

“Shade of God: The Gifts of Humanism”

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I'm sure that my mother was an atheist. She never would have used that word – nice people didn't say it out loud. Nice people didn't say that they didn't believe in God, or thought the question of God was, perhaps, unimportant. She wouldn't have ever challenged my father's Jehovah so blatantly – it would have caused unnecessary trouble. But she somehow managed to never go to church, or to take us kids anywhere on Sunday mornings. My brothers and my sister were and are happily non-religious, and she had worked out a truce with my dad years before. And it might have gone unremarked, if her youngest daughter had not developed this tic, this weird fondness for Sunday school, for worship and the Bible. I just had an instinctive appetite for religion, its language, its rituals, its comforts. No one knew where it came from. When I tried to talk to my mom about my new enthusiasm, she would busy herself with something around the house. Change the subject. And though she didn't say it, the message was clear: *It's fine if you like it, honey, but religion is just not for me.*

It was a puzzling and disappointing moment for me as a child. We didn't know how to talk about it. A lot of people don't. Situations like this occur in our families, with our friends, and in our very church which prides itself on diversity of belief, and they have inspired me to do this sermon on the shades of God, or the different beliefs among us. How do you articulate what you believe in a way that doesn't insult someone else? How do you hear another person's beliefs without feeling that your own beliefs are threatened?

My mother was an atheist. There are a lot of people like her in the world. According to Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard, about 15% of Americans, or about 40 million people, claim to be some sort of Atheist, Agnostic or Humanist. Those are the ones who will tell this to a person taking a poll, so in fact there are many more who could or would not. There is still a stigma, he says, against the words “atheist” or “agnostic”. Even if people answer “no” when polled about whether or not they believe in God, they will also say “no” to the word “atheist” as well. There is a stigma. Almost half of Americans polled are willing to say that they would refuse to vote for a well-qualified atheist. These results come AFTER the miracle that occurred in 2008, in which an African American

was elected, and a woman was the next likeliest person to at least win the Democratic nomination. (from *Good without God* by Greg Epstein)

Why is this? There is a long and influential tradition of religious authorities claiming that a person cannot be good – that is, live a purposeful, moral, and generous life – if they do not have a belief in God. This includes modern figures like Rick Warren and C.S. Lewis, but goes all the way back to the first century of the Common Era with the Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Seneca said simply, “No man can be good without the help of God.” Now it’s true that Seneca’s definition of God sounds much more like conscience and what Jungians might call “True Self” than the Jewish God, or the Roman deities. But he had to have that word in there. An open disbelief in God was a punishable offense by the Romans. And in many places, it’s still a risky thing to mention today. It’s a quick way to have someone assume that you have no moral center. Greg Epstein wrote his book, *Good without God* based on the notion that this kind of assumption about atheists and agnostics is simply unacceptable. And untrue.

Nor is it true that the idea of “atheism” is simple. Sherwin Wine, the late rabbi and founder of the Humanistic Judaism movement, says there are many forms: There’s **Ontological Atheism**, which denies that there is a creator or manager of the universe. (I’d have to count myself in that category, at least on some days!) There’s also **Ethical Atheism**, which says that if there is a creator/manager of the universe, he doesn’t run the world the way we’d like him to, punishing or rewarding people as we want. (I’d definitely go along with that.) There’s also **Agnosticism**, which says you can’t prove or disprove God, (Can’t argue there) . And even the forms of atheism I don’t personally resonate with, I can respect. There’s **Ignosticism**, the idea that the word God is so confusing that it’s meaningless, and **Pragmatic Atheism**, which regards God as irrelevant to ethical and successful living, and which sees all discussion of God as a waste of time. And finally, there’s **Existential Atheism**, which says that even if there is a God, he has no authority to be the boss of my life. So many varieties, and I’m sure you could come up with more. Like the notion of God, it’s not a simple idea.

You may have noticed that my sermon is not called “The Gifts of Atheism”, however, but “The Gifts of Humanism”. There are several reasons for this. For the purposes of this discussion, I consider humanism a term that includes people of many subtle shades of belief – the various kinds of atheism, agnosticism and skepticism I just described for you. To bring in these varieties together, humanism is a word that works.

Humanism is also a longstanding, well-respected tradition within Unitarian Universalism, and has been a strong influence on us all through the 20th and into the 21st century. In 1998, 46% of all Unitarian Universalists identified as such. It was humanism that opened our movement up in the 20s and 30s to include an exciting wave of scientific thinkers. Humanism said that scientific thinking did not have to live outside of religious community, but should be a part of it. I am far from a scientist (I am one of those people whose quality of life rose dramatically in the 11th grade when math and science were no longer required at my high school. It's just not the way my brain works.) But even though I am not a scientific thinker, the wide path that humanism opened up allowed me entrance into the UU church when I first came, with my hunger and thirst for religion, and what by that time was an aversion to the word "God". I could be included; I could be part of a church again.

Humanism, I believe, is the best evidence that we mean what we say when we encourage people to doubt as part of their religious journey. Many religions encourage some doubt. But usually they mean doubt as a detour to the beliefs they espouse. Go ahead and doubt, they might say, as long as you end up with the same Father God and Divine Son Jesus that we're teaching up here. They're fine with doubt, but not with some of its conclusions, including a shift away from God toward human beings.

And, finally, I find humanism to be a more positive term. I believe strongly that the word *atheist* deserves respect. People ought to be able to say, *atheist*, *atheist*, *atheist* all day long if they want to, and still be seen as good, loving and moral human beings. It's insulting to even question that. But if used by itself, it is still a term that describes only what a person does not believe in. And an inspiring life stance needs to point to something we do believe in. I ask atheists and agnostics the same question I ask myself: what is it that you pointing your life toward? In all likelihood, it is the world of humanity.

And so along with my affirmation of the words atheist, agnostic and all the rest, I offer the word "humanism". What is a humanist? Rev. Bill Schultz, former president of the UUA, wrote that humanism is "a religious movement that emphasizes human capabilities, especially the human capacity to reason; that adopts the scientific method to search for truth; and that promotes the right of all humans to develop to their full potential." ("Our Humanist Legacy: Seventy Years of Religious Humanism" by William F. Schulz, from the UU World, November/December 2003)

You'll notice that Schultz calls it a "religious" movement. He doesn't set humanism in opposition to religion. Religious humanists are those who acknowledge that we need awe and mystery, kindness and compassion, myth and ritual, as much as we do science and reason. They simply point these experiences toward human life and human meaning, rather than the supernatural.

And so, a humanist might argue that my mother did have a religion. You just had to look for it. Hers was the religion of a lovely spring day, or baking a perfect batch of brownies and watching us devour them. Her religion was the pleasure of watching my siblings and me fishing in the boat on our lake, and for once not picking at each other. Her religion included always helping out my Aunt Margie, always short of money and long on foolish choices, even when everyone else had written her off. In other words, it was savoring the delights of this world, rejoicing that your kids turned out all right, and caring for those who are given to you.

Sherwin Wine considers humanism to be about the struggle to cultivate human dignity – other people's, as well as your own. This notion is foundational to our faith, whatever your personal theology may be. Which of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles do you know by heart? Which one could you rattle off most easily to someone wanting to know who and what we are? The first one, right? *We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person*. This principle colors all the rest of them, and influences Unitarian Universalists of all beliefs.

It just makes sense. I look at the newest members of my extended family, the twins, Gunnar and Siri, born just before Christmas. Their parents, Kendra and Eric, went through years of miscarriage, fertility treatments and all the attendant heartbreaks that came with their attempts to have children. Because their children were preemies, Kendra and Eric had to patiently coach them in eating, which involves sucking, swallowing and breathing all at the same time. Feeding had to be done in shifts with little continued sleep. In their first weeks home, my sister came on her day off and took over, to help Kendra and Eric get some sleep. My mother never met her great-grandchildren, nor half of her grandchildren, but if she had been around, she would have been there in a second. It was her religion. And the twins are doing great. But no one knew that it would turn out this way. Given the numerous failed pregnancies, there was no guarantee of healthy babies this time around, or that serious problems would not develop. They still might. It takes great faith to care for a special needs child. It takes faith to care for any child. It takes faith in the midst of exhaustion and discouragement. Even in a case

where a child will never live with the quality of life we imagined for her. Even if he does not live. We would do it again. We would promote the worth of life, even when we don't know the outcome of our efforts. We never do, actually. The whole notion of a human life "turning out well" is temporary and tenuous. It can change in a flash. And a life is still worthy.

Promoting human dignity is even more tenuous. We live in a world that treats so many people with no dignity at all. People are born in poverty and suffering. People are born in violent homes, or violent neighborhoods, cities or countries. The New York Times columnist Tom Friedman once wrote of suicide bombers, that they suffered "not from the poverty of money, but the poverty of dignity and the rage it can trigger." There is no excuse for violent behavior. People can always make choices. That is the work of cultivating dignity. And we have to understand the magnitude of our basic need for dignity, and the lengths we will go, however, misguided, to assert it. Human dignity is collective, one requiring all humans to promote.

How much cooperation and support we each need to have dignity. We human beings set so many conditions on accepting one another. Being good enough or smart enough, rich enough or attractive enough. Some people can maintain their sense of worth and dignity all by themselves, no matter what happens to them, no matter how many failures they experience. Most of us need people reminding us, supporting us. You are not a human doing, you are a human being. I don't care if you just lost your marriage, your job, your ability to drive a car, or the function of your bowels; you have dignity. We need to see our dignity in other people's faces as they look at us. We need to hear it in their voices as they speak to us. We say that worth and dignity are inherent, and that's true. We're born with them. It's also true that the world can snatch them away from us before we even know it. We depend on one another for worth and dignity.

We must also cultivate dignity within ourselves. It does not matter how many times you validate me, if I don't believe I have dignity, I can't hang onto it. I must help cultivate it within myself. Rabbi Wine says there are four qualities of dignity we must cultivate in ourselves:

- 1) We must have a high self-awareness. You could call this consciousness, being present, or being awake. What kind of impact do you have on other people? Are you willing to notice when you've hurt someone or when you're hiding from something difficult? Do you know what your

own strengths and limits are? Can you face them? Self-awareness requires great effort and great courage.

- 2) This relates to the second quality, a willingness to assume responsibility for your own life. Personal responsibility is a very important humanist value. There is no Great Rescuer, no infallible authority to come and tell us definitively what to do or what the truth is. My friend the Rev. Kerry Mueller quoted her father in saying that you should never turn your conscience over to another person. Right after the Jonestown suicides, where the followers of Jim Jones took poison on his direction, and Kerry was in shock and horror that this could happen, she remembered her father's words. "Never turn your conscience over to another person." She started taking her kids to the Unitarian Universalist church. She wanted to teach them to cultivate self-responsibility, and she wanted to have a whole church to help her teach it. Responsibility for your own life is hard. It takes a lot of effort, and we are slow learners. We need reinforcement.
- 3) Rabbi Wine's third component of human dignity is great for middle class people. It is the refusal to find your identity in any possession. Do you own your house, or does it own you? You might love your BMW, but if you lost your job, and you had to give it up, would it be a crisis? You might think the answer is obvious, but you won't really know until it happens. This practice works for all kinds of people, by the way. Each of us has something that would be hard to give up. Ask me about my books sometime. Cultivating dignity means making sure that there is something underneath you, something underneath the car or anything you own and enjoy, something that would help support you if you had to let it go. Cultivating dignity means cultivating a sense of relinquishment, of letting go.
- 4) And finally, he says that dignity means having a sense that your behavior is worthy of imitation by others. Children imitate us. Ask any parent who has just stubbed her toe and heard her child walking around humming, "*Damn, damn, damn...*" Or worse. Knowing that people may imitate us reminds us that we are intimately connected with them. That if you show compassion to people, that you live with a sense of justice and fairness, you are making it more likely for someone else to do this. If they see you doing it, it becomes possible. I find myself surrounded by people that I admire. I hope that being with them helps me become more

like them, and I hope that if I become like them, others may want to be like me.

Humanism is about the great hope that what we do matters in the world. That it's up to us to make things happen. As imperfect as we are, we're all we've got. So humanism takes its place of honor at the feast table of our faith. Let us honor it in ourselves and in our movement. Amen.