

**Reading***excerpt from Faithiest*

by Chris Stedman

*Chris Stedman is a twenty-something, thoughtful author and a regular contributor on Huffington Post that attended seminary with Rev Pam. He begins his book "Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious" with this story of attending his first atheist gathering in Chicago.*

I sat down on the couch, carefully balancing a mint julep in one hand and a plate of hors d'oeuvres I couldn't name in the other, intensely aware of how out of place I must have seemed. Next to me on the couch were a woman in her mid-forties with a shimmering peacock brooch and a man in his late thirties.

I introduced myself and asked what they'd thought of the panel. They raved: "Wasn't it wonderful how intelligent the panelists were and how wickedly they'd exposed the frauds of religion? Weren't they right that we must all focus our energy on bringing about the demise of religious myths?"

I paused, debating whether I should say anything. My "Minnesota Nice" inclination warned me to let it be, but I had to say something. So I started small, asking them to consider that diversity of thought and background fosters an environment where discourse thrives, where ideas are exchanged, and where we learn from one another. I was stonewalled: "We have the superior perspective; everyone else is lost," said the woman with a flick of her hand that suggested she was swatting at an invisible mosquito...

"I understand what you're saying," I said, trying to weigh my words carefully, "but how can we discount the role religious beliefs played in motivating the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi?" "Oh, I get it," the man jumped in with a sneer. "You're one of *those* atheists."

I wasn't sure what he meant, but it didn't sound like a good thing. I shifted my weight from one side to another and picked at an hors d'oeuvre that I thought might be some kind of cheese. "What do you mean, 'one of those atheists?'"

"You're not a real atheist. We've got a name for people like you. You're a 'faitheist.'"

I'd heard words like that before—in my youth, when I was told I couldn't be a real Christian because I was gay. Once again I didn't fit the prescribed model, and I was not-so-gently shown the door. [T]he implication was clear: you're at the wrong party, kid.\*

**Reading**

The Path to Heaven...

by Chet Raymo

"The more I learned about the natural world the more I stood in awe of its mystery. I longed to sing praise and thanksgiving. And to pray. 'I don't know exactly what a prayer is,' says Mary Oliver in a poem, 'I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed.' I knelt in the grass."

"The biologist Richard Dawkins, whom I much admire, thinks it's a fraud for someone of atheistic temperament to use the language of traditional religion. The word 'God,' for example. Or 'prayer.' These words have meanings defined by usage, he says. 'God' is a transcendent personal being who hears and answers prayers and intervenes miraculously in the world. By that definition I am an atheist."

"But why must words like 'God' or 'prayer' be stuck in their ancient usages? Why must I concede an age-old language of praise to the Born Agains? I read the Book of Nature; I have no qualms using the G-word for the mystery that I find there, no embarrassment using the word 'prayer' for attending with reverence to what I see.

“I am an ‘Only Live Oncer,’ but I try to live in a state of grace. Not supernatural grace, to be sure, but the myriad natural graces that bless and hallow the everyday.”

## Message

Ich bin ein Humanist

Rev Pam Rumancik

On June 26, 1963, President Kennedy made a speech of solidarity in West Berlin after the erection of the Berlin Wall. During that speech he made the statement “ich bin ein Berliner” meaning “I am a Berliner” and indicating that the free world stood with them at the height of the cold war. It was a powerful moment in history and a welcome gesture of unity for that beleaguered community.

But almost immediately rumors began circulating that the president had gotten it wrong. That while he meant to say he was a Berliner, what he actually said was that he was a German Pastry. When you google this now there are nearly as many hits for “I am a jelly donut” as there are for the actual event. In fact, it’s become common wisdom that Kennedy screwed up and looked foolish rather than extending the goodwill of international cooperation.

But the common wisdom is wrong. Wikipedia & Snopes both dispute this version of the event. The Snopes article says:

Kennedy's famous line was penned by [Robert Lochner] who was raised within Berlin itself and was an accomplished and highly regarded translator in his own right. In proclaiming "Ich bin ein Berliner," therefore, JFK was no more referring to himself as a pastry than someone calling himself a "New Yorker" would have been understood by Americans as styling himself to be a magazine or a town car. (Snopes, 2014)

Often times you have to dig beneath ‘common wisdom’ in order to find deeper truth. Especially when the common wisdom is so much more entertaining than reality.

I started off with this story this morning because I want to look at the ways we use words to draw in or to divide. I was drawn to the title “Ich bin ein Humanist” because I wanted to offer the same kind of solidarity, the same statement of fellowship with UU Humanists that Kennedy offered to the West Berliners. I want to affirm at the most profound level that we are all humanists - in its most basic understanding of the word.

One of the blessings of our faith tradition is that our 4<sup>th</sup> principle affirms the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This means that every person in our church can figure out what makes sense to them, from their experiences, from their reasoning and from their exploration.

Theoretically what this means is that we have folks with many different perspectives sitting in our chairs on any given Sunday morning. But the reality is that some folks feel shut down and hesitant to voice their beliefs if they sense they are a minority. It’s easier to not talk about something than to express a tender or gently held belief and have it dismissed or ridiculed.

Rather than freely search and explore together, we gather around safe topics like social justice or music and never bring our deepest concerns to the wider community. And, unfortunately, in my experience it is often folks who identify as humanist who shut others down. It comes out in little comments about “Christians” said with a dismissive tone, or a joke about belief in God. It’s subtle but strong in many of our churches. My earliest experiences of humanists at my first UU church were “ouchy.” They were the folks objecting to any religious language & scornfully rejecting anything spiritual as uneducated & unformed.

Kendyl Gibbons, one of our prominent UU ministers wrote about her father’s humanism for a GA Presentation in 2004:

“[My father] had no patience with supernatural explanations of anything, nor with sentiment, nor with pretense. I would describe his theology, to the extent that he had one, as a kind of Puritan humanist fatalism...He regarded religion as an annoying combination of sentiment, pretense, and irrationality, the resort of inferior minds, intellectual sloth, and personal immaturity; something that any sensible person would simply outgrow.”

This was my experience of Humanism in my home church. And unfortunately, also to some extent in the next few UU churches I attended.

When I started reading about Humanism in seminary and studying the writing of some of its luminaries like John Dewey, William Murray, and Kendyl Gibbons, I found a whole depth of thought and understanding of human nature that didn't represent what I'd experienced in church. In “Not your Father's Humanism” Gibbons writes:

I still don't accept supernatural explanations for the world I experience and I still don't look for rescue or reward. But I do live in a realm of multi-dimensional experience that values the evocative, the emotional, the imaginative and symbolic aspects of human existence.”

Her Humanism described a perspective layered, humble, and open to awe and wonder. It is beyond the judgment and dismissive humanism that I'd experienced. The International Humanist and Ethical Union's bylaw # 5.1 says that Humanism:

...is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.” (Wikipedia, 2014)

This sounds reasonable. I can connect with that. But this is where that language thing comes in. The subtitle of today's sermon is: How words fail. Humanism has come to represent something that is less than flexible in UU circles. The term “crusty” is attached to humanist regularly and it reveals a rigidity and if I had to put a name on it, an arrogance.

My experience with persons calling themselves humanist has been that they believe they have attained the pinnacle of theological understanding and that any of the rest of us who don't agree with them are not as evolved and certainly not as smart. Like Kendyl Gibbon's dad, they regard spiritual language as something any sensible person would surely outgrow. But there are humanists – many are here in this congregation – who do not think this way. They include my friend, Chris Stedman, who authored our reading today. They understand that words can have many levels of meaning and enjoy discussions around the evolution of language - they open up and make space for exploration rather than shutting down conversation.

But it kind of works like my experience with Texans. When I owned a restaurant in Estes Park, Co in the 90's our wait staff really hated Texans. The ones who were loud and obnoxious always started off their complaints by saying “I'm from Texas, and in Texas we do it...” – always better. So Texans got a really bad name.

But here's the thing. The nice and reasonable Texans didn't announce that they were from Texas – so there were undoubtedly way more polite and respectful folks from that state than we ever knew – but all Texans got painted as difficult and unreasonable. It's the vocal, crusty folks who get named as humanists while the rest of us who don't feel the need to draw lines aren't recognized as such.

And to be fair, inflexible humanists are feeling beleaguered, running into the same situation that Christians faced 40 - 50 years ago. Their faith home is changing to be more inclusive of other perspectives and it's not always comfortable. Some defensiveness is bound to creep in.

But the ability to evolve and change is the heart of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. As you know by now, my favorite theologian was Theodore Parker. He was a rabble rousing minister in Boston in the mid 1800's who preached to crowds of thousands as the Unitarian establishment looked on in disapproval and disgust.

His most famous sermon was titled "the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" where he argued that the world had changed so much in the time since Jesus had lived that Christians from the first century had more in common with Jews and Buddhists of that time than they did with Christians from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The task of liberal religion is to be constantly vigilant, to be constantly reexamining those things which we think are important and sifting out the wheat from the chaff on a regular basis. It's hard work and it requires energy and commitment – but the reward is a life of meaning and purpose and a fellowship with larger humanity. There are permanent things we have to find and recreate anew in each passing generation, and there are transient; window dressing that we need to let go of in order to stay connected to a deeper truth. This is the task of religion, this is why we gather and stay in discussion, and push each other to grow and stretch just a little farther each Sunday.

True Humanism, open to change and evolution, fits our Unitarian Universalist faith very well. Jurgen Habermas, a contemporary philosopher has said "modernity is an unfinished business" and UU minister David Schafer adds "reality is a moving target." We can't rest in what was comfortable even a generation ago.

Kay Korb says that Humanism's "role in our UU faith needs to be looked at again in a new light. Humanism in our movement, from its triumphant days in the 50's, went into eclipse to the degree that I have heard it said that its day is past... Perhaps it is true of our father's or grandfather's humanism... peopled by those who were always on the alert ... for the use of metaphorical, poetical, theological language... But my own judgment would be that close to 100 percent of Unitarian Universalists are humanists in the true meaning of the term, in the meaning that does not use spiritual as its opposite. The real opposite of humanism is not spirituality – it's not even theism (there have been many theistic humanists in its history) - but supernaturalism."

Korb goes on to say that the weaknesses of past humanism were its overly optimistic view of humanity and a "to reductionist idea of knowledge." With the advances in scientific knowledge it's harder to say for sure what we know is true – because some new discovery just around the corner may blow everything out of the water in the blink of an eye. She says "the findings of physics, while expanding our knowledge, have done away with hubris." (David Schafer, Katy Korb, kendyl Gibbons, 2007)

I wish that were true, but while Gibbons and Korb are celebrating a new manifestation of humanism within our communities I'm not sure we are there quite yet. There are still voices who feel threatened by the changing landscape of our congregations.

One of those is Michael Werner, who wrote a book titled *Regaining Balance: The Evolution of the UUA*. He claims that the leadership of the UUA is anti-Humanist because it favors a "radical tolerance" of divergent beliefs and perspectives - and he blames moving away from Humanist values for the loss of growth and vitality in our association. Werner writes: "The value of reason in religion has been discarded along with critical thinking, science, and progressive thought... and a narrow ideology has taken over the UUA."

I believe we are back to the problem of language. Back to the place where words mean different things to different people. Humanism – as a way of respecting what is real and true in each human person does not have to be devoid of passion or the beauty of poetry or metaphoric language. These deepen and enrich the human experience and can include critical thinking and progressive values even if not housed in clinical or scientific lectures.

I would argue that on Sunday morning, they are more important. What we feel when we gather is just as important as what we think.

The churches in our association that are growing and thriving are not our humanist strongholds. At least not humanist in the way Werner would name it. They are humanist in celebrating what is real and deep and awesome

about the human condition without labeling everything beyond current knowledge and facts – supernatural. Werner and folks like him are locked in an earlier version of Humanism which doesn't make space for the many facets of each and every human being.

In the book "Faithiest." Chris Stedman wrote that while he found rejection and scorn toward religious folks in the atheist circles he tried to join, he found curiosity and welcome from the faculty and students at Loyola – gasp – the Catholics!

He found places to have the conversations about the depth of being human and eventually found his way to a new and life affirming Humanism. A Humanism that seeks to understand instead of dismiss. That seeks to find connections instead of places of being right.

What I think Werner and his followers miss is that Humanism didn't decline because the UUA leadership was working against it. Humanism declined in our churches because it became rigid and judgmental, because it shut down conversations instead of opening up places of dialogue and deeper understanding.

And ministers understood this because of all the people with theistic or Christian leanings who came to them, on their way out the door, saying I don't have a home here anymore. In my short two years in Chattanooga it happened a number of times. Folks who had joined but felt a silent condemnation of their faith journey; who felt our promise to welcome all on a free search for truth and meaning was actually pretty hollow. You're free to join us – if you're here we know you aren't one of those silly people who believe in God.

I feel that silent pressure in writing my sermons. I feel very comfortable using metaphorical language and don't believe in anything supernatural – but I know if I use too much poetic or evocative language I will ruffle some feathers – and I end up underserving folks who appreciate the wonder, ambiguity and possibility of a natural life.

Michael Werner and his followers are right in saying that UU leaders and ministers have sought to open wider conversations and become more radically inclusive. We are attempting to live up to the promise of our principles. But expanding our language does not mean we are abandoning reason or becoming purveyors of the supernatural. It means that we recognize that there are many, many ways to be human. We open wide our tent and welcome everyone who understands the world differently - but still agrees to be part of a covenantal community of faith.

Instead of shutting down conversation with objections to language, we need to open up safe spaces to talk about our deepest understandings. It's not fair that the Episcopalians have all the fun & interesting lectures. Because they still use God language they are free to talk about what that language actually represents. If you've cut out the language, you've closed down the conversation.

There are deep questions at the heart of being human, questions that draw in and celebrate our humanity rather than closing off or making divisions. A Humanism which celebrates the varied ways each of us experience and understand our time on this small blue planet is a Humanism that I can embrace and fully declare: ich bin ein humanist.

Amen & blessed be.