

REUNITING HUMANITY AND NATURE
(THE FAITH OF A NATURALISTIC HUMANIST)

A Sermon by Ron Knapp, Minister Emeritus
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I

When the full grown poet came,
Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe, with
all its shows of day and night,) saying, He is mine;
But out spake too the Soul of man, proud, jealous
and unreconciled, Nay, he is mine alone;
--Then the full-grown poet stood between the two,
and took each by the hand;
And to-day and ever so stands, as blender, uniter, tightly
holding hands, Which he will never release until he
reconciles the two,
And wholly and joyously blends them. Walt Whitman
from "Good-bye My Fancy"

Good morning. My name is Ron Knapp. I am Minister Emeritus of this august institution. That's a pretty glamorous title, but as far as I can tell, that honorific entitles me to only two benefits. One is that, if I should ever choose to do go, I have a vote at the Unitarian Universalists General Assembly and at the Prairie Star District Annual Meeting. The other is that I get to speak to you folks a couple of times a year, and I always look forward to these occasions.

As I continue to think about it, however, that exalted title-- "Minister Emeritus" -- indicates that I have been around a long time. Maybe a sort of spiritual grandfather. Maybe, even, what Whitman calls, in the piece I read earlier, "The full grown poet." What Walt Whitman meant by that phrase, "the full grown poet", just as he meant by other phrases such as "the new son of God", which I will resist using, was the authentic religious teacher for the modern world, or the authentic religious prophet for the modern world. It is that persona which I wish to assume this morning.

Over my almost forty years in the Unitarian Universalist ministry, there is one question, more than any other, that has captured my interest and contained the content of much of what I had to say from this pulpit over the years. That question is this: how can one articulate a religious faith that, without delusion, accepts and incorporates modern knowledge of the world and of the universe. In other words, how can one reconcile, without delusion, what is believed about the universe with what is known, in our time, about

the universe. What we believe about the universe can go under the general rubric, "theology". What we know about the universe can go under the general rubric, "science". To oversimplify a bit, my question can be phrased: how can one reconcile, without delusion, science and theology.

Now, there was a time when theology was known, in the faculties of the great academic institutions of western civilization, as "the queen science." Science provided emerging knowledge and theology imbued that knowledge with ultimate or cosmic significance. Over the past couple of hundred years, however, the "queen science" has been toppled from its high pedestal and, more and more, been relegated to back rooms and back waters until it has become, in an academic sense, irrelevant.

What led to this situation, it seems to me, is that theological beliefs had become so entrenched that religious leaders felt they had to be preserved at all costs. The best known example of this, of course, is that of Galileo. His ideas threatened prevailing religious understandings and he had to be silenced. Science had to be silenced. Knowledge had to be silence. In our own time there is no other way to understand the continuing religious debate over evolution, even after a century and a half of verification of its basic tenets. The absurd religious doctrines of "creationism" and the intellectually dishonest practice of sugar coating creationism with the more respectable and more ideologically self serving name, "intelligent design", represent little more than the suppression of knowledge in order to maintain an antiquated understanding of religion.

Isn't it time for belief and knowledge to be reconciled once again? Isn't it time for theology and science to be reconciled once again? I think so! And once again Walt Whitman provides me with inspiration. "I accept reality and dare not question it ... Hurrah for positive Science!" {Scientists} he wrote in "Song of Myself"

to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are
not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.

I could exegete this passage at length, but it will have to suffice to say that what Whitman means here is that authentic religion for the modern world has to go through the house of science to get to the house of religion. An appropriate religion for the 21st century has to be intellectually honest with scientific understandings and yet move beyond that to articulate the human place in the cosmos, and the relationships between human beings and the world in which they live.

I believe that the appropriate religious response, for the 21st century, comes under the rubric of "Naturalistic Humanism".

II

Perhaps it is time to define what is meant by, and what I mean by, "Naturalistic Humanism." What is meant by, and what I mean by, "naturalism." What is meant by, and what I mean by, and in this case what I do not mean by, "humanism." And I should add: What is meant by, and what I mean by, "rationalism," since I consider that an integral part of "Naturalistic Humanism".

First, "naturalism." A dictionary definition, as the word "naturalism" relates to philosophy, reads like this: "the system of thought holding that all phenomena can be explained in terms of natural causes and laws, without attributing moral, spiritual, or supernatural significance to them." What I mean by "naturalism" is that the natural world is the only world we can know; that the natural world from the context of human experience is the only world there is. From such a perspective all forms of supernaturalism are seen as delusions.

Two or three decades ago I came across a sentence in a book by Jacques Monod, a French scientist, titled Chance and Necessity, which has stayed with, haunted me, all these years. "All religions," and even great parts of science, Monod wrote, represent desperate attempts "to deny our own contingency." Monod may be too harsh. Maybe not all religions. But, basically, I think he is right: most religions, some parts of science, and even great parts of Unitarian Universalism, represent desperate attempts to deny our own contingency; desperate attempts to deny that we are absolutely dependant upon the processes of the natural world.

"Naturalism" resists "denying our own contingency." Naturalism accepts the reality that our being is the result of the chance processes of nature and not the result of some cosmic intent. Naturalism insists that we are of the earth, earthy. Naturalism insists that our ultimate meaning is found in this context.

Secondly, "humanism". Here's a dictionary definition: humanism is "a philosophy or attitude that is concerned with human beings, their achievements and interests, rather than with abstract beings and problems of theology." And here is a poetic definition. It is the first few lines of Alexander Pope's epic poem, "Essay on Man".

Know then thyself,
Presume not God to span,
The proper study of mankind
Is man.

Humanism focuses on the human being and on human being, focuses on that which we can truly know and truly understand. At this point I need to make a historical digression. What was meant by the word "humanist" in the 19th century and much of the 20th century has to be different in the 21st century. In those previous times the human being could be thought of, to use Biblical terms, as a being created a "little lower than the angels." In those times the human being

could be thought of, in evolutionary terms, as being the end result of evolution, that we were on the top of some evolutionary heap; that we were the supreme achievement of creation.

I do not believe it possible, with intellectual honesty, to maintain such views in the 21st century. We are just one of the millions of ways life has found expression in the cosmos. Mischievously, I like to shock people, when I am involved in discussions of such things, with the idea that, if adaptation is a primary process of nature, cockroaches might be at the top of the evolutionary heap. They have adapted magnificently and have been around for tens of thousands of years with out changing. Human beings, for all I know, might just be an evolutionary dead end.

My understanding of humanism is centered in the idea that out of all those bubbling processes of nature, human beings emerged; that out of all those bubbling processes of nature, I emerged. My understanding of humanism involves a celebration of that wonderful reality that human beings do exist with human minds to think, human eyes to see, and human hearts to love. My understanding of humanism recognizes that we, and not God, not some cosmic force, are responsible for our actions, for good or for ill, for how we deal with other people, how we deal with the earth and the world of nature, and what legacies we leave for those who follow us.

Thirdly, "rationalism". The dictionary definition of "rationalism" would read like this: "rationalism" is "the theory that the exercise of reason ... provides the only valid basis for action or belief, and that reason is the prime source of knowledge and of spiritual truth." My definition of "rationalism" would include the idea that reason is the arbiter of truth, that reason is the best means at our disposal to understand the nature of the world and the nature of the universe. The Jewish thinker, Morris R. Cohen, in The Faith of a Liberal, writes:

The defense of religion must be stated in a spirit of sober regard for the truth, and not as a more or less complacent apology for beliefs we are determined not to abandon.

It is that "sober regard for truth" which I see as central to rationalism, and which I see as central to the development of an appropriate religion for the 21st century. And it is reason, as "a sober regard for truth", which needs to be an integral aspect of Naturalistic Humanism. I say this because "reason" can provide a sense of authority. Think about it for a moment. In the old religions the arbiter of truth is revelation. In Christianity the authority is the Bible, in Islam, the authority is the Koran, in Judaism the authority is the Torah. To settle disputes over religious doctrines one turns to those authorities, to ancient revelations to settle the dispute. The only arbiter of truth I can come up with for religious liberals, who by and large reject revelation, is reason. Without reason, without that "sober regard for truth," we fall into the complacency of saying "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as long as you believe it" What nonsense!

It matters tremendously what we believe.

But enough about that since I am going to deal with that further next Sunday when I talk about "Holy Eclecticism." Just for now, however, let me say that if I could have my own way I would have engraved over the entrance to every church that wants to honestly confront the modern world, "Come, let us reason together".

III

I do not remember who the author was, but the title of one of the books I had to read in my theological education was The Nature and The Destiny Of Man. I don't remember much about the content of the book either, but I presume it was written from the perspective of Christian theology. From the perspective of naturalism, I believe there are two productive fields of study which can provide for religious speculation about the nature and destiny of human being and human beings. The first of these is evolutionary biology. The second is scientific cosmology.

Human thinkers have known the truth of evolution for thousands of years. The ancient Romans knew. Lucretius knew. In his six volume work, On The Nature of Things, written before the Christian era, Lucretius said about evolution: "from out of the loam" how many living things, including human beings, have emerged. But for contemporary western civilization our understanding of evolution really begins with Charles Darwin and his two books: The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man, both of which caused a fire storm of religious opposition at that time and up to the present time. "When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the cambrian system was deposited," Darwin wrote, "they seem to me to become ennobled."

"They seem to me to become ennobled." This is the opposite of traditional Christian theology where the human being was created a little lower than the angels and fell from grace. Perhaps Darwin could have titled his second work, instead of The Descent of Man, "The Ascent of Man", for as the eminent early 20th century scientist, George Gaylord Simpson, reminds us "Man has risen, not fallen." Over billions of years, in the churning processes of evolution, life forms emerged, and human beings emerged. But then Simpson, who says "man has risen, not fallen," adds the powerful cautionary note:

He (humanity) can choose to develop his capacities ... and try to rise still further, or he can choose otherwise. The choice is his responsibility, and his alone.... Evolution has no purpose; man must supply this for himself.

When I contemplate the evolution of evolutionary biology over the past century and a half, I am awed by two wonderful and powerful ideas, two wonderful and powerful realities that present themselves to us as opposite realities. On the one hand we, now know that all living things are interrelated, that the millions of living things

currently on the earth, and the millions of living things that have gone extinct, are members of one natural family, sharing common ancestors. On the other hand, we now know that individual living beings are unique.

When we think of this just in terms of human beings, we now have the knowledge to know that we are all brothers and sisters. Through a study of mitochondrial DNA, scientists at the present time are tracing our ancestry back to a woman, or a small group of women, probably in Africa. We all have the same great, great, great, great, grand mother. Who knows, perhaps in some future year, when we have to fill out a form that asks for our nationality, we are all going to have to put down "African." Perhaps we are all African Americans! The power of this idea, this reality, is that it makes the concept of race, one of the major curses of our world, obsolete and irrelevant. We are all members of the human race.

When I think of this in terms of the individual human being, when I think of this in terms of myself, I am again filled with awe. After millions of years, billions of years, with all its bubblings and permutations, evolution produced a unique being, me, or you, and it appears that there will never be another being exactly like me, or you, again!

The other productive field of study for understanding the nature and destiny of humankind is scientific cosmology. Scientific cosmology presents the view that all things in the cosmos, animate and inanimate, from stars to animals from planets to stones -- everything -- is part one grand process. The astronomer Robert Jastrow says that the scientific cosmologists have written

a beautiful story that unites man, the other animals of the earth, and the inanimate objects of the universe in one great community of change and existence.

I remember quite vividly when I first became acquainted with this beautiful story. I was in theological school -- about forty five years ago -- when I read an article in a magazine by three Princeton astro-physicists. We now know enough about the nature of the universe, the three scientists said, to say with confidence that the very elements that make up our bodies were created in the center of dying stars. We are made of stardust.

I can't go into this any further this morning, except to say that scientific cosmology presents the 21st century world with a wondrous new vision of creation; a beautiful new Genesis. Once again human beings can see a oneness in the universe.

There is one aspect of humanism that also tends to fill me with awe and wonder. I am thinking of the fact that evolution has provided for a human brain that can communicate with other human beings over long distances and across generation after generation. People who lived generations before we live faced many of the same problems, had many of the same concerns, dealt with the wonder of and

agony of human existence and shared with us, through the capacity of writing, their thoughts and their solutions. I don't have time to go into this any further -- although I may deal with it more completely next Sunday -- but suffice it to say, for now, that one of the most fruitful resources available to human beings as they seek an understanding of the meaning of existence and the meaning of their lives is what I am fond of calling "the wisdom of the ages".

IV

I began this sermon by asking the question which more than any other has intrigued me throughout my professional religious life. How can one articulate a religious faith that, without delusion, accepts and incorporates modern knowledge of the world and of the universe? How can one reconcile, without delusion, what is believed about the universe with what is known, or will become known, about the universe. I believe that what I call "Naturalistic Humanism" provides an honest answer to that question. Indeed, I know of no other formulation that does!

I also began these remarks by reading Walt Whitman's little legacy poem from "Good-bye my Fancy." I am going to read it again in conclusion because it presents, in the most powerful imagery I am aware of, the imperative of reuniting humankind and nature once again.

When the full grown poet came,
Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe, with
all its shows of day and night,) saying, He is mine;
But out spake too the Soul of man, proud, jealous
and unreconciled, Nay, he is mine alone;
--Then the full-grown poet stood between the two,
and took each by the hand;
And to-day and ever so stands, as blender, uniter, tightly
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