

## ***“Spiritual Humanism: not an oxymoron”***

***“To Everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven ...”*** spoke King Solomon , the psalmist of Eccl. (3:1-8)

For several reasons I've found myself reflecting on that verse over the past summer. The broad consensus among biblical scholars is that the verse proclaims all the actions of man to be inherently "futile ... meaningless ... or "fleeting," depending on translation, as the lives of both wise and foolish men end in death. In light of this perceived senselessness, the psalmist suggests just enjoying the simple pleasures of daily life, such as eating, drinking, and taking enjoyment in one's wife and work, which are gifts from the hand of God.

But at least as common an interpretation, and the one that has had me reflecting, is simply that ***“things happen in their own good time”*** and that time is not always of our choosing.

Such were my thoughts as I reflected on the fact that I has been scheduled to preach a sermon on grace and its meaning for UU's on what turned out to be the Sunday after Rev. McCall's resignation. In the wake of that sermon, and looking ahead to the challenge of a year's worth of pulpit-filling, the board and the theological diversity ministry asked whether I would be willing to accept a call to assist. And so it is that I'll be in the pulpit once each month this year, beginning today obviously.

***“To Everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven ...”***

Late one night, I returned from a two-day consult with a client in Miami. More energized than exhausted, I sat down to watch some TV before going to bed. Browsing across the satellite channels, my eyes locked in on a program on the EWTN network of Catholic programming: Solemn High Mass of the Extraordinary Form. Isn't that great?! Not just any old mass but a high mass -- that means a sung mass -- and not just any high mass, but a "Solemn High Mass" -- that means with 4 officiants -- and not just any solemn high mass, but "of the extraordinary form" ! And that's the thing that captured me and kept me awake, watching till 2 in the morning.

Practicing Catholics today usually have no exposure to a solemn high mass of the extraordinary form, and unless you were, or are, a catholic of at least my age, you would probably have never even seen one. Lots of incense ... lots of chanting -- all in Latin of course -- ... lots of stylized ritual movements being performed by 3 priests each with special dovetailing roles. It's a beautiful thing. And all of it being directed -- choreographed really -- by a cleric in the role of Master of Ceremonies. During those 9 years that I was in the seminary, and not yet being ordained, that was my ritual role -- Master of Ceremonies -- ***and I loved it!***

Most of that went into mothballs after the second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. It's when the altars got turned around so the priest would be facing the people. And Latin was shelved for the local languages. Both good things. But more than a millennium of music, including Gregorian Chant, gave way to guitar masses and what you hear in Catholic churches today. Very **not** good. And it's also when the ranks of priests and nuns began to evaporate. Good or bad? Who knows and depends on who you talk to. And it's when I, too, left the monastery.

***“To Everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven ...”***

So there I was, in the spring of 1969, wearing a tweed jacket instead of my monastic habit, and on a bus bound for Philly, leaving the Religious Order for a new life, or I suppose picking up my old life where it had left off almost a decade earlier. And here I stand now in this church in my fortieth year AM – After Monastery. And as I was preparing this sermon, I'm reflecting on a poet – a psalmist – of a later era and along with Jerry Garcia, I'm thinking, ***“What A Strange Trip It's Been!”***

Because I'm going to be in the pulpit so much this year, I think I have an obligation to you to explain myself, that is to give you a sense of where I find myself in spiritual terms today and at least a condensed travelogue of the faith journey that's taken me from being the Master of Ceremonies at the high altar of a solemn high mass of the extraordinary form to this pulpit of this UU church.

From my earliest days in the seminary it was obvious to both my superiors and myself that my road to the priesthood was not going to be smooth. Case in point: I had entered at the time when it was still a mortal sin for Catholics to eat meat on Friday. In one of my first research projects for a paper on moral theology, I chose to study the roots of this proscription. Did you know that the tradition of eating fish on meatless Fridays only dates to the 16th Century and its origins were purely economic? With a meat shortage in England and a struggling fish industry, Parliament, with backing from the Church of England, ordered people to replace meat meals on Fridays with a fish dish. Roman Catholics adopted the personal sacrifice and made it mandatory, vesting it in biblical and theological trappings.

But it wasn't my recounting history that got me in hot water. No, it was my thesis that you could not take an act that was intrinsically moral-neutral and vest it with the threat of mortal sin – ie eternal damnation – purely on the grounds of obedience to the church. That's what got me in hot water and I was told in no uncertain terms that I was to cease this line of argument or I'd be dismissed from the seminary. I decided to lay low. But I did get a perverse pleasure in the fact that another practice that the Vatican Council threw overboard was the requirement of meatless Fridays (except during Lent and certain feast days).

But what propelled me eventually out of the seminary, the monastery and the practice of Catholicism was not the thoughts that were in my head, but rather the hole that was in my heart. The fact is that I didn't really connect spiritually with the core mysteries and practices of the faith. I loved its rituals – the theater of it all – for example serving as Master of Ceremonies at the solemn high masses. I loved being chosen for the schola cantorum, the small group of singers who led all of the chanting. But when I wasn't in role, I was pretty disconnected. I remember one year, for example, that during morning meditations I surreptitiously read all of Bruce Catton's history of the Civil War, plus Sandburg's biography of Lincoln. There's where the disconnect was, you see, at the center – in the prayer life and especially in the experience of the Eucharist. I'm sure that you know that in Catholic belief, the Eucharist – the consecrated bread and wine – become in a miraculous way the actual – not symbolic – body and blood of Christ. If you really believe that, then taking communion should be a profound experience. Not for me. My head understood all of the theology and the Acquinian-Aristotelian logic that explained how this could be true – it's based in the distinctions among prime matter and substantial form, and the difference between substance and accident. But *for me*, it was just too-sweet wine and too-bland bread. Not a solid platform on which to make a life-commitment to the priesthood. And so, after nine years in the religious order, two years shy of ordination, and facing the implications of making my final religious vows, I let my temporary vows expire and I left, donning that tweed jacket and boarding that bus for Philly.

### **Atheistic Secular Humanist**

What followed was about a decade long movement away from committed Christianity through agnosticism and eventually by the late 1970s to a comfortable atheistic secular humanism. I subscribed fully to its tenets, but especially three:

1. **Religious Skepticism** – even antagonism, truth be told –
2. **Reason** as the only test of truth.
3. **Science And Technology** as the only way of understanding the world, the universe and man's place within it.

My basic posture at that time was probably best summed up in the first line of my personal credo back then: "I believe in the universe of the knowable." I would expand that to be:

***"What science has proven must be believed; what science has disproven must be discarded, and what science has not proven must be doubted."***

And so it was as a contented and convinced atheistic secular humanist parent of two kids that in 1989 I settled into Restoration UU for the sake of its Sunday School. So it was and so, I fully expected, it would stay. And it did for a while. But in the mid-1990s I began to have a series of experiences that forced me to reexamine the felt-certainty of my philosophy.

Some of you know that story; I laid it all out in my Easter sermon of five years ago. For today, though, just reflect on this fact:

Did you know that our entire known universe, ie the boundary of our observable universe (the only universe that we can know) at present is about 28 billion parsecs in diameter – that’s about 840 trillion miles around. A big space. But the estimated lower boundary of the entire universe is about 24 gigaparsecs in diameter, that is 720 million-trillion miles around. A really big space!

The point? The universe is a big place, its phenomena vast, and what we know by science – indeed what ever can be known by science – is only a fraction of its reality. And the moral? **Between the territories of the scientifically proven and disproven lies a huge and far larger *territory of the possible*.**

In my case these experiences translated into an increasing appreciation for the realm of spirit, and an increased awareness of the power and action of Spirit. From the atheistic, scientific, secularistic humanist that I had been, I had morphed into a spiritual humanist which is how I identify myself today.

### **Spiritual Humanist**

Spiritual humanism! To some that must sound like an oxymoron. “Isn’t spirituality the very essence of everything that humanism decries?” they might ask. Well, the answer is that it all depends on what we might mean by it.

Now humanism itself seems devisable between a secular form and a spiritual one. Secular humanism is a passionate embrace of rationalism, together with a rejection of all supernaturalism. Religious or, increasingly more common today, Spiritual humanists, commonly embrace much of the language of religion, but reinterpret it in naturalistic ways. Most dramatically God -- when used by contemporary spiritual humanists -- rarely if ever stands for an omnipotent divine being standing outside of the universe. Instead divinity, or the divine, is seen intrinsic to the cosmos itself. Today the single largest group of people holding spiritual, or religious, humanist positions are – Guess -- Unitarian Universalists.

This strong identification between American Unitarian Universalism and humanism has been true from the beginning through to its current evolution. In 1933 fifteen Unitarian and Universalist ministers joined with John Dewey and seventeen other intellectuals to sign the original "Humanist Manifesto," that declared with unbridled enthusiasm, how "The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world... Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs... In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of a candid and explicit humanism...." For the greater part of the twentieth century Unitarian Universalism in America has been deeply marked by scientific or, if you prefer, secular humanist perspectives.

But ***“To Everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven ...”***

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century wore on, a change was afoot within the minds and hearts of American UU's. In the 1997 UUA survey of beliefs among members, when asked whether anything was missing in their UU experience, over 76% said "yes" and only two factors account for over 60% of that yearning (and each are about evenly divided: 30 – 30).

- Diversity – including diversity of experience
- Intensity of joy and spirituality.

Like the flipside of a coin, when asked whether they ever considered leaving Unitarian Universalism, almost 60% said "yes" and why:

- Because we lack spirituality and joy (29%)
- We're too arrogant and cerebral (19%)

Reflecting this, we've seen a new shift in emphasis. Those among us who are inclined to use the term "spiritual" are now in ascendancy. Our greatest pulpits, even our denominational presidency has been held for a decade now by those in this "spiritual" camp.

This theological evolution was borne out by the UUA's 2005 report titled, "Engaging Our Theological Diversity." Of all the questions asked in the theological survey, this statement, ***"The natural world is a web of interdependent connections, of which we are inescapably a part,"*** is the largest piece of common ground for both ministers and laity. Over 90 percent of respondents, across all demographics, asserted that this understanding is highly important to their faith. The rise of *religious naturalism – or spiritual humanism --* as an identifier led to the adoption of the seventh Principle – *respect for the interdependent web* – and has accelerated in the decades since.

Let me, then, offer to you some other statements from that 2005 report which are representative of spiritual – or, if you prefer, religious -- humanism with widespread and growing belief among fellow UUs and after each, let's do a quick show of hands as a quick test of our alignment with them:

***"Humans are born with the potential to be good; we are committed to nurturing good through love and learning."*** Around 90 percent of lay respondents and ministers considered this true and highly important. How many of us – show your hands ....

***"We embrace a covenant in love not to "give up on anyone"—to create inclusive community,"*** was affirmed by 80 percent of lay respondents and 72 percent of clergy as highly important.

***"The depth dimension of our lives (spirituality) calls us to live mindfully, seek meaning, and serve – to act out -- love."*** Close to 90 percent of survey respondents gave this affirmation high importance.

***"We encounter 'God' in our own depths, in others, and in nature, seeking wholeness and transformation."*** This statement, too, reflects a broad consensus among UUs. Even in a congregation with a strong humanist identity, 80 percent rated this statement important.

**“God” can be conceived as a pervasive Creativity, ever evolving, that lures us beyond our limiting horizons.**” This “process theism” was more controversial among lay respondents. About 60 percent of lay respondents considered this concept highly important; 82 percent of ministers did.

**“Spiritual reality engages us in the midst of paradox and mystery; we are challenged to abide there at times.”** This statement was also preferred by ministers (80%) over lay informants, but still about 60% of lay respondents affirmed it.

Of course each of these assertions is worth further reflection, and in subsequent sermons I will explore some. But, for today, commenting on all this together, revealing how this new spiritual humanism might erupt within our lives, let me quote from *The Sacred Depths of Nature* by Ursula Goodenough, a UU cell biologist who identifies herself as a religious naturalist – and daughter of one of my academic mentors Ward Goodenough. She writes:

*“Our story tells us of the sacredness of life, of the astonishing complexity of cells and organisms, of the vast lengths of time it took to generate their splendid diversity, of the enormous improbability that any of it happened at all.*

*“Reverence is the religious emotion elicited when we perceive the sacred. We are called to revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence, the whole and all of its myriad parts as they catalyze and secure and replicate and mutate and evolve.”*

She then continues, drawing upon our own Unitarian resources. *“Ralph Waldo Emerson invites us to express our reverence in the form of prayer. ‘Prayer,’ (Emerson) writes, ‘is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul.’”*

I suggest this is spiritual – or if you like, religious -- humanism, a true light for our lives and the world itself. Within the vision of this humanism there is no difference between the spiritual and the material. There is no dead universe and no spiritual world -- no heaven or hell --beyond the Cosmos. But Cosmos is alive, it is animal. The universe is mysterious, constantly unfolding, but never completely revealing.

Spiritual humanism accepts the wisdom of our bodies and respects the knowledge we can glean through our senses; it acknowledges the intuitive depth of the heart, as well as the wisdom that can arise within our open minds. Indeed, this spiritual humanism is an invitation to a fully examined life, to a life of discovery and engagement, to a life of love.

And, my friends, to what more could we wish to be called?

Finally, in upcoming months I will explore more of these interconnected strands.

- Next month we'll see how blurry the definition of life is becoming and explore further the concept of the living Cosmos, specifically Gaia, and celebrate Gaia's life-giving with an appropriate ceremony.
- In November, we'll explore another aspect of the transcendent dimension, how blurry the definition of death is becoming; we'll have a remembrance ritual and discuss some concepts of the soul.
- In December, for something different, I'll offer a bit of religious/mythic history and share the good news: Christianity IS a pagan mystery religion.

***“To Everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven ...”***

Blessed be.