Sermon on William R. Murry's "Reason and Reverence", Calgary, January 17th, 2010
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There is a story told by rabbinic scholars, that heaven is a round table where we sit together through eternity and study Torah. God is at the table. When asked to explain some passage in the scriptures God will reply, How should I know? I only wrote it. You lived it. What do you think?

Three years ago William Murry, past president of Meadville Lombard Theological School, published a book entitled, "Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century". Like that eternal table the rabbis spoke of, Murry has gathered a circle of discourse about humanism, and speaks to us from what he finds there.

First, Murry explores the underlying assumptions of religious humanism. Next, he engages the possibilities of religious naturalism. Finally, he fuses the two into a new posture that embraces both reason and reverence. Murry calls this fusion, humanistic religious naturalism. I find his work useful, helpful, and compelling.

This morning I shall begin with some background on humanism and a few tidbits from the feast that Murry has packed into his slim, lucid volume. Then I shall share a few tiny hesitations about Murry's work. Finally, I will pass along the gist of Murry's conclusions.

Let us begin with a definition of terms.

Humanism is one of those slippery words that shifts shape halfway between the speaker's lips and the listener's ear. Historically, we could associate a humanist perspective with the pre-Socratic Greek thinkers who were drawn to natural philosophy rather than Plato's ideal forms. Murry also describes Confucianism in ancient China as a humanist world view.

Moving up a millennium or so, we meet Erasmus and the Renaissance scholars who studied the humanities. By this they meant the worldly disciplines of language, music, mathematics, astronomy, architecture, and medicine, as opposed to the study of divinity, once but no longer the queen of sciences.

By the nineteenth century, our English word humanism emerges, denoting modern enlightenment philosophy. German scholars showed scripture to be the work of human hands. Darwin's "Origin of Species" showed humanity to be the work of evolution. Orators such as Robert Ingersoll, "The Great Agnostic", challenged the notion that God took sides between nations, or chose to permit suffering and injustice; Ingersoll proposed instead a religion of humanity whereby people were to treat one another with dignity and respect, and take responsibility for themselves and one another.

By the twentieth century, humanist preachers argued that we could be good without God. Their Sunday sermons lifted up the events of the whole week, such as rights for women, labour laws, racial justice, and world peace. These, too, were worthy of a Sunday's mindfulness.

By 1961, when Unitarians and Universalists merged into the Unitarian Universalist Association, humanism had become the water we swim in, the air we breathe.

A few years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association directed its Commission of Appraisal to survey theological perspectives. The Commission of Appraisal found that approximately eighty percent of UUs identify as humanist and approximately eighty percent (not necessarily the same eighty percent) find their spirituality in nature.

William Murry describes humanism in terms of the worth and dignity of every person, and the necessity for human beings to take responsibility for themselves and for the world. He also defines humanism as non-theist; I have difficulty with that. We'll come back to that a little later.

Shifting to an historical perspective, through a series of three Humanist Manifestos, the first issued in 1933, we see how some humanists defined their outlook, and how that outlook evolved. Woven through the fabric of change, as humanists defined and re-defined themselves, are threads that continue constant.

First, a humanist posture frees god from the responsibility for much of human misfortune. If life is a random walk through a hazardous environment, humans might as well take some responsibility, where possible, for their own well-being. For example, as was seen in the depression of the 1930's, an authoritarian religion might tell you that misery is sent by god and your duty is merely to endure. But a humanist would say that humanity has the right and the responsibility to work towards the healing of the world.

Another consequence of a humanist perspective is how we do church, and especially how we do prayer. If we make a religious choice to honour the integrity of this world, and to take responsibility for our own lives, then to pray for divine intervention becomes almost blasphemous. Moreover, observation suggests that petitionary prayer—asking god to intervene on our behalf—tends to be unreliable. And to pray for personal favour, when our neighbour also struggles under a mighty burden, seems unmannerly somehow.

On occasion, in a tight corner, I have instinctively prayed that the luck might flow my way. I have never been ungrateful for good luck, and I try to give thanks by taking a sober second thought the next time a high risk activity beckons. Prayer can be a way of thinking aloud, or a step along the learning curve. From the depths, we can pray to find the strength and courage to meet what comes our way. But to pray that the order of the cosmos be rent asunder for my personal advantage? I cannot do that.

And so, in humanist worship, prayer becomes, not petitionary, but reflective, meditative. Together we listen for the small, still voice, and in silence we may hear the beating of our own hearts, the breathing of our neighbours, the laughter of our children, and the wind in the trees.

These are some of the changes that humanism brought to our worship. Time brings other changes. The truth of each generation emerges from its own time and place.

Over time, old-style humanism became stereotyped as rigid, unfriendly, elitist, and anthropomorphic—shaped in human form. Once, we could say with Protagoras, that man was the measure of all things. Today, in the face of the collapse of the Atlantic Cod Fishery, I would hesitate to say that; we did not measure well when we permitted the draggers to devastate the Grand Banks habitat. Today, I might note also that all the signatories of the first Humanist Manifesto were men; I want to hear the voices of women and children too.

Murry recognizes certain weaknesses in the humanism that generated the first Manifesto. The humanism of that era tended to be highly individualistic, emphasizing autonomy, and de-emphasizing community. There was little sense of the tragic, and the place of suffering in the world. Reason was elevated, while emotion and feeling were demoted. Humanism tended not to be open to mystery and the unknown. And there was no recognition of the extent and depth of evil in the world. Says Murry, "the humanism of [the time between the two world wars] was too dogmatic and seemingly intolerant of other perspectives, especially theism".

The experiences of the second world war, of Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags, made all too clear the potential for human evil in the world. Science was seen to be used for evil ends, as well as for good. A wounded world cried out for compassion.

In recent years, feminism, environmentalism, and post-modernism challenge the humanist perspective as overly rational and lacking in spiritual dimension. Even so, religious humanism was the ideological centre of Unitarian Universalism at the time of the 1961 merger, however cold, entrenched, illiberal, and unfriendly it might have seemed to some.

A second Humanist Manifesto in 1973 reaffirmed rejection of the supernatural, and reaffirmed commitment to reason and the scientific method, but recognized that science could be used for evil ends. This second manifesto recognized that both reason and emotion were valuable and worked together, not as opposites. The second manifesto called for environmental awareness, an end to discrimination and violence, and a reasoned compassion that worked towards the betterment, not just of individuals, but of all humankind.

It is within this historical context that Murry's book marries reason with reverence and re-grounds religious humanism in religious naturalism to bring a richer, deeper humanism into the twenty-first century.

Like religious humanism, religious naturalism recognizes one natural universe, and one reality. Religious naturalism rejects the supernatural; if there is a god, that god is part of the natural world. Religious naturalism makes room for notions of god and spirituality.

Murry looks to a broad range of concepts to describe spirituality.

Murry begins, “As a religious humanist, I use the word spirituality to refer to a quality of life in the here and now, a quality that has to do with genuineness, depth, and devotion to values other than my own self-interest.”

Casting a wide net, Murry invites us to consider spirituality as the breath of life, as that which makes life vital and worth living, something deeper, more meaningful, and more lasting than the dehumanized world most people inhabit, something beyond the shallow and superficial, something about relationship, connectedness, beauty, care, wonder, awe at nature, something with joy in it, and love of the universe, love of life, and gratitude for one’s time on this earth, something that transcends our own ego and takes us to peak experiences.

For Murry, the religious response to spiritual awareness is gratitude: “Gratitude drives away feelings of resentment and despair and transforms us into generous and large-souled persons.”

And where is god in this?

Murry suggests that traditional theism sees god as supernatural, and separate from the world; in other words, the traditional sense of god is transcendent—above and beyond.

But UU theists, says Murry, tend to perceive god as natural, and part of the natural world. In other words, theistic UUs tend to engage a god that is immanent rather than transcendent. By immanent is meant a sense of the holy as something that abides with us and pervades the world. One could think of the transcendent as vertical, and the immanent as horizontal.

It seems to me that for UUs, especially humanists, it is not god but we humans who must become transcendent, to think and reach beyond ourselves, beyond our own egos and our own times. We are called to transcend our own culture and self-interest.

UUs might speak of god as the life force, the power of creativity, the power of life and love. UUs might speak of a spirit of God that animates the world and all living beings. Such a god might be experienced as a spiritual presence of love, decency, joyfulness, and hope.

Murry argues that such a theism is sister to humanistic religious naturalism, retaining a sense of deity, of something deeper, engaging some sense of an “ultimate ground of being that is in some sense spiritual”. In other words, I believe that Murry is recognizing a sense of the holy that might not be entirely inconsistent with a humanist outlook.

This I know: there is very little traction to be gained, trying to persuade someone that they do not know what they know, or feel what they feel. Your best argument is the model of your own life.

This I know: the common thread through all these -isms is respect for the worth and dignity of every human being. My sense is that these -isms see in each other a being like themselves; they see an I and a thou, not an it. They see each human being as an end, not as a means to an end. Our end, our purpose, is to live the life we are given as best we can, growing into the fullness of our personality in gratitude and awareness, in wonder and awe, in connection with our true selves, our neighbours, and all the universe.

Murry puts it this way: “The heart of humanism should not be what we reject but what we affirm. Both theistic and non-theistic religious naturalism affirm the dignity and worth of each person, the importance of reason and experience in making judgments, dedication to the well-being of all people, and an affirmation of the authority of human experience.”

I do have a few quibbles with Murry.

Murry is not as much in love with storytelling and the majestic resonance of scripture and language as I am, or with antiquity.

For example, Humanists put a lot of effort into arguing that we could be good without god. Well, the nineteenth-century Universalists, had sorted that out, to my satisfaction at least, a hundred years before.

My point is that humanism wrestles with the same big questions that humanity has always engaged. The words change; the angels we wrestle with stay the same: fate or free will? How shall we live? Who am I? Where is here? What is my purpose? Same questions, sometimes the same answers, in different tongues for different times.

Murry’s story is about how humanism is different. My story is about how we are the same.

Another quibble: Murry tends to lift up extremes of opinion, especially with respect to authoritarian religions. Given my own experience with interfaith work, I see Murry’s polarities excluding a lot of middle ground. My story would be more about how we are not as different from our neighbours, some of our neighbours, as we might think.

And when Murry speaks of building a better world, I hear an echo in the humanist preachers of the old Hebrew prophets. We are not so different from our ancestors as we might think.

But this is Murry’s book, not mine; if he doesn’t like stories as much as I do, that’s his privilege.

I like Murry’s book a lot. This new fusion he calls humanistic religious naturalism makes room for a more inclusive humanism. His book is timely, and reflects new scientific perceptions about body, mind, and spirit. Also, Murry connects humanism to the environment and to community. This has possibilities. In fact, I believe Murry is charting a trail we are already treading, according to the Commission on Appraisal, in that the greater part of UUs presently self-identify with humanism even as they find spiritual depth in nature.

Unitarian Universalism is non-creedal. We have no statement that tests belief. Each of us works out our own understanding of where we place our faith and confidence.

Here is a sketch of what Murry sees as the essence of humanistic religious naturalism.

1. Human beings are of great worth and value. We are not self-sufficient, we depend on nature. The human body and mind are part of one unified whole. We have no conscious survival after death. This life is all there is, and our challenge is to make the most of it.
2. The natural order is all there is as far as we can tell. There is no supernatural order as far as we can know. We can only know what we experience with our senses, and where the scientific method takes us from there.
3. The goal of human beings is to become more fully human. What enriches human life is good, what diminishes human life is evil. Growth is essential. Education is essential. Justice is essential. The democratic process best respects the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. Truth, goodness, and beauty enrich human life.
4. Ethics arise from human experience. Reverence for life in all its forms is a central principle in the ethical life. Gratitude motivates us to ethical living. Awe and reverence at the universe lead us to preserve and protect the environment. Progress, though not inevitable, is possible. A higher standard of living for all people is desirable and possible through a more just and equitable distribution of resources and wealth.
5. Human beings are not totally determined by nature or nurture; we have some genuine freedom of choice.
6. Finally, it is essential to be open to new ideas and question basic assumptions, including one’s own.

In conclusion, William Murry has shared with us his sense of humanism past and present.

As to the future, Murry reminds us that we are part of nature, and not separate from nature. And so a religion for the future must affirm our responsibility to preserve and sustain the natural world. We must take seriously the discoveries of science, and learn from science. We must take seriously both reason and reverence, for reason makes our achievements possible, but only the respect and awe of reverence will save us from the hubris and arrogance that would destroy all the good we have accomplished.

Finally, the religion of the future must affirm the values that make our lives more fully human, to live intensely in the present, to reach beyond self-centredness to a sense of one’s self as part of a larger sacred whole.

Let us live deeply here and now, creating lives that are joyful and meaningful. Rooted in nature, and aware of our human capacity for evil and for good, let us pursue a realistic hope for human progress and a better world. Guided by reason, moved by love, reverent before the magnificence of the universe, let us be grateful for the gift of life.

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