Peter Scales, **A Humanist View of Faith**

CUUC – March 24, 2024

Stephen Colbert is one of my favourite television comedians. He often speaks proudly about being Roman Catholic. For Catholics, Lent is a time leading up to Easter when many believers try to suffer a little by giving up something they love. One year Stephen Colbert said, “For Lent, I’m going to give up being a Roman Catholic.” He shuddered and his eyes widened. “Suddenly I feel spiritually empty. This must be what Unitarianism feels like.” When he said that, I laughed and laughed. I laughed in part because of Colbert’s delivery. I also laughed because he’s correct. Most Unitarians do not live in a world of magical thinking and invisible friends. Most Unitarians do not believe in sin, therefore we do not believe in the remission of sin. And most of us find bizarre the notion that one man – even a very, very special man – could suffer torture and death so that our sins could be dealt with and our suffering could be relaxed. For me as a humanist, a core of my ‘theology’ is that if I miss the mark, then there is no magic that can take away the sting of the error. The ‘inherent’ part of my inherent worth and dignity is that I am good for my own sake and not because a mythical being injected me with goodness at conception. Similarly, when I act badly there is nobody I can blame but myself. If this talk goes poorly, I cannot blame ChatGPT or Elon Musk.

Before I get too far, I want to make it clear that I am only speaking of my humanist view of faith. Millions of people have religious experiences that are undeniable, and I do not want to challenge the faith of anyone else. If you find peace in your belief in one of the gods or in a non-humanistic system of thought, then I wish you all good things! Similarly, if you attend or belong to another faith tradition… maybe you are visiting a Unitarian congregation for the first time… Many religious rituals and observances have positive social benefits. I hope your tradition gives you peace and helps you to be your best self.

With those introductory words, let’s get into this morning’s homily, “A Humanist View of Faith.”

I want to tell you three things this morning: What humanism is; what ‘faith’ is; how humanism and Unitarian-Universalism dovetail. As I talk, and during the Forum after our coffee break, I want you to think of how ‘faith’ and ‘humanism’ help people and help justice and peace.

My brother, sister and I had a liberal upbringing in many respects, and I am arguably a good and moral person despite having no fear of any gods. I was about 25 when I read the definition of “secular humanist,” and I decided that I was one of those. When I became a Unitarian in my early 30s I did not have to change my thinking or leave behind anything precious because it turned out that I was already essentially a Unitarian; I just did not yet know the hymns and readings.

Faith, or having “a faith”; Merriam-Webster Dictionary: 1. allegiance to duty or a person, loyalty, e.g., they lost faith in the company's president; fidelity to one's promises; sincerity of intentions, e.g., acted in good faith. 2. belief and trust in and loyalty to God; belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion; firm belief in something for which there is no proof; complete trust. 3: something that is believed especially with strong conviction especially a system of religious beliefs e.g., the Protestant faith.

Can a Unitarian have ‘faith’? Yes, we can have faith in the people around us; faith that our services will start on time; can Unitarians have faith in the Principles and Sources? Let’s think about that and discuss in the Forum. Most Unitarians do not have faith that a supernatural being is guiding world events, or that a magic ghost is going to ‘return’ to earth someday and judge the faithfulness of the quick and dead. Maybe when Unitarians say ‘faith’ we mean ‘trust’ more than ‘faith’?

Awe… In a recent coffee talk at the UVic Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, someone suggested that when people are in the dark forest or along the surging ocean, and they report a ‘spiritual’ feeling, a better word to describe what they are feeling is ‘awe’. Many of us use the words ‘spiritual’ and ‘awe’ every day and we might conflate them; I know that I have. I learned last week that American psychologist David Yaden interviewed 501 subjects about their ‘awe’ experiences. Dr. Yaden has published an Awe Experience Scale, a 6-factor structure, including: altered time perception; self-diminishment; connectedness; perceived vastness; physical sensations; need for accommodation. Dr. Yaden has experienced ‘awe’ moments that he used to call spiritual, and he is now working with psilocybin to induce ‘awe’ experiences and to help people. I have only scratched the surface of his work; you can expect another homily someday.

Reverential naturalism: Most people I talk to would say that they find connection to the divine when they are in nature. They might not be able to define what they mean by “divine” but they know that “it” is in nature. Prominent sociologist Dr. Paul Bramadat calls this “reverential naturalism,” which starts not with ‘religion’ but with an enriched and open naturalism. Many Unitarians would accept “reverential naturalism” as a description of their core spirituality.

Collective effervescence (CE) – Emile Durkheim (1912): a community or society may at times come together and simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action. Such an event then causes collective effervescence which excites individuals and serves to unify the group. CE is the basis for Durkheim's theory of religion as laid out in his 1912 volume *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim argues that the universal religious dichotomy of profane and sacred results from the lives of these tribe members: most of their life is spent performing menial tasks such as hunting and gathering. These tasks are profane. The rare occasions on which the entire tribe gathers together become sacred, and the high energy level associated with these events gets directed onto physical objects or people which also become sacred. The force is thus associated with the totem which is the symbol of the clan, says Durkheim. For Durkheim, religion is a fundamentally social phenomenon. The beliefs and practices of the sacred are a method of social organization. I believe that collective effervescence can be felt in a setting like Capital UU, in a music concert that is performed to many adoring fans, and could even be experienced by people standing together to watch a total eclipse. Think back to descriptions of ‘awe’.

UU Source #6 - Humanist teachings… **What is humanism?** The first principle of UUism – that member congregations affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all persons – does not exclude people who believe in gods or in the earth as our mother. Our first principle opens the door to humanism.

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. **The lifestance of Humanism - guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience - encourages us to live life well and fully**. It evolved through the ages and continues to develop through the efforts of thoughtful people who recognize that values and ideals, however carefully wrought, are subject to change as our knowledge and understandings advance.

The American Humanist Association’s website includes a consensus of what they believe. It is in this sense that **Humanists affirm the following**:

Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis. Humanists find that science is the best method for determining this knowledge as well as for solving problems and developing beneficial technologies. We also recognize the value of new departures in thought, the arts, and inner experience—each subject to analysis by critical intelligence.

Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change. Humanists recognize nature as self-existing. We accept our life as all and enough, distinguishing things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be. We welcome the challenges of the future, and are drawn to and undaunted by the yet to be known.

Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns and extended to the global ecosystem and beyond. We are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility.

*The Humanist Manifesto continues:* Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals. We aim for our fullest possible development and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies, and even in the inevitability and finality of death. Humanists rely on the rich heritage of human culture and the lifestance of Humanism to provide comfort in times of want and encouragement in times of plenty.

Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships. Humanists long for and strive toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences, where differences are resolved cooperatively without resorting to violence. The joining of individuality with interdependence enriches our lives, encourages us to enrich the lives of others, and inspires hope of attaining peace, justice, and opportunity for all.

Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness. Progressive cultures have worked to free humanity from the brutalities of mere survival and to reduce suffering, improve society, and develop global community. We seek to minimize the inequities of circumstance and ability, and we support a just distribution of nature's resources and the fruits of human effort so that as many as possible can enjoy a good life.

Humanists are concerned for the well-being of all, are committed to diversity, and respect those of differing yet humane views. We work to uphold the equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in an open, secular society and maintain it is a civic duty to participate in the democratic process and a planetary duty to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner.

Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. **The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone**. [end of Humanist Manifesto paragraphs]

Many humanists – UU and non-UU -- are uneasy (to say the least) with spiritual magick and the idea that gods are directing and observing human or global events. Humanists tend to see the world with a sense of “what you see is what you get”, that this life is the only life you get and there is nothing afterward except your body’s return to matter and energy.

“Gentlewoman,” a retired interfaith hospital chaplain, posted to Huffington: “Religious and skeptical humanism are **optimistic** movements, full of hope and enthusiasm... They attract large numbers of young people who learn all the classic virtues and practice them in the world, only they don't have a theological or "spiritual" (whatever that means) overlay.”

Many of us in this room – and indeed in Cascadia and British Columbia – live with essentially humanistic ideals about how to live and how to be in community with others.

Those were a few words about what humanism is. Let me tell you what I think humanism is not. I want to say that humanism is not atheism or agnosticism. I like the story of a city council meeting… council and the citizens were going to be discussing an issue of social concern… the mayor acknowledged Rabbi Cohen in the audience… the man next to the rabbi leaned over and whispered, “I don’t believe in god.” The rabbi replied, “I don’t believe in the god that you don’t believe in, either.”

I’ve talked about awe, Unitarianism, and humanism. I’ve been reflecting on those definitions and I want to say a few words about…

**What humanism is to me.** Pluralism is one word to describe “holding two belief systems.” In my view there is room for pluralism. People can be humanist and Jewish, humanist and Hindu, humanist and atheist, and humanist and Christian. It’s not all-or-nothing. But it is “people before gods”.

In my mind, people who act today in such a way as to improve their chances in heaven are essentially not humanists. They might be 80 percent humanist. ☺

not spoken on March 24: [I think that the Confucian [551-479 BCE] maxim, which most Canadians know as the Golden Rule, One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself, is essentially humanistic because it does not also say, “because god says so.” In the Torah, Leviticus 19:18, a version of the Golden Rule says “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself.” But the next line is “I am the LORD,” and this ensures that this statement is not humanistic. You may have heard of "The Platinum Rule"... Viennese philosopher Karl Popper (1902-1994) wrote that "The golden rule is a good standard which is further improved by doing unto others, wherever reasonable, as they want to be done by."]

I believe that our Unitarian principles can guide us toward humanism, while also leave plenty of space for awe and spiritual searching. In the end, each of us needs to live the life that works for us in our hearts and minds. Let me repeat a phrase I spoke earlier from the Humanist Manifesto: The lifestance of Humanism - guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience - encourages us to live life well and fully.

If your strivings and meditations lead you to a god or many gods, and you are still able to live in society in peace, then I embrace you in all of your pluralistic and hyphenated humanism. ☺

**What does a religious home look like?** There are two kinds of religious homes. Maybe three.

In one kind of religious home, the people at the front of the room tell the people in the chairs what to believe. If the people in the chairs accept what the people at the front are dictating, then it’s a religious home.

The other kind of religious home is where the people in the chairs hold and modify their own beliefs, and where they are free to do so. The people in the chairs listen to the people at the front… accepting some of the info and rejecting others.

I have described faith and humanism, and talked about what a religious home might look like. So… **Is this a home for faithful humanists?**

Yes, without a doubt. Not just as it is home for Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, pagans, Wiccans, atheists and agnostics but, in some ways, more so. In my mind, and some will likely disagree, Unitarian Universalism is primarily a home for humanists. Hyphenated humanists also find themselves at home here.

I have faith in Unitarianism and UU people.

I probably introduced five topics but I wanted to tell you three things this morning: What humanism is; what ‘faith’ is; and how humanism and Unitarian-Universalism dovetail. I asked you to think of how ‘faith’ and ‘humanism’ help people and help justice and peace.

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**The development of the Awe Experience Scale (AWE-S): A multifactorial measure for a complex emotion**

David B. Yaden, Scott Barry Kaufman, Elizabeth Hyde, Alice Chirico, Andrea Gaggioli, Jia Wei Zhang

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ABSTRACT: Awe is a complex emotion composed of an appraisal of **vastness** and a need for accommodation. The purpose of this study was to develop a robust state measure of awe, the Awe Experience Scale (AWE-S), based on the extant experimental literature. In study 1, participants (N = 501) wrote about an intense moment of awe that they had experienced and then completed a survey about their experience. Exploratory factor analysis revealed **a 6-factor structure**, including: altered time perception (F1); self-diminishment (F2); connectedness (F3); perceived vastness (F4); physical sensations (F5); need for accommodation (F6). Internal consistency was strong for each factor (α ≥ .80). Study 2 confirmed the 6-factor structure (N = 636) using fit indices (CFI = .905; RMSEA = .054). Each factor of the AWE-S is significantly correlated with the awe items of the modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES) and Dispositional Positive Emotion Scale (D-PES). Triggers, valence, and themes associated with awe experiences are reported.

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Semi-formal 2021 interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPl38AsJGzc>

David Yaden, PhD, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Working in The Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research, his research focus is on the psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and psychopharmacology of spiritual, self-transcendent, and positively transformative experiences triggered with psychedelic substances and through other means. David is the editor of *Rituals and Practices in World Religions*, and his scientific and scholarly work has been covered by outlets such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.

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Fascinating interview of Yaden at Johns Hopkins from Nov 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4mjX5ZsUVk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4mjX5ZsUVk)

Dr. David Yaden and Dr. Michael Ferguson, world experts in the sciences of psychedelics and spirituality, discuss Yaden's new book, "The Varieties of Spiritual Experience." Inspired by the history, philosophy, and methodology of William James's classic text "The Varieties of Religious Experience," this new volume is a twenty-first-century response to timeless questions about humankind's spiritual nature. "The Varieties of Spiritual Experience" introduces a rich array of original empirical data collected and analyzed by Dr. Yaden and his colleagues, thus enriching the book's treatment of spirituality with a uniquely evidence-based series of perspectives.

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