

Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence

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Boulder International Humanist Institute
Fourth Annual Symposium
Boulder, Colorado
February 22, 2003

It was seventy years ago that a group of scholars issued the “Humanist Manifesto”, a document outlining a new religious vision, more adequate to the challenges and the opportunities of the twentieth century. The Manifesto was not the product of some whimsical enthusiasm. Rather, it was the culmination of a complex process which had its roots in the thought of Theodore Parker and other Transcendentalist thinkers of New England, as the implications of that radical religious vision had been worked out in the Western Unitarian Conference, and within the Ethical Culture movement, by some elements of Reformed Judaism, and among a variety of other religious liberals. To these philosophical, ethical, religious concerns were wedded the insights and imperatives of those who advocated the scientific method as the appropriate means for understanding the world and humanity’s place in that world.

It is ironic that increasingly over the decades, humanism has been identified as a secular ideology. Indeed “secular humanists” is the common term by which the spiritual descendents of the original signers of that document are currently known. As I read the original Manifesto, however, it is clear that the signers did not define themselves as “secular” or as the enemies of religion. The Manifesto affirms the ongoing importance of religion for human life. It defines religion as “the quest for abiding values” and it insists that while fashions in theology may shift the shape and form of religion, the religious quest for abiding values is a constant of human experience.

The Manifesto did not seek to abolish religion, but rather to set out some imperatives by which to structure and revitalize religion so that it might more adequately serve the human community in the modern. The signers of the Humanist Manifesto were concerned to challenge the various dualisms which fractured the human community-- the dualisms defined by body and mind, by humanity and nature, by sacred and secular, by knowledge and faith, by reason and revelation. They envisioned a radical unity out of which might emerge a truly moral and ethical social structure.

The Manifesto was issued in a highly problematic context and the years have not been kind to the dream that it sought to advance. The catastrophe of the First World War was still reverberating around the globe. A continuing worldwide depression had served to lay bare the brutal injustices of the economic and political systems under which humanity labored. And, of course, the premonitions of an even greater catastrophe on the horizon haunted the troubled dreams of many.

Confronting this reality, much of mainstream religion declined the invitation to dialogue that the Manifesto presented, and retreated, instead, into neo-orthodoxy. From that position, theologians were able to distinguish between “moral man and immoral society,” to decry the social iniquity of the times, but to offer little hope for any effective corporate response to growing evil. The optimism and confidence in human capacity that under-girded the Humanist Manifesto, tempered though they were by a realistic estimate of the human condition, were radically out of fashion. The consequence was that religion and humanism quickly ceased to encounter each other outside the vital, but admittedly local dialogue within Unitarian and Universalist and a few other self-consciously liberal groups.

Overtime, Humanists began to accept as home the ghetto to which they had been consigned. Humanists accepted the charge that they were secularists, materialists, rationalists and the implacable foes of the spiritual and emotional qualities that romanticized religion emphasized. Living under this imposed definition, Humanism gradually lost the vocabulary of reverence that I believe had been the native tongue of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto. Over time, Humanism came to be understood by many as an artifact of a by-gone, dated, slightly quaint era and its advocates were seen as aging dinosaurs who did not yet realize that their era had ended, and that they had been replaced an upstart, irrepressible spirituality.

I am keenly aware of this development within my own religious movement. Every survey taken indicates that the majority of Unitarian Universalists still think of themselves as Humanists in their theological/philosophical attitudes. However, there is a growing sense that Humanism, even within this most liberal of religious movements, is on the defensive, that it is identified with an older generation, that younger, smarter, more with-it people are now engaging a new language, the language of spirituality, and to a large degree, the common theistic dialect of the conventionally religious. There is a growing sense that the future belongs to those who can be comfortable with god-talk and who embrace or at least tolerate the cultural attitudes that language reflects. As a consequence, fundamental religious assumptions from the traditions of the peoples of the Book are gaining renewed currency and often an uncritical acceptance among us.

Watching this development, I have found myself wondering why Humanists, who once offered a serious challenge to traditional religion now, find that increasingly we are engaged in a monologue. I would submit to you that to some degree at least we are talking to ourselves because we have allowed ourselves to be defined by the opposition. We have dismissed mainstream religion as an atavistic aberration. We have given up the hope of a constructive dialogue. We have manned the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind against this new superstition until the very end. But in the process of defending, we have lost the vocabulary of reverence, the ability of speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us, the language which would allow us to enter into critical dialogue with the rest of the religious community.

The sad thing is that Humanism, with its emphasis on the ongoing search for truth and understanding, with its insistence that revelation is not sealed, with its conviction that all truth is one, with its commitment to “truth, known or to be known,” has an inherited vocabulary of reverence implicit in its underlying assumptions--a vocabulary of reverence which is drawn from and depends upon the ongoing scientific enterprise, the enlarging exploration of the universe and humanity’s place in the universe.

The key to the recovery of a humanist vocabulary of reverence is to be found, I believe, in the second affirmation of the original manifesto. After affirming that the universe is “self existing and not created,” the manifesto went on to insist (in the language of the time), “Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and he has emerged as the result of a continuous process.” If we take that assertion seriously, then it becomes clear that our growing understanding of the nature of the universe is, in some sense, also a deep anthropology--a source of continuing revelation concerning our own nature.

I would suggest to you that the history of science in the twentieth century was the history of an enlarging understanding of the universe, its evolution, its history, and its structure. We have engaged the universe at the very limits of our capacity. We have explored the world of the microcosm and the world of the macrocosm. We have found at both extremes incredible complexity.

In high energy, subatomic physics we have encountered a reality that can only be fully explicated in the language of mathematics and that, when translated into our common discourse, confounds all our settled conventions. We have discovered a world in which particles emerge from and return to the undifferentiated void, a world in which particles oscillate in time, between past and future, a world in which particles appear to be in constant communication with each other across vast distances and at speeds greater than the speed of light, a world which, incredibly, is changed and altered by the very process of observing it, a world in which the distinctions between subject and

object disappear. We are not sure what all of this means, but it becomes clear that at this fundamental level of reality, there is no distinction to be made between you and me and the tree and the rock. Ultimately, the more we understand of our universe at this level, the more we are driven to reverence before the mystery of the invisible, ineffable reality in which our quotidian existence is rooted.

At the other extreme, the macrocosmic world, we discover a universe that is larger than we can encompass in our imaginations. Throughout the past century, our estimates of the age and the expanse of the Universe have proven over and over again to be far too modest. As our ability to measure and observe has improved, we have found a universe that is many billions of years old, most recently, we are told, 13.7 billion years old, give or take a few months. As our tools have enabled us to look further and further back into the history of that universe, we have been able to write the story of its emergence to within a few seconds of the beginning. We cannot say much about those first few seconds, and we cannot say anything at all that is more than speculation about the time before time. But this much seems clear: The universe, beginning from an unimaginably hot and dense singularity, evolved through a series of stages, each producing the conditions necessary for the succeeding stage. Our sun, our solar system, our planet, our own beings are all late stages of this evolving universe. And curiously enough, much of our insight into the early history of the universe emerges from and resonates with our insights into the interaction of subatomic particles--suggesting a strongly recursive universe in which patterns repeat and recur over many different scales. The more we understand about the macrocosm, the more reason we have to stand in awe and reverence at the process which shaped and structured its evolution, our evolution.

Nor has this been a matter of intellectual satisfaction only. The insights of cosmology and theoretical astronomy have served to tie us ever more tightly into the emerging story of the universe itself. Just as the processes of the subatomic world underlie and ground our daily existence, so the history of the emerging universe continues to work itself out in our ongoing lives. We now understand that the heavy elements--iron, carbon, oxygen, and all the others--were not present in the earliest stages of the evolving universe. In fact, all of those heavy elements were created in the incredible heat and unimaginable pressures at the heart of massive stars. As those stars died in gigantic super-nova explosions, all of these elements so essential to the creation of our planet and to our own existence were scattered as dust across vast reaches of space. Eventually that dust coalesced under the force of gravity, and planets were born. And on some of those planets, life emerged and evolved into more and more complex forms. The history of the universe is our history; we are all of us recycled stardust. In the words of Robert Terry Weston, "out of the stars have we come." Our very existence is rooted in the fundamental processes of the universe itself. How can we

not stand in awe before the fact of our emergence as a consequence of those same vast processes that created galaxies and suns and stars and planets?

The work that has been done in biology during the past century has magnified that sense of reverence and awe. Building on Darwin's work in the middle of the nineteenth century, biologists have presented us with a powerful understanding of who we are and how we are rooted in fundamental processes. Thus we know that the evolutionary processes which produced the universe, the galaxies, the stars, and planets continued on this earth changing its landmasses, its oceans, its atmosphere, its climate. Early--and recent investigations place the date closer and closer to the formation of the planet itself--in tidal pools, or in clay beds, or in volcanic vents, life emerged. And from that first life, all living things on this planet emerged. All that lives or ever has lived derives from a single source.

That itself would be cause for awe and reverence, but recently the earth sciences hint that the tale may be even more complicated. Scientists like James Lovelock suggest that life did not simply emerge on earth, but that life is a defining artifact of the earth, that the earth became a self-regulating, living entity—Gaia--that we do not live on earth, but must be seen as elements in earth's living system. Biologists like Lynn Margulis have suggested that the evolutionary concept of the descent of humanity from earlier life forms obscures the incredible complexity and interwoven nature of life. Evolution, in her view is the result of the complex interaction and integration of organisms with their total environment. She argues that we did not descend from earlier forms, but rather that our existence is the result of the cooperative, symbiotic merging of earlier life forms to produce greater and greater complexity. Margulis would have us understand that those earlier life forms, in many if not all cases, continue to exist, within us as well as apart from us.

Margulis reminds us that within every cell in our bodies there is a life form called mitochondria. These small entities are absolutely essential to our existence. Mitochondria are the processors that transform chemicals into usable energy for our bodies. Without mitochondria our lives would not be possible. And yet, mitochondria exist quite independently within our cells. They have their own DNA; they have their own reproductive processes; they have their own life cycles. They have an existence significantly separate from the host cell. Margulis speculates that early in the evolution of life, some primordial bacterium ingested mitochondria. Rather than being digested, however, the mitochondria set up housekeeping within the cell and in a remarkable symbiotic relationship began supplying energy to the host, allowing for new forms and possibilities to emerge. In these ways, earlier life forms were not overcome, defeated, out grown, cast off as new forms emerged. Rather, the evidence suggests that in some cases at least, the earlier forms are incorporated in and an integral part of the life of more complex forms. Margulis reminds us that the bacteria

from which life emerged were here before we were, continue to be here with us now, and undoubtedly will be here after we have been replaced by some new emergent life.

More recently, we have been reminded of our rootedness in the natural processes of life by reports of the results of the human genome project. The mapping of the human genome has demonstrated anew how clearly we are part of the Gaian system of life. Not only do we share more than ninety percent of our genes with other primates, our genome structure is not markedly different from fruit flies or mustard plants. Our beings are intimately related to every living thing that creeps, or crawls or flies, to every living thing that is rooted in the earth and reaches for the sun, to every living thing that inhabits the dark depths of the oceans. We are but one form life has taken, one expression of Gaia's living process. It is difficult not to speculate that if the universe is truly as recursive as it seems, perhaps we are to Gaia as the mitochondria are to us.

Nor is this continuity with the past true only of our relations with other living systems. In a curious way, we carry with us in our bodies the very environment in which we evolved. The heat of our bodies is the heat of stars, tempered to the uses of life. The salt in our blood and in our tears is the salt of ancient oceans, encapsulated and carried with us, generation upon generation, into strange and distant places and circumstances. The past is not dead. It lives in us even now. The evolutionary universe, the ancient environment, the emergence of complex life—all are recapitulated in every moment of our existence.

When the Humanist Manifesto declared that we are part of nature and we have emerged as the result of a continuous process, it not only denied the creation stories of the western religious traditions, it gave us an immensely richer, longer, more complex history, one rooted in a system which invites not blind faith but challenge and correction and amendment, one which embraces "truth, known or to be known." It also gave us a language of reverence because it provides a story rooted not in the history of a single tribe or a particular people, but a history rooted in the sum of our knowledge of the universe itself. It gave us a doctrine of incarnation which suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in humming birds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing. A language of reverence for Humanists begins with our understanding of this story as a religious story--a vision of reality that contains within it the sources of a moral, ethical, transcendent self-understanding.

It is a religious story in that it calls us out of our little local universes and invites us to see ourselves in terms of the largest self we can imagine—a self which was present, in

some sense, in the singularity which produced the emergent universe, a self which was present, in some sense, at the birth of the stars, a self which, in some sense, is related through time to every living thing on this planet, a self which contains within itself the seeds of a future we cannot imagine in our wildest flights of fancy.

It is a religious story in that it whispers of a larger meaning to our existence—a suggestion that in us the universe is grasping for self-knowledge, for self-understanding, for insight. How we participate in this process, or what the ultimate consequence of this process may be, we cannot know. But if, as the Humanist Manifesto suggests, we are not separate from nature and we are a result of nature's inherent processes, then our struggles with meaning and purpose, our endless search for insight and understanding can not be limited in their significance or consequence to the human enterprise alone, but must be part of the emergence of the universe itself.

It is a religious story in that it implies a broader ethic for our lives. To understand the human race as related in the most intimate of ways to all living things on this planet; to understand the earth not as the platform on which life exists, but as itself a living being, regulating its complex systems in such a way as to sustain ongoing life; to understand our own physical beings as a congeries of ancient living forms, quietly and unobtrusively contributing to our ongoing existence while pursuing their own mysterious imperatives; to understand ourselves as the incarnation of those same forces and substances and circumstances which produced galaxies and stars and planets is to enlarge our sense of responsibility and our definition of moral living. In light of this enlarged revelation, the ethic of the main-chance, the ethic of short-term benefit, the ethic of immediate gratification, the ethic of tribal values and ethnic identities so prevalent in our world are challenged in the most profound way and found in every case to be inadequate.

We are driven to recognize the paradox that our individual well being is rooted in the understanding that at heart we are one with all things and our sense of separateness is ultimately an illusion, while at the same time affirming that our individual separateness is a consequence of the drive of the universe for differentiation and complexity. We are driven by our story to seek an ethic that respects the individual and the ground out of which the individual emerges. This implies a deep concern for ecojustice that reaches across class, racial, ethnic, even species distinctions and embraces a vision that responds to the largest sense of self we are capable of entertaining.

Brian Swimme has suggested that the religious story for our time is the "Universe Story." I would add that the human story and the universe story are the same tale. If the Manifesto was right when it insisted that we are part of nature, not separate from it, that we represent a continuing natural process, then it becomes clear that the

challenges, the hopes, the dreams, the aspirations which find expression in our lives are not separate from the context in which we have evolved, in which we are rooted. We are not encapsulated, separated, isolated beings. Whatever we are, the universe is. The reality inside of us and the reality outside of us are ultimately one reality. In us the universe dreams its dreams. In us the universe struggles for a moral vision. In us the universe hopes for new possibilities. In us the universe strives for self-understanding. In us the universe seeks the meaning of existence. I do not mean to suggest that the universe is limited to our expression of it, or that this is the only place where this kind of complexity has arisen. Nor would I suggest that humanity is the only avenue on this planet by which the universe gropes toward self-awareness. I simply argue that our existence, our struggles and our failures are lent moral significance by the fact that they occur within a larger context--within the largest context our reason and our imagination can conceive--within a context grounded in a unified view of existence.

This is a religious story; it invites us to awe; it demands a vocabulary of reverence. It is a story that is uniquely appropriate to the Humanist tradition. It emerges from the scientific enterprise. It seeks to overcome the ancient dualisms that, over the ages, have diminished the human spirit. It offers a clear alternative to the limited faiths and narrow fundamentalisms that compete for the allegiance of the human community—one that does not have to deny the categories and assumptions upon which our daily lives are built, but can embrace the emergent insights and understandings which enlarge our vision of ourselves and the context in which our lives are lived.

The Humanist Manifesto was an invitation to revision the religious enterprise and to challenge the prevailing attitudes and assumptions of the religious community. We are called, at this moment in time, to renew that undertaking—to find or build a vocabulary of reverence adequate to the vision which is emerging around us—a vision which is the result of the drive by the universe to know itself and understand itself—a vocabulary adequate to describe a universe which regularly confounds our expectations, even as it rewards our attempts to know, by revealing levels of meaning which make contemporary faddish talk of angels and gods and spirits seem trivial and irrelevant. We are children of, expressions of a universe that is not only “stranger than we know, but stranger than we can know.” It is incumbent upon us to challenge the parochial and limited claims of traditional religions with the enlarging and enriching and reverent story that is our story and their story: the Universe Story.

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