

# The Journey Manifests

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"Any religion that can hope to be a ... dynamic force ... must be shaped by the needs of [its] age."

These words, found in the first Humanist Manifesto of 1933, bear a prophetic witness to the religious dialogue of the last century. They ring with the legacy of our evolution as Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists to decry an unexamined faith. Imagine the risk, early in the 20th Century, as those thirty-four signers lay pen to paper in an act that many believe shocked our culture into self awareness.

They were giving formal structure to Religious Humanism, what the Rev. Dr. William Schultz describes as "a religious movement that emphasized human capabilities, especially the human capacity to reason; that adopted the scientific method to search for truth; and that promoted the right of all humans to develop to their full potential."

This explanatory document, this manifesto, was written five years after the The Humanist magazine was first published in 1928. We owe much of our understanding of ourselves as Unitarian Universalists to the small group of scientists, journalists, educators, philosophers, and yes... liberal Unitarian clergy like the Reverends John Dietrich and Curtis Reese who gathered themselves together to birth this radical text.

There is hope woven throughout those fifteen affirmations that first sought to declare freedom from the enforced doctrines and creeds that many mainline traditions would press close to their members like a self-justifying skin. A resounding belief that salvation from the human condition was possible and that it would come from our work, from our hands, from our very best aspirations, without requiring intervention from the Holy or any supernatural understanding. In short, nothing more was needed to realize the full potential of the human personality than our own commitments, and that realization was the culmination of our life's work.

*The self you leave behind  
is only a skin you have outgrown.  
Don't grieve for it.  
Look to the wet, raw, unfinished  
self, the one you are becoming.*

What strikes me most in this now seventy-one year old declamation is the statement by Raymond B. Bragg, then Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, reminding us that "it was designed to represent a developing point of view, not a new creed." At its very outset, the first Humanist Manifesto cried out for reevaluation, calling its adherents to enact its thirteenth affirmation which insists that "religious institutions, their ritualistic forms, ecclesiastical methods, and communal activities must be reconstituted as rapidly as experience allows, in order to function effectively in the modern world."

I believe that this call helped to save Humanism itself, which at the outset placed a great faith in the ability of science to save the world. As the Rev. Dr. William Schultz, past President of the Unitarian Universalist Association and self-identified Humanist, points out in his article *Our Humanist Legacy: Seventy years of religious humanism* "the humanists tended to be the practical sort, whose first question of any new scientific development was: And what can this do for us humans? This left them extraordinarily vulnerable when the answer came back: It can kill you. With the coming of the Second World War only a few short years after the Manifesto was published, the world would be reminded – in the form of the Nazi's V2 rockets and efficient gas chambers, to say nothing of the Allies' atomic bomb – that science and technology could foster massive amounts of destruction as readily as they could relieve human suffering."

Theologians have pointed out that the first Humanist Manifesto left little room for the emotionality that is at the core of human life. And little explanation of free will, that free human agency which can be misused to bring violence and hatred to bear on our society. 1933 did see the raising of a lofty goal for Humanism... working toward "a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good."

The power that I see in this history lies not only in its call for social justice and human rights that has since pervaded the Western moral dialogue, but also in the discipline that has called Humanists to really engage with the ongoing struggle of maintaining a contemporary philosophy – a calling to intentional living that is responding to the issues of the current day.

*The world, too, sheds its skin:  
politicians, cataclysm, ordinary days.  
It is easy to lose this tenderly  
unfolding moment. Look for it  
as if it were the first green blade  
after a long winter. Listen for it  
as if it were the first clear tone  
in a place where dawn is heralded by bells.*

The fortieth anniversary of this landmark event was met with the release of Humanist Manifesto II, a 1973 document that immediately acknowledges the struggles resulting from horrors witnessed in its recent history. In its opening language, written by Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson, we find grief that grows into a lasting call to action.

"Nazism has shown the depths of brutality of which humanity is capable. Other totalitarian regimes have suppressed human rights without ending poverty. Science has sometimes brought evil as well as good. Recent decades have shown that inhuman wars can be made in the name of peace. The beginnings of police states, even in democratic societies, widespread government espionage, and other abuses of power by military, political, and industrial elites, and the continuance of unyielding racism, all present a different and difficult social outlook. In various societies, the demands of women and minority groups for equal rights effectively challenge our generation.

As we approach the twenty-first century, however, an affirmative and hopeful vision is needed. Faith, commensurate with advancing knowledge, is also necessary. In the

choice between despair and hope, humanists respond in this Humanist Manifesto II with a positive declaration for times of uncertainty."

This statement chills me for its applicability to the traumas of today. I see, time and again, how Humanism is living up to its own calling to never rest, to never let go the struggle to keep its philosophy relevant, resonant, and clear. The second Humanist Manifesto stretched us, and struggled to include the myriad ways that a Humanist outlook calls us to heal this broken world. It called us forth to boldness, to daring, and to a constancy of engagement. In rejecting what it names "false 'theologies of hope' and messianic ideologies," Humanist Manifesto II acknowledges that there is a great capacity for harm in human interactions and insists that the righting of human ills be born by our own hands.

And if those hands should fall, whether to numbness, apathy, or fear, who would remain to promote the "preciousness and dignity of the individual person," listed as a central tenet of the humanist position? As a congregation that identifies strongly with the Humanist tradition, it should be no surprise that our history is woven fine with a commitment to bettering our surrounding community and the broader world. This is a calling that will not let us go. In today's world where war, poverty, oppression, and injustice grow ever stronger, and where basic civil liberties and human rights are threatened on a daily basis, we must draw strength and determination from our historic purpose.

I believe that the Humanism of today makes room for us to focus on a piece of justice making that we are passionate about, in ways that can shelter us from the pervasive tendency to feeling overwhelmed when we try to take on the whole of the world. If you didn't know before this morning, you certainly know by now (after meeting our most fabulous personification of Humanism 2003) that the American Humanist Association has recently released the third Humanist Manifesto. This heralding of the future of Humanism as we know it is a document that differs significantly from its two predecessors. Humanism and its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III begins with the words, "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity." In this most recent affirmation of an evolutionary process that speaks to so many in today's world, the need for personal growth and happiness and the responsibility to care for all peoples are woven together as a balanced whole that represents a way of life. Once again, Humanism has responded to a deep need in today's world, and focused its purpose to meet that need.

In an essay timed with the 2003 release of Humanism and its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III, the Rev. Dr. William Schultz challenged us to pay heed to the intention in this tradition's latest formal declaration to make room for greater diversity within Humanism's expression. In his earlier mentioned article on the seventy year history of Religious Humanism, Schultz notes how many traditionalists (meaning traditional Humanists) are often finding themselves uncomfortable with the level of engagement with ideas of spirituality and theological diversity that characterizes twenty-first century Unitarian Universalism.

In pondering the source of that discomfort, Schultz writes that some "explanations include the traditionalists' negative experiences with other religious traditions and their

understanding of the heritage they embody as one that rejects all things religious. But this last perception is simply wrong. Most of the early religious humanists were not interested in abandoning religion, but in transforming it... What those who identified as Unitarians asked of their denomination was not that it rid itself of other theological perspectives but that it make room for theirs. How ironic, then, that some of humanism's contemporary practitioners would be the most resistant to an evolving faith, and how paradoxical that some of those whose humanist forbears fought the battle for theological pluralism within the Unitarian fold are today the agents of a narrow sectarianism."

Where will the Humanism of the future take us? I see great hope in the perspective brought by the writers of our most recent Humanist Manifesto to a workshop at our 2003 General Assembly in Boston. They told attendees that for the first time their philosophical statement made room for plurality. They put serious intention into focusing the document on what Humanists believe, instead of putting their energy into what they do not believe. Consequently they are finding that many people who might not immediately have identified themselves with this philosophical tradition, this faith, or as some would name it – this life stance... many of those people are realizing their own belief systems include a very deep grounding in Humanist thought.

As I said earlier, Humanism's journey has shaped the evolution of Unitarian Universalism in modern times. There is no doubt in my mind that our focus on the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, the inherent worth and dignity of all peoples, and the interdependent web of all existence, can be traced directly to the prophetic witness that Humanism has brought to our religious dialogue.

It is my hope that as a denomination we will celebrate how this tradition unites most of us on a moral and ethical level, even across our theological diversities. It is my hope that as a congregation we will take deep pride in our Humanist heritage, and live to be active participants in the search for personal growth and commitment to social justice that its current incarnation promotes.

There is a vision and a determination that calls us forward to ever greater understandings of our own worth as individual human beings. Who knows what another forty years of active engagement might bring to the future of Humanist proclamation. I expect that the wisdom gained will again catalyze needed growth, witness, and change.

May we continue to be guided by all that has come before us.  
Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.