

Humanism, the fifth of UU's six sources of wisdom, is a newcomer to American society, although the ideas themselves have been around since the days of ancient [India](#) and [China](#), [and some ancient Greeks attempted to [explain the world in terms of human reason](#) rather than myth and tradition.] As a modern, formal philosophy, humanism in the West began only in the early 1800s. It took until 1930, for the Unitarian minister Charles Potter and his wife, Clara Potter, to publish *Humanism: A New Religion*. Potter was an advocate of such liberal causes as [women's rights](#), access to [birth control](#), "civil divorce laws", and an end to capital punishment. In that same year, Unitarian minister Ray Bragg became editor of the *New Humanist* magazine. Three years later, in 1933, Bragg then asked the Canadian Unitarian philosopher Ray Sellars to help create a document that became the first Humanist Manifesto. Not only was this document written by Unitarians, but fully *half* of the signers were Unitarian ministers.

I can't overstate the importance of this first manifesto to UU. It was the first religious document in the world to acknowledge that "Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs." It insisted that "Religions the world over [need to come to] to terms with new conditions created by...vastly increased knowledge and experience." And this document was earth-shaking in its first proposition: "Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created." Although science has since replaced the idea that the universe has always existed, declaring that God didn't create it was truly revolutionary.

The manifesto's second proposition was a more subtle but equally epic shift in a view of humanity. Prior to the manifesto, all Western religions viewed humans as divinely created and positioned at the pinnacle of the natural world, which gave them the right to transform it as they saw fit, provided they were good stewards. But the first manifesto stated, "Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process." UU's seventh principle hews closely to this new thinking: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The difference in power relationships with the rest of nature and therefore, how to interact with it, is striking.

The first manifesto fully embraced the world's growing reliance on science in its fifth declaration, which rejected the supernatural as the source of human values.: "[Humanism] insists that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method." Finally, the manifesto replaced traditional religion's goal of personal salvation with this proposition: "The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good."

We find echoes of those long-ago statements in UU's summary of its humanist influence: 'Humanist teachings...[counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science](#), and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit," that is, unreasoning, unexamined obedience to any set of ideas. We can also trace a direct line from this 84-year-old manifesto to UU's sixth principle: "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

When the Unitarian and Universalist churches merged in 1961, the new UUA found a natural outlet for its energies: the civil rights movement. The UUA was animated by the same spirit contained in the [eighth and thirteenth declarations](#) of the first Humanist Manifesto: “Religious Humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man’s life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now. This is the explanation of the humanist’s social passion...Religious humanism maintains that all associations and institutions exist for the fulfillment of human life.” Many in our own congregation took to heart humanism’s emphasis on this fulfillment, on our complete responsibility for everyone’s participation in society, to motivate their own involvement in the civil rights movement. These humanist ideals inspired two of our own — UU minister John Reeb and UU civil rights activist [Viola Liuzzo, to march —and give their lives — in Alabama](#) for the right of African Americans to be treated as full American citizens.

In 1973, however, UU and Humanism began to part company. In the 40 years since the first manifesto, Humanists had witnessed the horrors of World War II. They’d witnessed the terrifying technology that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki with single bombs. They had seen the evils of the Nazis, and following that, the ruthlessness of Joseph Stalin. They had seen the CIA topple democratically-elected governments on this side of the world and the other side and meddle in the elections of dozens of countries for the benefit of U.S. industry and U.S. political influence. They had seen brutal Soviet suppression of people in Eastern Europe. They had lived through the Vietnam War. They had read “Silent Spring,” the seminal book on how powerful corporations were poisoning our environment. And they saw that the Civil Rights movement’s momentum had stalled and its leader assassinated.

Equally important, Humanists had seen that major religions had failed to help an exploding number of people. Religion, for the most part, had resisted modernization. It had failed to move beyond promises of personal salvation and “false theologies of hope.” It had failed to work for justice, to help all members of their societies participate fully in them. Humanists were scared that the world was, because of religion, going backwards instead of forwards. So, in 1973, a committee of the American Humanist Association wrote an updated humanist manifesto. The tone of this document was more alarmed than the first manifesto, more broad in its goals, and more insistent in its language. Formally, UU draws on just a few vague statements from this document, but this version of the manifesto still overlaps UU’s principles in a few key areas:

- Both movements speak to the idea that “While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.” But the 1973 manifesto explicitly declared humanism to be non-theistic, while UU allows its members to decide for themselves whether they believe in a deity or supernatural guiding force.
- While both this manifesto and UU believe that “moral values derive their source from human experience,” the manifesto declares that “happiness and the creative realization of human needs and desires, individually and in shared enjoyment, are continuous themes of

humanism.” UU recognizes the right for people to participate fully in society, but it makes no explicit statements about the purposes of life.

- The 1973 manifesto reflects the world’s experience with totalitarian governments in the past 40 years, and makes a strong commitment to democratic government. The UUA drew on the same lesson from history when it established what is now our fifth principle: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.
- The 1973 manifesto prizes individuals’ right to make their own choices even more than the 1933 version, saying, “The preciousness and dignity of the individual person is a central humanist value... We believe in maximum individual autonomy consonant with social responsibility.” UU’s fourth principle, the right to conduct a responsible search for truth and meaning,” echoes this valuing of the individual but doesn’t go nearly as far as the humanist statement.
- Humanism’s value of individuals carried through to a proposition in the second manifesto to end most types of discrimination against people. Since this was the dawn of the movement for LGBTQIA rights, topics like marriage equality and employment equality weren’t specifically mentioned, but it’s fairly simple to connect the manifesto’s commitment to the UUA’s work in these areas. In fact, in the same year the second manifesto came out, the UUA established what is now the Office of [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Ministries](#). The UUA’s work on marriage equality, and its welcoming stance to all forms of sexual identity and orientation, however flawed in its execution, is a continuation of the Humanist tradition of insisting that every person has the right to live a full, authentic life.
- For the first time, in 1973, the humanist manifesto talks about sexuality. The position that the manifesto took on sexuality is completely compatible with what UU developed for its RE program on sexuality, Our Whole Life (OWL). The manifesto says, “We wish to cultivate the development of a responsible attitude toward sexuality, in which humans are not exploited as sexual objects, and in which intimacy, sensitivity, respect, and honesty in interpersonal relations are encouraged. While we do not approve of exploitive, denigrating forms of sexual expression, neither do we wish to prohibit, by law or social sanction, sexual behavior between consenting adults.” These are precisely the goals and the underlying attitudes of OWL.

The 1973 manifesto breaks away from UU more sharply when it talks about reason and science. The manifesto says, somewhat contradicting itself, that “Reason and intelligence are the most effective instruments that humankind possesses...critical intelligence, infused by a sense of human caring, is the best method that humanity has for resolving problems.” Yet the first source of UU wisdom is explicitly non-rational. Our first source of wisdom is “Direct

experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” (As an aside, case studies by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in the late 80’s and early 90’s uphold the idea that reason alone isn’t up to the task of problem solving.)

Between 1993 and 2003, Humanists realized that the second version of the manifesto was too negative, too shrill, and too broad to be the basis of a sustainable movement. So, in 2003, the American Humanist Association issued a [[much overhauled,]] much shorter, and much more positive [third version of its manifesto](#). As with the second version, UU acknowledges only a few fuzzy phrases as a contribution to our beliefs. These phrases are basically the same abstract ideas that the second manifesto contained.

But, it seems that Humanism has inched towards UU. The 2003 manifesto recognizes the value of non-rational experience in solving problems, so long as people subject their insights to critical thinking. The newest manifesto also borrows UU language directly, saying that humanism is “committed to *treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity*, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility.” And in the newest manifesto’s final section, it elaborates on a progressive ideal shared by UU’s: Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness. When we put our efforts towards a higher minimum wage, when we fight against voter suppression tactics, when we oppose employment discrimination laws based on sexual orientation, when we work to ban pesticides that make farm workers sick and die, the entire world benefits.

As humanism and UU teach, we have the power, as individuals, as groups, to push back against these dark forces. Download the “5 Calls” app. to your phone, and contact public officials. Ask Jerry McNerney to “adopt” Jeff Denham’s congressional district and hold an alternative town hall. Donate money to the Environmental Working Group, so that they can fight the EPA’s decision to allow the use of chlorpyrifos, a pesticide shown to be toxic to humans. Keep raising your own awareness of the assumptions that we have, because we grew up in a white-normal and hetero-normal culture and church. **Be** fierce as well as compassionate. **Be** a gentle warrior. Carry on the legacy that Humanism has gifted to UU.

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