

Peacedale, RI
Gretchen Robinson
Minister, Channing Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockland

01-13-2008

In the reading a social worker, of all people, tells a woman survivor of a plane crash: "God must have had a reason for saving you. You haven't finished your life's work yet." How often do we encounter that kind of comment, someone imposing their theology on another person? Giving their opinion, sharing their belief or judgment--often unsolicited? It happens all the time. Often it's innocuous and we brush it off; sometimes though, it's intrusive.

The woman is "troubled." It felt like I was saddled with a lot of responsibility ... to figure out, 'What is this work I'm supposed to be doing?' And then the flipside is (that) God didn't have any more work for all those other people, and I don't believe that."

Being a chaplain, I found the man's statement akin to malpractice, since he made her look at her experience using his terms. Rather than clarify the issues for her, he imposed his framework for how she should make meaning out of her survival while others died. Ultimately though, she was able to reject his theology, which apparently did not fit her understanding. Often we have to struggle to integrate life events and in time to decide what it is we believe, or just as importantly what it is we don't believe. Someone else's dogmatic statements of belief can make the task harder. It may leave us feeling awkward or different.

She says, "I decided to live with as few regrets as possible: Not leaving home in the morning being upset with someone, not passing up a chance to tell my husband or one of the boys how much I love them."

That's a positive outcome to this tragedy, a moral response to the tragedy, far better than escaping into self-gratification and pleasure seeking. To this point she hasn't brought god into it. She says, "It was hard to do that because it wasn't the habit. But whenever I thought, 'Oh, this is hard,' then I'd think, 'Well, I might not be coming home tonight. It's not that hard.'" She's trying to do what Buddhists call living in 'right relationship' with her family. Psychologists would call this an appropriate way to deal with her 'survivors guilt.'

Then she speaks of god.

"That event was like being picked up by the scruff of the neck and shaken and God says, 'this is your only life. Just be grateful that you've got these days and these hours and these wonderful people in your life. Just be grateful for that.'

"One of the things that has followed me, surrounded me, wrapped me, I think, is that feeling of gratitude."

Now it sounds as if this woman sincerely believes in god. And again gratitude is a good outcome from working through a trauma such as she went through. But as a humanist I

The Faith of a Humanist

want to use this story to point out that in our culture 'god language' and religious metaphors and images are commonly used as a kind of lingua franca, in order to express ideas in conventional terms. They can be a kind of figure of speech, used even by people who may or may not actually believe in god. It's our common cultural heritage and our fallback way of communicating. But it tends to cover up the evolution in consciousness that has been going on for some time, a new freedom to question and doubt openly.

There's a huge cultural shift going on. We see it in the publication of books such as *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, the *God Delusion* by Daniel Dennett, and now *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. A huge and an paradigm shift is taking place. The way we view religion and even conceive of reality is evolving.

Is this just fad? These books have hit the bestseller list and stayed there. Many on the religious right have criticized these books, so have some religious liberals. The polarization in American religion seems to have deepened. While as a humanist, I welcome these books as long overdue--they are strident. The authors have been called the 'angry atheists.' Yet it wasn't so long ago that feminists were called 'strident' for pointing out injustices perpetrated against women. The old system of power is entrenched. Groups have to be strident in order to be heard. Still, it's going to be a while before this particular dustup settles and both sides start talking to each other.

As a religious humanist, I think we need to join together and start dealing with the problems that we humans have caused one another--and the environment here on earth. We need to stop waiting for some 'white guy in the sky' to come down and save us, save us from ourselves. If there is a god, which I sincerely doubt, then we only have our hands to do his work, right? So I really don't care what others believe or don't believe. Show me your faith by how you live in the world. Faith in action is all that's worth believing in.

I'm a chaplain. Had I been the woman's counselor, I certainly would never declared unilaterally what her experience meant. To make meaning is her job. It's about what supports the person's life and their being and becoming. When I'm with a patient or a family, it does not matter to me at all whether someone speaks of god or the holy spirit--or finds courage and meaning in the human spirit.

I wonder, though, at those times when people feel they have to speak god language in order to feel good or give validity to the 'conversion' they are going through. We change inwardly as the result of personal reflection. This results in a deepening, psychologically and/or spiritually. I certainly do not believe in a transcendent god who allows some people to die and other to live, to divide the sheep from the goats. My objective is to listen as that person struggles to understanding. Then perhaps--just perhaps, we might have a dialogue that is healing and leads to greater wholeness and integration for the person.

At one point in my life, I was as angry, perhaps as angry as the angry atheists. Religion was and is used to control people and keep them silent and docile, women and children

The Faith of a Humanist

especially, or anyone who advocated for the have-nots of the world. That's why I like to stir things up and get people questioning, it's a good thing sometimes.

As a child my mother sent me to an evangelical church, which she assumed, would turn me into a bible-believing, good Christian. It didn't work out that way. The teachings were narrow minded and mean-spirited and most made no sense to me and oppressive to my being and becoming. But one little girl cannot stand against her whole family and church and school, because even in school we said the lord's prayer every day. I just knuckled under until I grew up.

Reserved by temperament, this made me even more shy and introverted. I had to keep my inner life secret. Not believing in god would have seemed like the greatest betrayal to my parents. Except it did make sense in one way: the humanist part of Jesus' teachings: the sermon on the mount about "blessed are the meek." My parents were poor and didn't own their home; and "blessed are the peacemakers" because even then I was devoted to non-violence, coming as I did from a family where hitting between siblings was largely ignored.

I found that I could hide out as a dissenter, even though I felt ashamed and like a bad person for not believing. Faced with such oppression, people shut down. They repress their own spiritual development. They have their private faith or stop attending church. They avoid the subject or just figure religion is something you don't question. But something in me pushed me to question, to become a heretic, a skeptic, an apostate. If you look up that word, apostate, it means to abandon one's faith or principles. Well, I found my own faith and lived by the principles of the human dignity and worth of all--decades before I knew of the Unitarian Universalist principles.

How does a humanist end up working as working as a chaplain? Praying with people using god language? Good question. Given my history, I have a deep and abiding desire to help others make sense, to make meaning out of their experience. I get tired of talking about myself. I want to sit down and listen to others.

It's possible to suspend what it is I believe or my own spiritual issues and listen to another. It's possible for people to converse, despite deep religious differences, to put their heads together and help along the process of making meaning. When I'm the designated helper, by some paradox, the conversation often ends up helping me. It's a much-noted side benefit of entering into the inner world of another person. We learn as much as they do about this life we share. And that applies to anyone who tries to bridge the religious divides we encounter these days. Faith is about making meaning, making sense of what happens to us. We take some action and then we see where it took us.

And an essential part of making meaning is to question -- and to doubt the so-called wisdom that others gave us early in life--if we feel called to. The indoctrination I endured, I was able to avoid the worst of it. Even as a young child, I inwardly rejected what I was told I had to believe in order to belong: thus my search, my longing for a place to belong. Some part of me remained intact. From that seed grew a person who

The Faith of a Humanist

can think and question and figure things out for herself. We all have powers of reasoning and acquiring knowledge that can lie dormant inside of us.

Doubt and questioning are essential parts of the human journey to emotional and spiritual fullness. They do not, as some would have it, mean you are perverse, wicked, or bad. In the Protestant Reformation, people thought you had they had the right to kill anyone who refused to believe as they did. Yet, there have always been doubters. Confucius, Socrates, the great Jewish teacher Maimonides (who I discovered at age 10), Galileo, and later, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Charles Darwin, Marie Curie, poet Emily Dickinson, the philosopher Wittgenstein, and Margaret Sanger: doubters all.

For centuries religious zealots killed off the questioners of their age. Whenever they stopped, free thought started bubbling up. Among these free thinkers and doubters is Jesus himself. From his agony on the cross, he asked god 'why have you forsaken me?' In the two earliest gospels these are the last words Jesus says before dying, as if he expected some god to answer him. Theologians have interpreted this as a sign of Jesus' faith but closer reading does not support this.

Many, many religious leaders since have confessed to times, even years of doubt, with Mother Teresa being the most recent. All these people challenged the nature of religious belief. That puts today's angry atheists in good company.

Even so, it takes courage to be a humanist, even at times within Unitarian Universalism, where too often we 'make nice' with others in the pews because, well, 'we don't want to offend anyone, would we?'

If like me, some of us tend to be reserved of temperament, play it safe, and think long and hard about saying what we think, we might want to buck up our courage and maybe find some chutzpah. I like the quote: "Never be afraid to say what you are not afraid to think." Try living by that one. If you think something, why hold back, why self censor? Life is so short, why would we want to keep silent about something so good and right as our thoughts and beliefs.

So here's my Two-Step process for putting humanism into action:

Step one: coming into your own -- not hiding your light under a bushel, finding your own truth and speaking out of your own understanding. French writer, Emile Zola said: "I came to live out loud." When we swallow our ideas and self-censor ourselves out of fear, we end up with to spiritual indigestion. In writing this sermon, I decided that I needed to take my own advice and be more forthright and open about myself as a humanist. I need to tell others that humanism a valid and worthwhile life stance, equal to any other faith or belief. It works for me and it certainly was hard won.

When I, at long last, put aside the conditioning and indoctrination of my childhood, I was able to claim my own inherent worth and dignity. It was a long time coming. Whether we are religious humanist, atheist, Christian Unitarian Universalist, or other, we can be in dialogue. It's a truism that everyone in our faith is on a different spiritual

The Faith of a Humanist

path--yet by some paradox we are on the same path. It's not that we UUs can believe whatever we want. Each person is expected to develop over time some kind of spiritual understanding or path. Theist or non-theist, it does not matter as long as it is authentic to the person.

It may take time to find our voice, to somehow find ways to present and re-present what is most meaningful and true for us. In our families, our church, and our communities, we are always 'coming out' if I can use that language, 'coming out' to others and to ourselves.

Step two:

In the reading the woman ends by saying: "One of the things that has followed" her was "that feeling of gratitude." If as a humanist, I view gratitude or any other quality as Christian and dismiss it, if I just stay in my own comfort zone, I risk closing myself off to teachings that might be a vital part of my learning. I give up nothing in investigating what a religion stand for. Most of the humanists I know are students of world religions and highly moral even though they don't believe in a traditional god. A classmate in the humanist institute where I study says, "I can say I believe in god, as long as you let me define what god means."

I think we can make common cause with the mass of ordinary Christians who attribute a wake up, an epiphany like she describes to God, to a supernatural force. She attributes it to God at work in the world. Others say these insights are part of the psychological makeup of humans: that we seek for the deeper meaning of profound life-altering experiences. We are by nature reflective beings, we ponder, consider, think on what has happened. The woman must have continually asked herself: 'Why did I survive and so many others die?' For you this may or may not be a theological question but either way, what is right for you will become clear in time.

Freedom of religion has historically had a profoundly liberating effect on humankind. No wonder the conservatives and traditionalists were and still are threatened by things like separation of church and state. They fear that humanity will tend toward anarchy order and disorder, these two forces are ever in opposition to one another. Right now we have the two extremes pulling apart from one another. As poet T. S. Eliot said, "the center cannot hold." The rhetoric and the extremity of views pull us apart. We become more polarized and divided.

We must remember that this balancing and rebalancing has been going on for a long time in human history. We need to remember our past and our commitment to our own individual faith, even within our church. Our faith commitment is not to win out; our faith commitment is to live at peace with our neighbors. Christian or non-Christian we can look to the human Jesus who said, "love your enemies; do good to those who hate you." That is a teaching worthy of us all to abide by.