

## Editor's Preface

As I read through the collected articles for this issue, I was taken back to a number of incidents that helped in the “formation” of my ministry as a religious humanist – I use that term deliberately because it is current seminary-speak, and would have seemed pretentious to most of us *preparing* for the UU ministry in the seventies. Ministerial formation is what seminary education is said to be about these days, and the word is used, I take it, as a contrast to ministerial preparation. The whole path from lay person to *aspirant*, to candidate, and finally to minister-in-fellowship is now seen through the lens of *discernment*, a process with a built in assumption that there is something about ministry (or perhaps more accurately, about the person moving towards ministry), that needs to be uncovered.

While the language involved strikes me as a little precious, the underlying idea has some real merit. The skills you (sort of, begin to) learn in seminary – preaching, counseling, teaching, cultural competence and administering – are important, but probably less so than the insights you come across about yourself in a liberal religious setting. And the academic subjects you cover – theology, ethics, psychology, philosophy, church history and group dynamics – while a necessary framework upon which to hang those insights, are not the heart of what enable you to pastor.

That heart is the growing sense of yourself as a minister, in a host of settings and through a host of experiences. Sarah Millspaugh's article on About Your Sexuality took me back to my own SAR (Sexual Attitude Restructuring) experience at the Akron Forum in the early 70s, as well as my first training to teach AYS. Both were useful as part of the seminary process, but both were more about self-awareness than text- or lecture-based learning. Margaret Laws Smith's evocation of the same time period's growing spiritual awareness found within the transformation of conservatism into environmentalism, reminded me of the peak experience<sup>1</sup> of joining with the Hog Farm in the Cincinnati version of Earth People's Park. And Chip Roush's valiant attempt to frame communion in a contemporary UU idiom, parallels my own offering of communion built on a much earlier Unitarian rite, to a skeptical but game congregation in the eighties.

Ministerial formation is very much a matter of discovering something (actually many things) about the nature of ministry and about human nature, as instantiated in yourself. Clinical Pastoral Education is the paradigm here – what you learn as a trainee chaplain on the hospital floor is certainly not the theory of chaplaincy, nor even a chaplaincy skill set; what you learn is who you are in a setting of pain and despair, hope and recovery, loss and ultimately, love. What you learn are the personal specifics, rather than the theories, of human nature. What is true of our ministry is true of our movement in general. If there is a single descriptor for the shift in UUism from my seminary days to the present, it might be this: UUism, dominated by Humanism<sup>2</sup> used to be primarily about the application of theories of human nature in community... and it has come to be about the specific operations of your individual nature, and mine, as unique human beings, in situ. The danger is that this is a shift from over-intellectualism to near-solipsism.

When half a dozen prominent UU minister's gathered in Boston last April, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the UUA by reflecting on its future, to a person they decried the hyper-individualism of liberal religious thought<sup>3</sup> that makes it so hard to identify UUism and have it move forward. Each offered a corrective – a focus for a healthy UU

future: multiculturalism, anti-fundamentalism, congregations “finding their greatness,” by “explor(ing) what High Demand life among us looks like”<sup>4</sup> were among the suggestions. Three of the participants called for some form of spiritual practice or deepening, and there was a fair amount, but not an overwhelming amount of God talk, but only one of the six was willing to specify a theological core – the historical “gospel of Universalism, of God’s love for all people.”<sup>5</sup> I was disappointed that there was only one concrete core suggested, because when I am being asked to consider seriously changing my ways, I like to know upon what basis that request rests. I appreciate that Robert Hardies was specific – it allows me to assess his proposal and possibly offer alternatives.

To the exhortation to “find your (congregational) greatness,” or “deepen your spiritual life,” I don’t believe I can do much more than nod my head in partial awareness. I think I know generally where the authors of these two suggestions want to go, but I have less idea where they’re coming from, or why. And it is my assumption that most of us are “coming from” somewhere. (It should be noted that none of these six ministers are coming from a solidly humanist orientation, though one, Christine Robinson, has written previously for this publication).<sup>6</sup> But my colleague Rev. Hardies makes his grounding clear. I may not agree with his premise that a two-century-old theological breakthrough (and its modern Christian incarnation) is what stands at the center of Unitarian Universalism, but I can follow his reasoning from there, to the type of congregation he envisions, indeed leads, as a result. I can appreciate, though I may not wish to emulate, the choices he and his congregation have made.

Hardies’ position is mainstream contemporary theological framing: this is the doctrine that we follow and the vision it gives us, and these are the conclusions we draw about the work we need to do. In response to that specificity, UU humanists can say honestly and without apology: here is the doctrine we follow: “the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values,”<sup>7</sup> and half a century of careful application and study of this doctrine within the Association has led us to a form of religious naturalism that is the default practice, (in my experience) in a clear majority of UU congregations, though perhaps the practice of a much less clear majority of individual UUs.<sup>8</sup>

Naturalism (the theme of this issue), of course, is as much a humanist corrective as it is a generic form of liberal spirituality. As Jerome Stone points out, it “provides a context for humanism in that it (is) a reminder... to seek meanings and values in the extra human world... thus providing a balance to the anthropocentrism into which humanism can sometimes fall.”<sup>9</sup> Stone, in his brief review in this issue, of *Religious Naturalism* since the mid forties, stakes out the Naturalist ground as “the environment... within us as well as outside of us,” a formulation sufficient in this life for all possible meaning and explanation.

Stone’s is a philosophical survey, drawing on definitions, categories and resources that speak to a wide academic audience; but it also makes a very direct and simple appeal to UUs: that we need to take care, in our defining, “labeling” and carving up of what we believe and how we act upon it, not to separate ourselves overly from those with whom we share so much. It is not obvious that the “depth” sought by the UU clergy cited above, is categorically different from the depth dimension that many humanists seek; in many cases our challenges to their theological assertions are as much a matter of emphasis, as they are outright disagreement. We all have much to lose by assuming unbridgeable

chasms between us.

If, as Bill Murry, the pre-eminent UU popularizer of religious naturalism suggests, “naturalism... gives Humanism a deeper, more inclusive foundation,”<sup>10</sup> then there are two specific sets of questions for Unitarian Universalists to ask:

- What are the specific deficits of a default humanist UUism to which naturalism is the corrective?
- What wholly new directions and radically altered ones are emerging, or can be expected as this corrective takes hold?

Scott Prinster, who maintains that both “natural theology” and the romantic period’s interest in “the sacred dimensions of nature” are appropriate guides for all UUs, suggests an answer to the second of these questions:<sup>11</sup> that science must come to be seen as the central means of *religious* knowing for UUs. He implies that the secular strain of humanism that previously dominated our faith exhibits the deficit of taking the scientific method too much for granted – that it did not/does not advance a necessary merging of scientific knowing with non-supernatural religious inquiry. Prinster, who has served as a parish minister and is now a scholar of the philosophy of science, offers as a model that blend of science and religion promoted by the Templeton Foundation. But instead of the Foundation’s desire to use scientific methodology to study and perhaps establish the factual claims of religion, he hopes for an approach that will give an emotional religious appeal to science’s claims.

Secular humanists with a UU affiliation may protest that there is nothing uniquely religious about the emotional aspects of human life, but Prinster makes a compelling argument that a reverse-Templeton may well rescue UUism and HUUmanism from *scientism*, surely one of those “idolatries of the mind and spirit” against which the Humanist source statement in our UUA “Purposes and Principles” warns us.

Kendyl Gibbons argues, in a piece she penned for the Church of the Larger Fellowship, for a wider view of evidentiary judgments than science provides, and that many of the propositions we make about such matters as beauty, love, good and evil, are subject to forms of knowing other than the scientific sort. There **is** evidence, she suggests, for much of what we assert in such matters, but not the sort of evidence that can ever add up to anything like proof. Instead, the evidence for a claim that it is “wrong to steal, or to be cruel” comes in part from our aspirations for a world in which cruelty and theft are not commonplace.

Gibbons maintains that often in the place of proof-seeking, we must practice as humanists, not only what our collective experience of human nature tells us is true, but also the virtues and attributes we wish to be true. In that sense we humanists are no different from other UUs.

Chip Roush turns to historical examples at the dawn of organized liberal religion to offer a new worship approach based on an ancient rite and a possible even more ancient naturalism – the recognition by the Socinians (proto Unitarians of the 16th Century) that not only was the universe not centered around the earth, but that the natural world appeared to place some limitations upon the Divine. Envisioning a form of communion both in touch with our religious origins, and encompassing the responsibility of our collective human nature, Roush invites us to consider a “feast of hope,” in the poetic company of sages. Communion rites may make traditional humanists wince; Roush

suggests that they stand on a spectrum with making New Year's resolutions, and other sincere individual and collective efforts to live responsibly and ethically.

Our Heritage article author Margaret Laws Smith, predicted in her 1970 English article (reprinted in *religious humanism* immediately following Gaylord Nelson's first American Earth Day) that a growing awareness of ecological concerns would make "humanism more spiritual." The title of Smith's article, "Conservation and Religious Humanism" suggests the struggle in liberal thought forty years ago, to fully embrace the radical changes in perspective on the place of human beings in nature. Smith, who argues for a "reverence for the impersonal forces of nature," which she posits as replacing divinity as the "idea of the power or total environment which controls life," hints that the humanist notion of people being responsible for their own fate is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the "cooperation and *restraint*... crucial to survival."

At the same time that the modern environmental movement was gathering steam, a revolution of how we conceive of *human* nature was also underway. The intellectual and academic aspects of this sea change can be seen in the work of Abraham Maslow (appointed just before his death in 1970 to the editorial board of *religious humanism*), whose contribution to RH immediately preceded Smith's article, and warned us all against "helium-filled words," those "merely abstract and abstruse" terms that are not integrated with the experiential.<sup>12</sup> Such language is the result of atomistic, either/or thinking Maslow felt, a gentle reminder to everyone who believes they can tell the "other side" just what is wrong with any complex institution, such as organized religion.

The changes (and resistance to change) in our views of the interpersonal and developmental aspects of human nature were perhaps nowhere more on display in the seventies than in the sexual revolution. A so-called counter-culture of new behaviors, mores and reproductive technologies, presented a challenge to established religious and political views. Some of what was offered was experimental, but much was experiential, reflecting the actual lives of adolescents, and to only a slightly lesser degree, adults, including their parents. The psycho-sexual nature of human beings was what drove the development of About Your Sexuality, a pioneering UU (and in its assumptions, decidedly humanist) curriculum for teens. Sarah Gibb Millspough (whose companion article can be found in the current UU World)<sup>13</sup> draws on her first-hand knowledge of that development, supplemented by follow-up interviews, to give us the inside story.

Millspough gives considerable credit to the AYS program for boldness and direct response to human needs and wants, but also points to a disconnect that can occur when the legitimate desire to respond, runs into the requirement of care and caution demanded by a program based in science. Some of the claims of the AYS developers may have stretched the truth (a not uncommon human failing) with regard to the data on which they were based, or at least taken chances with the applicability of some of the material. It should be pointed out that AYS was always a work in progress, and that adjustments to it were made as the program unfolded. One of the reasons that the UUA is still a leader in the field of human sexuality education, with the age-specific offerings of Our Whole Lives (OWL) is the care that was taken, with assessment and meticulous attention to how so many things that no one knew about human nature were revealed.

Finally in this issue, Book Review Editor Carol Floyd gives us a detailed analysis of the structure, content and highlights of Bill Murry's latest, *Becoming More Fully Human*,

in which the former Meadville Lombard President suggests that Naturalism is prescriptive as well as descriptive. Floyd cites Murry's reliance on the work of Albert Ellis, and his Rational Emotive Therapy, as a basis for "retraining" ourselves to deal with several damaging human emotions, including two, anger and anxiety, that it seems to me, bedevil but also help define the two largest subsets of UUs, rationalists and the spiritually inclined, respectively.

Roger Brewin

## Notes

1. To use a popular term from the Abraham Maslow article in the same Vol. IV issue of *Religious Humanism*
2. Some would argue that UUism is still dominated by humanism; most who now think so believe that continued dominance is responsible for our Associational "decline."
3. Christopher Walton, "Faith In Our Future, The 2011 Minns Lectures," *UU World*, Vol. XXV # 4, Winter 2011 Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, Boston, pp 22-28.
4. Vanessa Rush Southern, "A Spirit of Fierce Unrest," in "Faith in Our Future," *UU World*, Vol. XXV #4, p. 26.
5. Robert Hardies, "Willing to Be Changed by What We've Started," in "Faith in Our Future," *UU World*, Vol. XXV #4, p. 28.
6. Christine Robinson, "Sources of Our Living Tradition: Humanism," *Religious Humanism*, Vol. XXXVIII # 1, HUUmanists, Hamden, CT, pp 6-13.
7. "Humanist Manifesto," affirmation five, American Humanist Association, Washington, D.C.
8. Chris Walton, in the same issue of *UU World* previously cited, points out that while the overwhelming majority (82%) of UU congregations are under 250 members (and these are the places where default naturalism is likely to thrive), those same "small" congregations hold only 49% of individual UUs.
9. Jerome Stone, "Naturalism (Religious or Otherwise) A Tentative Sketch," *Religious Humanism*, this issue
10. Bill Murry, *Becoming More Fully Human*, Religious Humanism Press, New Haven, 2011, p. 54.
11. It should be noted that while some of the authors in this issue offered articles in

response to a specific call for papers on the subject of religious naturalism, Prinster (along with Millspaugh and Gibbons) did not. The two questions, then, which immediately follow, were suggested more by the writings of these three, than were their papers a response to them.

12. Abraham Maslow, "(A Last Word On) Religions, Values and Peak Experiences," *Religious Humanism*, Vol. IV, #3, Fellowship of Religious Humanists, Yellow Springs, OH, pp. 100-103.

13. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, "Forty Years of UU Sexuality Education," *UU World*, Vol. XXV #4, pp. 50-52.

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