

“Man Is the Measure of All Things” – Really?  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville  
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Two weeks ago tomorrow, I received a mildly panic-y email from someone at the university asking me and ten others to participate in a training program on the following Saturday. On Saturday, April 5, the university was conducting diversity training for its resident advisors, and Maria was trying to assemble a panel for a break-out session on religious diversity. As a result, a week ago yesterday, a middle-aged Muslim woman from Bangladesh, a recent UA graduate now on the staff of Fellowship Bible Church, and I were sitting in the front of room 513 in the Student Union, facing an overflow crowd of 37 undergraduates. Maria had given us an outline with ten topics to cover, but we agreed to accept questions as we went along, and thus in our fifty minutes we didn't get beyond topic number 2.

I should back up and set the stage for you. Our break-out session followed immediately upon a performance by African dancers and drummers. They were going way over their allotted time. We – the other panelists and I – could easily hear them from across the hall, and eventually I went into the auditorium to watch for a while. As it turned out, most of the dancers and drummers were from Houston, but their performance looked convincing to me.

Our room was right next door to a much more boisterous break-out session. Those sitting on the floor in the back could probably hear the next-door activity more easily than they could hear us.

But the hands in the air! It was question after question. And not easy ones either. “What is the purpose of life?” one young person asked. Perhaps we should all have a 20-second answer to that one ready, but I don't. I responded that I don't think there is a Purpose of Life, with a capital *P* and a capital *L*. I would be content with making babies happy, ending the oppression of the poor, and sharing Beethoven with others. But my colleagues on my left and my right pretty much agreed that the purpose of life is to glorify God.

Now, let's set aside our reservations about the nature of God or the existence of God and ask ourselves, as I asked them, “Is this really what God wants from us? Glorification?” I had been preparing for my Sunday morning Bible class, and I had a recollection of what the Old Testament Prophet Amos had said, speaking to the Israelites on behalf of God:

21 ¶ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. [Amos 5:21-24, NRSV]

My co-panelists didn't buy it, but I hope I reached some of the students. What is important – you can call it the purpose of life if you'd like – what is important is fostering justice and living a life of righteousness. God, if there is a God, cares about justice and righteousness. God doesn't care much about our worship. And God doesn't really care whether we think He exists or not.

The rigid Christian on my left and the traditional Muslim on my right would have agreed that the existence of God is an important question. The question I found interesting – another student asked it – was whether they believed in the same God. The Muslim and I agreed that all monotheists believe in the same God; the rigid Christian dissented. But that's not my issue this morning.

If we don't get our purpose, if we don't get our meaning from God, if God isn't the source of wisdom and morality, then where is our grounding, where is our authority, where is our measuring rod?

Let me pause here, and tell you where I'm headed this morning. This sermon is more or less a continuation of my March 16 sermon, "What Brings Atheists to Church – and Why They Stay." My focus today, as it was then, is on religious humanism. I'll first consider the slogan that provides my title this morning, "Man is the measure of all things." Then I'll move on to the head versus heart problem, considering humanism and evil, humanism and spirituality, and humanism and worship.

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Protagoras, the ancient Greek philosopher, reportedly once said, "Man is the measure of all things." If Kerry were here, she could tell you what he really said; the best I can do is the English translation. Now, forget, if you can, the sexism of the statement. Let's assume that he meant man and woman, or humanity generally. The quote is too famous for me to try to bring it up to date. If God is off his throne, have we – we humans – replaced him?

I have read that lugworms, barnacles and sand fleas become terminally constipated because of the tiny plastic particles in exfoliants that have found their way into the food chain. [see Janet Maslin, NY Times, 8/13/07, review of Weisman, *The World Without Us*] I was horrified and outraged when I read this – how can we treat these poor, innocent creatures so badly? I will assume that none of us favors terminal constipation for any of God's creatures, no matter how seemingly small and insignificant.

What I'm after here is whether "man is the measure of all things," or whether there are values, whether there are moral standards in the universe in the absence of humanity. Let's suppose – this is a thought experiment, it's not meant to alarm you – let's suppose that we humans are gone – extinct, permanently removed from the earth. Let's suppose, as well, that animals that we can imagine as having feelings – cats and dogs, gorillas and elephants, you can expand the list as far as you'd like – let's suppose that they're gone, too. And, for good

measure, let's suppose that creatures that have the evolutionary potential for taking our place within the next, say, ten million years, are also gone. Now, my question is, in that hypothetical situation, do terminally constipated lugworms matter?

My guess is that no one has ever asked that question before.

I hope there's no lugworm expert here, but my assumption is that lugworms are very primitive creatures – they don't have consciousness, they don't have feelings. Do terminally constipated lugworms matter?

We are tempted – or at least I am tempted – to say “Yes, they do matter.” They are part of the interdependent web of all existence. Lugworms count, lugworms matter. God's love extends even to lugworms, to speak more lyrically and metaphorically.

Here's the problem with that response. I think we're imagining a world not devoid of sentient creatures but a world with an observer. We're there, or someone is there, watching, and shedding a tear over the terrible plight of the lugworms. But that's adding something to my thought experiment. There is no observer. There is no observer. How can the lugworm's difficulty matter?

This leads to the conclusion that man *is* the measure of all things.

The lugworm problem is a variant on the Grand Canyon problem – if humanity were gone, would it matter if the Grand Canyon were destroyed? We want to say – or at least *I* want to say – that yes, it does matter. Even if there's no one to observe, no one to experience the Grand Canyon, it still matters. It should be preserved. Its destruction would be a bad thing. But, again, I think we're importing an observer onto the scene, someone who witnesses the demise of the Grand Canyon, and sheds a tear, indeed, sheds many tears.

Don't look to me for a definitive answer here. Perhaps this would make a good topic for our Chalice Circles sometime.

I'm sure this whole lugworm discussion is making some of you uncomfortable. *All* of nature is important, you would insist. Our world is interdependent. For all we know, the loss of lugworms could have a devastating effect. We don't have the time or patience for stupid thought experiments that have no practical value.

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What we're bumping up against is the head versus heart problem. Those of the humanist persuasion, those who emphasize reason are thought to be too much in their heads. They have the reputation, perhaps unfairly, that they ignore, or they're oblivious to, matters of the heart – compassion, beauty, mystery, love.

In reading the third version of the Humanist Manifesto, I was struck – actually, I was disturbed – by one statement that appears just to have been dropped in, as though its truth were obvious. “Humanists recognize nature as self-existing.” “Humanists recognize nature as self-existing.” What I think that means is that we don’t have to think about where the world came from – it’s just “self-existing” – end of discussion. This statement in fact was not just dropped in. It is an updated version of a statement in the original 1933 manifesto: “Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.” I think the original is more understandable.

As a practical matter, of course, they have a point. But I’m concerned that such a statement could be interpreted as unsupportive of scientific research on the earliest micro-seconds of the universe. Beyond that, the statement seems to be dismissive of what I would consider the greatest mystery of all – why there is something rather than nothing.

But if we set aside the strange statement about the self-existing nature of nature, it’s clear that humanists, since their initial effort in 1933, have come to recognize the heart side of humanity, as well as the head side.

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Consider the question, for example, of why bad things happen to good people. The 2003 Manifesto does not address this question explicitly, but it expresses concern for the well-being of all. It favors the end of brutality and the reduction of suffering. It would have us strive “toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty.”

For example, a six-year-old boy chases after his ball, which has rolled into the street. In his single-minded focus on the ball, he fails to notice the on-coming garbage truck. If this story comes too close to home for any of you, I apologize. The boy in my story, was me, and fortunately my father was there to shout at me to stop, and I lived to tell the story.

The question of why bad things happen to presumably good people is one of the overriding questions in the Bible, and I don’t think it’s handled very well. [see generally Bart Ehrman, *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Questions – Why We Suffer* (2008)]

One biblical theme is that you get what you deserve. The good are rewarded; the bad are punished. If you don’t think you deserve your punishment, you just haven’t looked at your own behavior critically enough.

This view was challenged by the Book of Job, as well it should have been. Job, you may recall, was a rich and successful man – and he was a man of the highest ethical standards. On a dare, God allows all kinds of dreadful things to happen to Job, to see how he’ll respond. Job maintains his innocence. He not only maintains his innocence, but he challenges God to explain Himself. “Why have you done this to me?” Job asks.

God never answers Job's question, implicitly taking the position that the welfare of humanity is not His – not God's – problem.

A third answer that the Bible provides is that suffering is a test of faith. When Abraham agrees to kill his son, as God directed him to do, Abraham has passed the test. [Genesis 22:1-19]

A fourth answer that you find in the Bible is that suffering is redemptive – God will bring something good out of what appears to be bad. Thus Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, but in the long run it worked out for the best, when Joseph attained a position of power in Egypt and was able to help his father and his brothers. [Genesis 37, 45]

The approach that Jesus frequently took was to fix the problem. Thus, again and again, he uses apparently supernatural powers to heal the sick or feed the hungry or even to revive the dead. He gets the job done, but he doesn't provide much guidance for us ordinary mortals.

What's missing from these biblical examples is compassion. We may not be able to solve someone's problem, but we can be with them in their suffering. We can hold their hand. We can listen to them.

Job's friends, at first, at least, got this right. "They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." [Job 2:13] But after that they tried to help Job by figuring out what Job had done that led to his punishment. They just knew that it had to be Job's own fault.

Atheists and humanists, as I understand them and as I've experienced them, can be just as compassionate as anyone else. Indeed, their rejection of supernatural explanations and remedies helps keep them grounded in the real problems of humanity.

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What about spirituality, then? Is the idea of humanist spirituality a contradiction, an oxymoron? Spirituality, as you may realize, is one of those topics I shy away from. I've never really understood what it might be, and it seems too close to New Ageism for me to be comfortable with it.

Our responsive reading this morning was adapted from Bill Murry's book *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century* (2007). Murry bravely tackles the subject of spirituality, from a humanist perspective. Murry explains that he uses 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." He understands spirituality "in a this-worldly, naturalistic, and nontheistic sense." (p. 108) Murry in fact offers a number of different definitions of spirituality, in the hope that we'll find at least one that will work for us, and on the assumption that all the definitions offered are mutually compatible.

Spirituality is–

- a quality of life in this world, a foundation and a center for our lives from which we can then live more meaningfully and minister more effectively to those around us
- that which brings us into full engagement with the world around us
- that which makes life vital and worth living, that which gives us something to live for, that which deepens and broadens our lives, that which makes us truly human
- a quality of life that so often evades us when we are absorbed with work and family
- that which makes our lives deeper, more meaningful, and more lasting
- that which inspires us to seek and find a deeper meaning and purpose in life
- that which enables us to forge deeper connections with others, with one's inner life, and with nature
- that which brings about a suspension of ordinary experience and a transcendence of the self
- the experience of love of the universe, love of life, and gratitude for one's time on this earth
- the soaring feeling, the sense of elation and humility combined, that occurs when we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life
- the eternal human longing to be connected to something larger than one's own ego
- the flip side of the social justice coin
- that which causes the material world to slip into insignificance, for a moment or two, and which causes the self to experience something of the depth of life [Murry, pp. 109-115]

I hope that at least one of Murry's definitions will work for you.

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I quoted the Prophet Amos earlier to the effect that God isn't much interested in worship, but what God really wants is justice and righteousness. Why, then, do we come here each Sunday morning for worship?

It seems to me that no matter how literal or traditional your God is, it's hard to imagine that observing human worship services would be at the top of God's Sunday morning to-do list. They must get boring after a few centuries. Worship, we must acknowledge, is for our own benefit, not God's. And as I understand worship and Unitarian Universalism, our theology, or our lack of theology, neither compels us to participate in worship, nor discourages us from participation.

Now, I envisioned God as an observer at worship services here on this planet, a reluctant observer, or a very occasional observer. But I would not characterize those of us in this sanctuary as *observers*. I see us, rather, as participants. Worship is something we do together. It is the primary way that we build our religious community and keep it glued together. It is the primary way that we integrate all ages into our religious community.

You don't come here on Sunday morning for entertainment – although if something strikes you as entertaining there's no harm in it. You don't come here on Sunday morning primarily for intellectual stimulation – although if you're intellectually stimulated along the way, so much the better. You come here to be part of a religious community, to help that community to flourish, to deepen your spiritual roots, and to strengthen your spiritual wings.

Actually, you probably feel that it's outrageous for *me* to suggest why *you* come to church on Sunday morning. *You're* the one who knows, after all. Still, if I can claim knowledge of what God does on Sunday morning – a God I've never seen and don't actually believe in – then it's easy to claim knowledge about people sitting right in front of me.