Humanist activities. And that is where I met my wife to be and when we got married and gradually moved away from that life, centred on the YMCA.

I became a committed to socialist political ideas and devoted two intense decades to that community with the NDP. We strongly believed that true social change could only be brought about by good governance – policies and legislation that benefited all citizens equally. In those endeavors we were all Humanists even though most of us may not have known what the word

meant. It was only when I became a Unitarian that the seven principles and their attendant directions for living helped define me.

However, during all this time, I was also a family man actively involved in the family's welfare, helping to raise two fine boys. This took me into other community pathways for example in leadership roles in cub and scout activities that the boys were involved in and encouraging them in their social, educational, and other life skill developments.

As a young man I was active in various musical groups. Music has been a huge factor in my life. That and other cultural activities have also contributed to a Humanistic creativity that has enriched my life, activities like the food bank, refugee sponsorships and service to the Beacon community in various positions have helped me grow in many ways to become a good and productive member of society. And life has been a blast doing it.

In ending I would like to quote from the Humanist Society of Western New York's definition: Humanism is a joyous alternative to religions that believe in a supernatural god and life in a hereafter. Humanists believe that this life on earth is the only life of which we have certain knowledge and that we owe it to ourselves and others to make it the best life possible for ourselves and all with whom we share this fragile planet. We believe that when people are free to think for themselves, using reason and knowledge for their tools, they are best able to solve the world's problems. We have an appreciation of the art, literature, music and crafts that are our heritage from the past and of the creativity that, if nourished, can continuously enrich our lives. Humanism is, in sum, a philosophy of those in love with life.

### **Marilyn Medén's talk for June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024**

Some of you may have heard that I left the United Church when I was 12. I was to be confirmed and was expected to repeat the Apostle's Creed, to say I believe in God, the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. I did not believe. I chose not to be confirmed. My father was disappointed. When at seventeen I went to First Unitarian in Toronto, and decided it was for me, my father was very disappointed. He disinherited me! That didn't last. When I was about thirty he told me that he now believed as I did. His belief became "Enjoy Life".

As far as becoming a Humanist, it seemed obvious to me that if I didn't believe in a god, then I didn't believe in any being watching over us, looking after us, judging us, testing us, or even saving us. It must therefore be only us, looking after ourselves: Humanism.

One belief I have today is that what I do matters. Even the small things matter. When I do something positive like being warm and friendly to someone,

even a stranger, there is the possibility of a ripple effect resulting in others doing something positive and so on and so on, like compound interest! Yikes, before you know it the whole world would be better place! One can dream. And this is the type of dream I can support. In the meantime I may at least help the people I interact with!

I believe that we have less free will than we would like to think. Nature and nurture, you know. The good side of this is that it helps me to understand and forgive. How can you blame someone for not acting well who was born with a tendency to act against the wellbeing of others, possibly to be violent, or was not brought up in a loving family, or in good circumstances! And no nature or nurture is perfect! No free will is perfect either. These things help me to understand the flaws in others and in myself! My aim, and this is only my aim, is to look at each person, each situation, from the other's point of view. To find that point of view instead of automatically thinking of my own. To question and explore rather than to blame.

And what about the world? What happens to the world if there is no god? Sometimes we even get our idea of good and evil wrong! We may think we are doing good, but .. this is usually from our own perspective. It is difficult to know what the other person wants or the other country wants. And do you act for the good of your country or of the world?

I hope for improvement in the world. I hope those Artificial Intelligence characters we will control, or maybe only send on the path we think is the right path, will act in humane ways. Is hope considered faith? I guess not, but it is what I have. In the meantime, in my life, I attempt to understand humanity and to act in positive ways, in fact, as my father said, to "Enjoy life."

### **Small group conversation**

#### *Introduction:*

There are so many humanist ideas that we are already living and may not recognize:

- the power of science
- using reason and knowledge to address our issues (personal and societal)
- freedom of thought
- the human potential to effect change in the world and create justice. What each of us does matters.
- artistic and creative expression enriches our lives and our communities
- the human ability to learn over our lifetimes
- this is the one life we have and there is no life after death, so make the most of this life
- there are no supernatural beings who intervene; humans are the ones that are responsible to solve our problems

Many of you may relate to a number of these ideas, and feel you have a humanist way of looking at the world (even if you don't describe yourself as a humanist).

**If you want to, reflect on this question (whatever your theological views – whether you describe yourself as a humanist or not):**

*What humanist ideas do you connect with?*

### **Resources**

Read more on the five core features of a humanist approach to life as described by:

[Humanist UK](#)

Explore more about religious humanism (rather than secular humanism):

[UU Humanist Association](#)

[Humanist Canada:](#)

“Humanism is a world view which says that reason and science are the best ways to understand the world around us, and that dignity and compassion should be the basis for how you act toward someone else.”