

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Sources of Our Living Tradition #5
Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, Branches Group #38, March 2022

OPENING WORDS

The living tradition we share draws from many sources. The fifth is: Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

CHECK-IN

READINGS

Excerpts from the Humanist Manifesto III (2003)

- 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.
- Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.
- 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.
- 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.

Excerpts from The Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

- We believe . . . that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species.
- Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful.
- We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction.
- In the area of sexuality, we believe that intolerant attitudes, often cultivated by orthodox religions and puritanical cultures, unduly repress sexual conduct.

We believe in the human capacity to solve individual and social problems and to make progress. We believe in a continuing search for truth and hence that life is an adventurous quest. . . . We believe in the creative imagination as a power in promoting the good life. ~ The Rev. Lewis McGee

I seem to have spent all of my life rebelling against the church or other people's interpretations of what religion is—the truth is probably that I don't believe there is a God . . . Certainly I don't believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake . . . ~ Alice Walker

Secular humanist thinking, in my view, includes critical thinking, knowledge, compassion, and empathy. Mapping connections between the systems that create inequities in the world reinforces in me the need to be involved in creating social change. My agency did not come from a higher power, but from within. My motivation to constantly process ideas, look for solutions, and engage in dialogue with others comes from a desire for fairness and justice—a desire that does not require belief in an invisible entity. ~ Liz Ross

I'm a sentimentalist humanist. I believe art is here to help, even if the help is painful. ~ Zadie Smith

The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? The wide belt of the universe has no need for finger-rings. I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance. ~ Zora Neale Hurston

... being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead. ~ Kurt Vonnegut

QUESTIONS Please respond to any of the questions you feel moved to answer or any of the readings that you find to be particularly meaningful.

The first and third questions are adapted from session 6 of the study guide for the book *A Chosen Faith*, by John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, at <https://www.beacon.org/Assets/ClientPages/AChosenFaithdg.aspx>

1. To what extent do the excerpts from The Humanist Manifesto II and III express your value system? To what extent could any of them serve as a personal religious statement for you?
2. Do any of the variety of perspectives on humanism in the quotations resonate with you? How would you compare or contrast them with the excerpts from the second and third Humanist Manifestos?
3. In the book *A Chosen Faith*, Forrest Church points out that "it is our virtues, the very things of which we are most proud, that are most likely to betray us" into idolatry. He cites the traditional liberal values of reason, freedom, and tolerance. John Buehrens says that idolatry is worshipping a part for the whole. Using either of those definitions, can you identify a potential "idolatry" of which you see yourself in danger? Describe this potential idolatry and the dangers inherent in it. What can you do to protect yourself from having your "virtue" develop into idolatry?

CLOSING WORDS

We do not believe what we want to believe. We believe what we must. Belief is a guide to action, not the answer to a riddle. We are called upon not to believe nor disbelieve but to understand. Understanding requires discipline. With such effort, life can be richer, our minds will be clearer, and our sympathies broadened. ~ Raymond Bragg

notes on people quoted and sources of quotes

The Humanist Manifesto II (1973): <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/>

The Humanist Manifesto III (2003): <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>

Quotes from Lewis McGee and Alice Walker are from “Black Humanism’s Response to Suffering” in the Summer 2010 issue *UUWorld*: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/black-humanism-response-suffering>

- Lewis McGee (1893-1979) was a Unitarian minister and also served on the governing board of the American Humanist Association. <https://www.meadville.edu/ml-commons/details/lewis-mcgee-dd-1949/>
- Alice Walker (1944-), is a writer, poet, and activist; she believes that learning to extend the range of our compassion is activity and work available to all. She is a staunch defender not only of human rights, but of the rights of all living beings. <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/about/https://veganai.org/about/>

Quote from Liz Ross is from “Five Fierce Humanists: Unapologetically Black Women Beyond Belief,” at <https://thehumanist.com/magazine/july-august-2018/features/five-fierce-humanists-unapologetically-black-women-beyond-belief/>

- Liz Ross is co-creator of the People of Color: Animal Rights, Advocacy and Food Justice Conference. A former police officer, she raised awareness (from 2013-2018) about the history and problem of mass-incarceration through volunteering for organizations that are working to counter its negative impact. Liz has facilitated workshops and consulted for organizations, and individuals in leadership positions, interested in fostering an anti-racist climate in the workplace and in their personal lives. <https://veganai.org/about/>

Quotes from Zadie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston are from “Black Humanists Who Have Shaped the Humanist Movement,” at <https://andrewcopson.com/2020/07/black-humanists-who-have-shaped-the-humanist-movement/>

- Zadie Smith (1975-) is the author of novels and collections of essays; her novel *White Teeth* won multiple literary awards. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a tenured professor of fiction at New York University, and a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. <http://www.zadiesmith.com/about-zadie>
- Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) became the most successful and most significant black woman writer of the first half of the 20th century. Over a career that spanned more than 30 years, she published four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, numerous short stories, and several essays, articles and plays. <https://www.zoranealehurston.com/about/>

Quote from Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is from <https://americanhumanist.org/about/faq/>

- In his last novel, *Timequake*, and his last collection of essays, *A Man without a Country*, Vonnegut powerfully expressed his sense that corporate greed, overpopulation and war would win out in the end over simple humanity. As he ruefully apologized to those who would come after him, “We could have saved the world, but we were just too damned lazy.” <https://www.vonnegutlibrary.org/biography/>

Quote from Raymond Bragg (1902-1979) is from <https://uudb.org/articles/raymondbragg.html>

- Raymond Bennett Bragg, a Unitarian minister and civic leader, played a key role in the making of the Humanist Manifesto. <https://uudb.org/articles/raymondbragg.html>