

Ministers' Remarks
Good without God: Religious Humanism
Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

A few months ago, a member of our congregation, Harold Ogren, approached me with the idea of starting a *Humanist Discussion Group* to be held after Sunday services several times a month. Harold, whom some of you know as a particle physicist who works on the Large Hadron Collider particle accelerator near Geneva Switzerland, had attended a Unitarian Universalist Berkeley California congregation, which had a *Humanist Discussion Group*. Since that time, two other congregation members, Rob Hongen and John Crosby have joined him in this quest. This humanist triumvirate is working hard to create an Adult Education offering for a Humanist Discussion group, and we hope to see their results in our next Adult Education Prospectus.

The discussion with Harold Ogren prompted me to study humanism a bit more; the result is this morning's sermon, *Good without God* which explores the relationship of religion and humanism and next week's sermon entitled, *Good Enough* which investigates humanism and mysticism. If you are new today, understand that we Unitarian Universalists draw from many sources for our inspiration and sermons. These sources include: The Transcending Mystery of Wonder of life, Words and Deeds of Inspirational Women and Men, Wisdom of the World's Religions, as well as Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. This morning I simply want to delve into humanism, which has been a part of recorded human history since ancient Greece and Rome and even older Sanskrit texts from India.

The American Humanist Association defines humanism as a *progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.* (1) This humanism, which some might call secular humanism, is guided by reason, compassion and informed experience. A number of our congregation members identify with this philosophy of life.

Humanism has been a part of Unitarian Universalism for nearly a century, beginning with early humanist pioneer Reverend John Dietrich. Dietrich was defrocked by the Presbyterian Church in 1911, and later became a successful Unitarian Minister in Minneapolis, MN. He began preaching about humanism in 1918. (2) In a sermon entitled Unitarianism and Humanism, he offered this definition of religious humanism:

By religion, I mean the knowledge of and duties toward humankind. That is humanism. It does not deny the right to believe in God and learn what you can about that which we designate as God, but it places faith in humanity, a knowledge of humankind and our duties toward one another first. . . .

When I asked congregation member and humanist John Crosby how best to enter an exploration of humanism, he suggested that we offer excerpts from the American Humanist Association's *Humanist Manifesto III* created in 1993. The first Humanist Manifesto was issued in 1933 by a group of philosophers, Unitarian ministers, and religious liberals to integrate intellectual integrity and religious expression. (2) The second was created 1973. I have asked John to share with us this morning excerpts from the 1993 Humanist Manifest which *is part of an ongoing effort to manifest in clear and positive terms the conceptual boundaries of Humanism. It affirms the following: (1)*

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.

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 lifescence 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. (1)

In this congregation we gather together within a vast array of theological expression and interest. From humanist, agnostic, atheist to theistic, naturalist, Buddhist, earth-centered, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Native tradition, mysticism and others. We are liberal religious seekers. It is good to be together.

Good without God Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

Writer and humanist Aldous Huxley stated, "After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music," (3, pg 24) So I begin in gratitude for our musicians. In many ways this sermon is about holding each other in the pale moonlight and the silent secrets of those times when we simply need each other to face the tragedies and transformations of life. It is about gathering here in the mystery of the hour in our humanness whether we are long-time members or first timers, whether we are theists or nontheists.

Research tells us that people often walk through the doors of a congregation for the first time when they are experiencing significant transition or some type of crisis in their lives. Others may be prompted to come as a result of a small event, an invitation, an exploration, a returning. We come here searching for meaning. Faith is about meaning making in our lives. Sometimes, we arrive here because we are lonely and we want to journey with other liberal religious seekers. We arrive here with questions. We arrive here to make the world a better place. We arrive here to worship together.

My colleague, Reverend Doctor Kendyll Gibbons, a self-identified humanist minister serves the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, MN (the same congregation served by the earlier mentioned 20th century humanist pioneer Reverend John Dietrich,). Reverend Gibbons defines worship as follows, "*Worship is participation in a community's intentional creation of a dramatic, symbolic work of art, which re-presents what is real and valuable in its world, in response to the power of the pain and the promise of human existence.*" Reverend Gibbons also offers the following description of her religious orientation:

I am a Unitarian Universalist religious humanist. Like the founders of modern humanism, I maintain that it is important not to cut ourselves off from the common language of thousands of years of human wisdom. While I have no belief in any supernatural beings or forces, I do acknowledge the reality of such abstract and intangible qualities as love, justice, beauty, and the human spirit. I embrace and advocate for the natural experience of reverence, as a source of value in and for this world. (4)

Are you a religious humanist? Am I a religious humanist? Yes, I would say that I am, and would venture that most Unitarian Universalists are to some degree because we affirm humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the

results of science. However, I also consider myself a humanist mystic or a mystic humanist, depending on the day. And I will explore that paradox further in next Sunday's sermon entitled, *Good Enough*. Suffice to say, there are variations of religious humanism within Unitarian Universalism.

This past Wednesday, I met had our monthly Board of Directors meeting. After President Steve Dillon called the meeting to order, we lit a chalice in the center of the table and recited the chalice lighting words together, "We light this chalice, lamp of our heritage, for the light of truth, the warmth of community, the fire of commitment and the spark of the sacred which calls to each of us to care for our earth,". These words, whether in worship or in a business meeting, serve to ground us in our congregational vision, *Seeking the Spirit, Building Community, Changing the World*. After the Chalice Lighting, our congregation's treasurer offered our opening words; he had selected a passage from Krista Tippett's *Einstein's God: Conversations about Science and the Human Spirit*. This book is now on my summer reading list. Treasurer John Lawson read these words from Albert Einstein:

I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the actions of individuals or would sit in judgment on creatures of its own creation. I cannot do this in spite of the fact that mechanistic causality has, to a certain extent, been placed in doubt by modern science. My religiosity consists in a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend reality. Morality, is of the highest importance, but for us, not God. (5)

Morality is of importance for us. Can we be good without God? It seems like an odd question to me. And I readily agree with Harvard's humanist Chaplain, Greg Epstein, that such a question, Can we be good without God?

does not need to be answered—it needs to be rejected outright. To suggest that one can't be good without belief in God is not just an opinion, a mere curious musing—it is a prejudice. This is the sort of all or nothing condemnation of a huge population if one suggests that goodness and morality require belief in a deity. (6)

Epstein, the author of the New York Times Bestseller, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, begins his book with a dedication to Rabbi Sherwin Wine and this song from Humanist Judaism:

*Where is my light
My light is in me
Where is my hope?
My hope is in me.
Where is my strength?
My strength is in me....and you.*

I have to admit my own ignorance and naiveté when it comes to prejudice against humanists who may identify as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, or other non-theistic descriptions. I grew up in a family of scientists and freethinkers. Although we were raised in the local Presbyterian Church, its theology was never imposed upon me. We attended, I believe, more for a sense of community. While my family was by no means perfect (I have yet to find a family that is) we tried to do good, for the most part. We spent a lot of time outdoors. Although not taught overtly, I grew up with a sense of reverence for the earth and creation. Also, watching Carl Sagan's Cosmos series or the Undersea World of Jaque Cousteau provided me with a sense of mystery and wonder far beyond anything I'd experienced in church. *Can we be good without God?* Of course.

So, two years ago, when the *You Can Be Good without God* bus campaign controversy erupted here in Bloomington, I was dumbfounded. The hostility that arose was disturbing. The hullabaloo occurred because a group, the Indiana Atheist Bus Campaign, sought to buy an ad to be placed on Bloomington Transit Bus's. The ad featured a green meadow and blue skies with white clouds and stated *You Can Be Good without God*.

Initially Bloomington Transit denied permission for the ad. But the atheist group did not give up. In fact, they applied for a telephone number, so they could increase their communications. They were given the number 812-666-4135. As some of you know, 666 is the mythical biblical sign of the beast. As columnist Mike Leonard suggested about the issuance of this phone number,

“There’s either a sense of humor at work here, a vindictive streak, or divine interference.” (7) I prefer to think it was a sense of humor. I don’t believe for an instant that it was divine interference. And my guess, after the ensuing hate messages that came forward as a result of this campaign, is that it easily could have been pure vindictiveness.

“We’re taking it with good humor,” said an IU student who was the PR representative for the *Good without God Campaign*. Later in the article, however, she acknowledged that they asked for a business number because they “wanted to screen phone calls so no individual would receive death threats.” (7) Death threats? For identifying as an atheist?

After Bloomington Transit denied permission for the ad, the atheist group filed a suit in federal court on May 9th, 2009. Before the suit was heard, Bloomington transit changed their mind and allowed permission for the ad. Starting on “Aug. 20th, 2009 five Bloomington Transit buses carried advertisements that said, “You can be good without God.” This was followed by, five other city buses which had advertisements that conceded the point but extended the argument: “You cannot be saved without Jesus.” (8) In the end Bloomington transit implemented a new policy prohibiting any non-profit ads appearing on buses. And that was that, well, at least for the buses. Of note, some atheist groups have t-shirts which state on the front, Non-Prophet.

In his book, Good without God, Chaplain Epstein addresses the negativity many Americans have towards atheists and non-believers. Ongoing polling over the years shows that *approximately half of all Americans say that they would refuse to vote for a well-qualified atheist candidate for public office.* (6, pg x). In fact, a University of Minnesota sociological found that *Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in “sharing their vision of American Society.”* (6, pg 243) Good gravity Marie.

To the humanists in this congregation, particularly those who identify as atheists, I stand in this Unitarian Universalist pulpit and say welcome. You have a spiritual home here. I say thank you for your humanity, and the goodness you exemplify over and over. Thank you for being part of this community which strives to “Seek the Spirit (however you define that) Build community. And Change the world.” I also want to thank everyone in this congregation who responded with letters to the editors and columns during the bus ad controversy (John Crosby). And I want to apologize for not making a public statement myself. I don’t recall why I didn’t. I must have had my head up my armpit. I will do better in the future.

In Good without God, Harvard humanist Chaplain Greg Epstein reports that one billion people on this planet identify as atheist, agnostic, freethinkers or nonreligious. Although half of these folks say they do have some sense of spirit, Epstein points out that this still leaves half a billion that do not believe in any supernatural existence. Epstein also points out that 15% of Americans are non-religious and this is the fastest growing religious demographic in our country.

And here’s where I diverge with Chaplain Epstein, because he concisely says that “You’re not religious if you don’t believe in God,” (6, pg x). I know a lot of people whom I consider religious who do not believe in God. Also a few pages later he misrepresents Unitarian Universalists by naming us as arch-liberal Christians. From my reading of Good without God, Epstein seems unaware of our wide theological range. Some religious humanists, like Reverend Kendyll Gibbons, have no belief in supernatural beings or forces, and others, like myself, do to some extent. The amazing thing is that we are all Unitarian Universalists, a religious people, “*Seeking the Spirit. Building Community. Changing the World.*”

And here’s where I come back in alignment with Chaplain Grep Epstein who emphasizes throughout his book, the need for community. In fact, he recounts the story of his father who had left his Jewish religious community early in life to pursue a more humanist path. When Epstein was eighteen years old his father died of lung cancer and Epstein was acutely aware of his father’s loneliness and probably his own as well. He states, “Science can teach us a great deal like what medicine to give to patients in a hospital, but science won’t come and visit us in the hospital.” (6, pg xvi)

“I believe,” Epstein concludes, “that community is the heart of Humanism.” (xvii). And I believe that community is the heart of Unitarian Universalism. Seeking the spirit brings us into community, and building community allows us to hold one another in that pale moonlight, that pale moonlight, so we can garner the strength to go back out into the world and...and do good.

*Where is my light?
My light is in me
Where is my hope?
My hope is in me
Where is my strength?
My strength is in me....and you.*

Reverend Kendyll Gibbons says of community:

Over time, the church becomes a vessel which holds us, in moments of tragedy and transformation, in moments of need and vulnerability, in our most urgent questions of meaning. It is the chalice which carries the heritage of our tradition as it is handed from one generation to the next. (from one meeting to the next) Within this structure we learn to practice the disciplines of covenant; to mourn, to remember, to promise and to rejoice, and we take responsibility for a future beyond our own gratification.

And for me, that is the crux of our spiritual quest, to move beyond our own gratification, to move beyond our small ego-selves to connect to something deeper and larger, whether that be truth, beauty, justice, commitment, earth, spirit, mystery, Goddess, God, Gods, compassion, (some of the above, all of the above)...or simply the ineffable which we find in silence, music, nature, or community. The inexpressible connections. The sacred connections. The connections of reverence. The religious connections. The connections that calls to be our best human selves.

Chaplain Greg Epstein says he likes the word humanist (1) because it emphasizes that we are human (2) because it accentuates that we are trying to do good on behalf of all human beings and the natural world that surrounds us and sustains us and (3) because [he says] I don't want to just define myself as an atheist or agnostic. I don't want to define myself according to a god that someone else might happen to believe in. I want to define myself positively. (9, pg 8)

Die Gendanke Sind Frei, which will sing in a moment for our closing hymn, celebrates the German freethinkers who rose in the early-19th century. In 1848 there was a great migration of these German freethinkers to the United States. Many settled in St. Louis, Indianapolis and parts of Texas and Wisconsin. Known as the 48ers, they were influential within the developing humanist movement, and in a few places, Unitarian Universalism.

When I was in Wisconsin, I would occasionally preach at a nearby Unitarian Universalist Fellowship known as the Free Congregation of Sauk County. It was established in 1842 as the Freie Gemeinde Von Sauk County, and they still celebrate their German Freethinkers heritage. I looked them up on their web-site yesterday, and noticed they were having their annual summer worship gathering and picnic for all the local Unitarian Universalist congregations. Starting at 10am. I preached at that gathering once. I believe my theme was poetry. I chuckled when I noticed their theme for today: Humanism.

Let us sing in the spirit of humanism and all free thinkers throughout the world. #291 Die Gedanken Sind Frei.

(1) www.americanhumanist.org

(2) Schultz, William *Our Humanist Legacy* (www.uuworld.org/assets/php) November December, 2003.

(3) Muder, Doug, *Before words: The Spirituality of Humanism*, UU World Magazine, Summer 2011.

(4) Gibbons, Kendyll, Reverend Doctor, <http://firstunitarian.org/people/kendyll-gibbons>.

(5) Tippett, Krista, *Einstein's God: Conversations about Science and the Human Spirit*, (Penguin Books, London, England) 2010.

(6) Epstein, Greg, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, (HarperCollins, New York, NY) 2009.

(7) Leonard, Michael, *Reaching the Local Atheist Group is as Easy as Dialing 666.*” *Herald Times, Bloomington, IN, April 2009.*

(8) Fyall, Chris, *God’s Role in Good Debated, Herald Times, Bloomington, IN, October, 19, 2009.*

(9) www.alternet.org/module/printversion/150909.