

KENDYL L. R. GIBBONS AND WILLIAM R. MURRY, EDITORS

HUMANIST
VOICES IN
UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALISM

A PATH TOWARD WHOLENESS

KAAREN ANDERSON

I fell in love with Humanism in high school at the Unitarian Meeting House in Madison, Wisconsin. The minister, Max Gaebler, shared his intellectual Humanism with a caring, enlivened sense of being in the world. He was a witty, charming man, who at five feet six in dress shoes seemed to have emerged from the illustrated pages of Clement Clarke Moore's classic, as Gaebler was a real, live, jolly old elf. Gaebler and the Unitarian Meeting House proved a balm for my sin-sick soul.

Previously, I had sung in a Congregational church choir directed by my father alongside quirky elders with rascally rabbit pitch they couldn't quite trap. In that congregation, I often felt the beguiling love and warmth of community, but more often than not, I couldn't reconcile the various leaps of faith with anything rational or true.

I confess to unabashedly copying my friend Martha's answers from her confirmation class homework sheet onto my own in the backseat of her parents' Buick on the way to

church. My goal was to be confirmed solely to attain a prized family heirloom from my Lutheran grandmother. With the class complete and my having been anointed—confirmed—the ring was mine, and like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, I had made a deal with my own devil of deceit, greed, and shallowness for a worldly good rather than a spiritual one.

The Meeting House, on the other hand, did not ask me for leaps of faith. Rather, it asked me to align my actions in accord with age-old truths of loving my neighbor as myself and serving needs greater than my own. It didn't ask me to believe in a god who was seemingly capricious and arbitrary. It didn't ask me to not ask questions; instead it told me that curiosity is the blessed gift of the holy and that, somewhere within and beside others, answers can and do arise. I was indeed home. From ninth grade on, I have proudly worn the badge of Humanism as an emblem of the good life. It made intellectual sense to me. Then, when I was thirty-two, something happened and everything changed.

I was serving my first parish in Rockport, Massachusetts. I was in a brand-new, long-distance relationship. For a number of reasons, I was stressed and felt overwhelmed most of that summer and fall. I developed one strep infection after another, took many rounds of antibiotics, yet the bouts of sickness kept on coming.

By January, I had come down with a strep pneumonia infection (the same thing that had killed the puppeteer Jim Henson). It was filling up all the pockets in my neck with infection and constraining my wind pipe. I barely survived

emergency surgery, and my family was called to be with me in what had the potential to be the last hours of my life. Each day, my love, my sister, and my brother-in-law were at my side, calming me down, explaining various procedures and my medical care, holding my hand, kissing my forehead.

The third night in the ICU, I panicked. It felt like my throat was closing up again. I had this unshakable feeling that I was going to die, right then and there. As I wrestled for some sense of self control, I remember staring up at the ceiling, with the air vents pumping and an EKG clicking, and I thought, "This is it. This is the end."

And then it happened. This calm, this blanket of comfort, enveloped me, and I said out loud in my head, "You know what, if I die now, it's okay. It is. I've lived a good life, and all that matters is, I'm loved and I love. How lucky am I. I'm loved." I did not call out to a god to save me or to a magical force to remind me that there is something after this reality as we know it—some life to be reborn into. Being loved was sufficient; it was . . . enough.

So here's the thing: This was the moment of my reckoning regarding belief. But it was more as well. It was the marking of when I really became a Humanist. Up until that time, my belief in humans as the agency for one's salvation and transformation was theory. It was reason, conjecture, perhaps even a little leap of faith. But there, in the ICU, my Humanism moved from an intellectual construct to a force that solidified itself deep within me. It became more

than a theory or an intellectual construct; it became part of me. It is me. Both intellect and heart, woven into my understanding of the world.

For a long time now, I haven't believed in a god with a will, intentionality, or consciousness. I don't put all my eggs in the basket of a god who will save and transform me. Rather, I look to humans, to my relationships with people.

Transcendence with life, with the holy, comes through my human relationships. And yes, I get that humans will let me down and will hurt me as well. They will disappoint, betray, and otherwise fail me. But they also have repeatedly saved me from a selfish me-ism that can destroy my well-being and lead me to false idols. They have loved me so fiercely that I am brought back from despair, loneliness, and isolation. They have cajoled me into my better self, when, frankly, I sometimes don't want to bother with the effort. They have challenged me to aspire to possibilities that I fear are unobtainable, because they see something in me that I far too often can't see in myself. They are human. They are the four Fs: flawed, fragile, f*#&!d up, and, most importantly, fabulous. This understanding is the Humanism that has transcended the intellect, buried itself inside me, and inspires and heals me daily.

My Humanism/nontheism is rooted in right behavior, not creeds. Science tells us that, surprisingly, our behavior influences our reason, not the other way around. So if our intellectualism doesn't influence our living and loving, our good—with or without god—what use is it?

The mission of the church I recently served, The First Unitarian Church of Rochester, is to create spiritual connection by listening to our deepest voice, opening to life's gifts, and serving needs greater than our own.

Our church is rooted in the belief that evil is disconnection—disconnection from self, others, and the oneness of life. For us, it's not about belief. It doesn't matter if you are a theist, an atheist, an agnostic, a Pagan, a Buddhist, a Christian, or a Barnes-and-Noble-ite. If your beliefs are in service to connection, then they are in. If they aren't, then they are out. It's that simple.

In some ways, this way of understanding the world is ancient. In her provocative book *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong points to the Axial Age, when this concept was made manifest. She explains that for the sages of the time, what mattered “was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level. The only way you could encounter what they called ‘God’ was to live a compassionate life. Indeed, religion was compassion.”

This precept is a guiding force for my Humanism. It reminds me that the religious life has more to do with being humble, and with being deeply connected to oneself, others, and the needs of the world, than it does anything else. It means that empathy, kindness, justice-making, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restraining from judgment are essential to being and experiencing a vitality of the life force that runs through each of us.

My Humanism/nontheism is rooted in the idea that as Humanists, as Unitarian Universalists, we are a part of a living tradition—one that cares about living well in this life rather than paying attention to the possible next. But this focus on today's life doesn't mean that what comes after this life doesn't freak the bejesus out of most people.

After twenty years in the ministry, I've seen enough fear in people's eyes when they are close to death; I know that death can terrify folks. It is hard to fathom the end of one's consciousness. So we often say it is up to each of us to decide for ourselves what comes next. We are concerned with this life, not the next. Yet, often that isn't a very satisfying answer.

But here's the thing: I think we have an answer. The answer for what is comforting and what supports us at death is science. It is thermodynamics, it is physics, it is biology, it is evolution. We are always still connected, as we have always been. I just got a tattoo on my arm to remind me that I've got today—now—to live. But it also reminds me that I am connected. It says, "From stardust I arrived, to dust I shall return."

From stardust I arrived, to dust I shall return. Science keeps me grounded and somewhat less afraid of death. And on some level, there is something almost ethereal and mind-blowing that we are all connected—that the molecules we breathe in include argon, which we shared with the Buddha and Jesus and that mischievous Eve in the garden. Science is our answer to soften the blow of annihilation and the abyss.

My Humanism/nontheism is rooted in the metaphor of the cracked pot. What is the fear about being broken? We are all broken. Not in an inherently sinful way, but in the way that any life worth living and fighting for comes with a fair amount of knocks—both unearned and sometimes earned. So, we are broken somehow; we are not perfect. I say bless that uniquely, infinitely human condition, because ultimately it is our imperfections that bond us to one another, not the other way around.

Truth is, accepting this communal brokenness isn't as scary as we think, especially when we can do it together. We should talk about brokenness because we are in pain about it. We think we should be all things to all people or think that we can't fail. We try to keep a stiff upper lip and not let anyone see how fragile we feel, because if we did, we might not know how to keep going on. We might have lost our job, partner, child, marriage, well-being, hope, or compass for what is good and right. We might have compromised our values to fit in. We are insecure, lonely, hurting, and lost.

Yes, we are broken, but my Humanism says, so what? I am often broken, yet pieced together. Sometimes the duct tape and glue of our healing process holds us together. Sometimes another's love has transformed my hurt so thoroughly that there remains only the remnants of a once-raw scar. The point is, when we can just sink into this, we can be less lonely, less afraid, less disconnected. Together, in the company and love of one another, we can be made whole.

This is my Humanism. Not singularly intellectual. Not steeped in certitude. But a relentlessly relational, ruthlessly real, test-driven-by-near-death Humanism. Humanism of holy stardust and ash. Of brokenness and wholeness.



KAAREN ANDERSON *has served four Unitarian Universalist congregations as minister, most recently The First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York. She currently is artist/owner/designer of Solveig Studio.*