

How my humanist beliefs guide me

By Jerry Reed, October, 2018

1. Briefly, just a bit about my background:

-- I'm 76 now, born about 3 months after the Pearl Harbor bombing and start of WWII.

-- I've lived nearly all my life in Washington and Oregon, and a few years in California & Massachusetts.

-- I've been here in Grants Pass since 1990, 28 years now

-- I grew up in a large family, the 5th of twelve kids. I know what it's like to sleep 2 or 3 to a bed, to do farm work, and to use an outhouse on a cold winter night.

-- My rearing was very religious, fundamentalist – in the Pentecostal Assembly of God.

-- I heard about the Unitarians in High School from a Unitarian girl I dated there and then another Unitarian girl I dated when I went to the University of Washington.

-- And, the UW is also where I met Wanda and married her when I was finishing my bachelor's degree in Psychology there. So, I convinced her that she should go with me to the Unitarian church in North Seattle. And when we went to Amherst, Massachusetts to pursue my PhD in psychology at the U of Massachusetts we found another Unitarian church there.

Skipping over the next 50 years, in the interest of time, here is where we are now.

I meet with the humanist group here twice a month on 1st and 3rd Saturdays to discuss what humanism is about, and a wide range of issues of interest to humanists, like critical thinking, logical fallacies, the ways our brains work and how they sometimes fail us, and topics related to critical social issues like climate change, overpopulation, wars, problems related to excessive inequality, inadequate public services, alternatives for better democracy, new scientific discoveries, strange and different religious practices, and more. (If there is time I'll say more about the humanists and freethinkers group later.)

2. So, what is humanism?

-- Humanism is a philosophical and ethical view that emphasizes the value and **agency** (or ability) of human beings, individually and collectively, to solve problems and create a better world. Humanists seek knowledge and understanding by using critical thinking and evidence rather than dogma, or superstition. It views us humans as **solely** responsible for advancing humanity in this world in our time. *Nothing and no one else, natural or supernatural, will save us from our problems or from ourselves.*

Humanist movements today are typically *non-religious* aligned with a *nontheistic* belief system centered around human agency and looking to science and evidence to understand the world, rather than someone's alleged *revelation* from a *supernatural* being. Humanists

generally embrace democracy, with an optimistic commitment to making progress in improving the human condition for all humanity.

Here are two definition statements from the American Humanist Association:

1st the short one: “Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good.”

Now, a longer one they print in each issue of *The Humanist* magazine: “Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values-be they religious, ethical, social, or political-have their source in human experience and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.”

A. C. Grayling, author of “*The Good Book: A Humanist Bible*” says, “humanist teaching starts with the Socratic injunction to think for oneself, to take responsibility for the choices one makes in life and how one chooses to live it.” In other words, we should be skeptical of statements that are incredible, and factually inconsistent.

I will try to explain my view of humanism regarding several key issues or aspects:

First, we humanists believe our human future is entirely, 100%, up to us to manage, including how we interact with our natural environment. No supernatural agent exists to help or to obstruct us. There are two sides to our ability to deal with this challenge and opportunity.

1st, we humans are clearly, amazingly gifted for solving problems, creating ingenious, wonderful solutions. Think about - medicine, scientific discovery, electronics, art, literature, music, etc.

2nd, we humans are also capable of very bad, dumb, ugly, mean spirited, disgusting behavior patterns. A few examples, - wars, freeways, overpopulation/extinction of species, gross inequality, pollution, racism, etc.

-- We humanists are committed to finding ways to move **all** humanity toward the positive outcomes rather than the latter. This is our challenge, our responsibility, and our opportunity. We believe we can do it – **in this life – in this world**.

2nd. Everyone tends strongly to believe what we see or hear with our own eyes and ears, but our brains mislead us all the time. Witness the dress illusion, circulated on the internet and TV a couple years ago, which was clearly either black and blue or gold and white depending

on who was looking at it. Wanda saw it one way, I always saw it the other way. Everyone who looked saw it one way or the other, consistently, regardless of how others saw it.

Recently, a similar illusion, but an auditory one, has gone around on TV and the internet which either sounds like “Laural” or “Yennie”, again depending on who you are. The thing is -- **Reality** is much richer than what is presented by our senses to our brains, so our brain makes its own interpretation. That’s what the brain does **all the time**. Similarly, psychologists discovered and have demonstrated that our memories are also highly flawed and they continually change throughout our lives. New information, including fantasies, biases and opinions are continually being experienced, and they are incorporated in ways that revise and distort old memories. Our brains are pretty good, but cannot be trusted – so what can we **rely** on, we want to know?

-- The **scientific method** incorporates tactics that compensate for brain distortions. These include good experimental design, confirmation by other observers, use of various control groups, such as placebo controls, replication of findings by other unbiased persons, etc.

Good science requires a commitment for all researchers to accept the conclusion that best agrees with all the results, i.e. the *balance of the evidence*, and to reject competing hypotheses – even when they are one’s own pet views. That’s the mark of a true scientist – which is a challenge to each of us, including to me, of course.

Reliable beliefs are consistent with the **balance of evidence** and they lead to better **scientific** knowledge that **works, solves** problems, and makes our lives better.

3rd. So, let’s talk about things that are **natural vs supernatural**. Humanism embraces a naturalistic and materialistic view of the world, that is, one in which all its parts are amenable to the scientific method. They are observable, measurable, confirmable by independent observers, etc. Many natural phenomena in the past were not readily confirmable in this way, such as magnetism and electricity, various rays, and microscopic ‘critturs’ before we invented microscopes. But, by using good theories, clever thinking and technology, people found ways to understand them, measure them, and even to see and use them. So, now we know they are part of our natural world, subject to natural laws.

Supernatural things, however, like gods and goddesses, elves, ghosts, angels, demons, fairies, and the Flying Spaghetti Monster are not confirmable. That’s why they are called **supernatural**. Consequently, by definition and in fact, there is no way to draw ANY conclusion whatsoever about them at any level of confidence, including whether they really exist or not.

-- One pretty good hypothesis about such beliefs is that they are evidence of the human tendency to attribute agency behind a natural phenomenon that we observe but don’t understand. When we erroneously assume such invisible agent, skeptics like Michael Shermer, refer to it as making an “*agency*” error. It’s another way our brains can trick us.

-- Now, about **agnosticism** and **atheism**: the first, agnosticism, is about what one can **know** and prove for sure, the second, atheism is about what one **believes** based on extensive evidence. If one cannot truly know for sure whether a supernatural god exists or not then one must be agnostic, so **we are all agnostics** about gods and goddesses. By the way,-- just an aside thought -- my biology sense kicks in whenever the god vs goddess argument starts. Is there any reason why a deity would have any kind of genitals? I know, I know, that's not for me to understand. But think about it. There are implications – and sex and genitals are for biology and evolution. How does that fit for deities?

-- Well, after all, what can we know for sure anyway? The philosopher, DesCartes, concluded, "Cogito, ergo sum" – I think, therefore I exist. But, I'm not so sure. I kinda think it would be more accurate to say, "I **think** I think, therefore I **think** I exist". And, then everything else beyond that is surely stuff we believe, based only on evidence, but we cannot know for sure.

-- **Atheism**, on the other hand, is about what one *believes* about the existence of gods or goddesses. And, what secular humanists and I believe, based on the balance of evidence, is that there are none, zip, zero, none at all. And that is the challenge facing us: since it's up to us to take care of ourselves, and it's also our liberation --- nothing but our natural reality is limiting us. Contrary to the myth of the Tower of Babel we can send rockets with humans in them to the moon or Mars and no god will do anything at all to us --- but natural elements may well be pretty harsh on us.

-- Humanity has dreamed up perhaps 100,000 and one gods, and most of us are atheistic about 100,000 of them --- secular humanists just go the one more.

4th. (And, this is one we can use every day) Knowing that we are flawed, and just a product of random natural evolution, shaped by selection processes, can be humbling, but it can also provide some relief and liberation for us:

-- The outmoded concepts of sin and shame, guilt and blame do not serve us well at all. **Forgiveness** is available and warranted. **We** can forgive ourselves and others. What a relief! The **source** of forgiveness is in **US** and in **others** around us, not from some super lord, either here on earth or in the afterlife. It comes from understanding our humble flawed evolutionary origin which has dealt each of us about as many flawed genes as anyone else got.

-- **Clinging** to our own harsh judgments and resentments of others for whatever reason is an exhausting **burden**, whether aimed at them or at ourselves. We can let go! We know we are not perfect, no one is, not even ourselves. And, if forgiveness relief is not immediate, we can give ourselves space and time away from the others to work on getting over it.

Having a long memory for perceived slights or insults from others is a **burden**, not a virtue to feel righteous about. (repeat)

-- Nowhere is it written that anything **must** be just thus and so, as we, might think it **must** be. Albert Ellis, the psychoanalyst and father of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) used to call that “**Musturbating**” when a troubled patient would use that kind of irrational argument. He also sometimes referred to it as “**Jehovian**” thinking – as if we are empowered to say what **must** be.

-- And, as we near end of life, we can relax, we are all forgiven in the end (the universalists were on the right track about that.)

5. In my closing comments, I want to run quickly through several other beliefs and values I hold with less elaboration about how they relate to humanism.

-- The **dualistic** belief that one’s **mind** is more than one’s **brain**, is rejected (that’s just more supernaturalism), which also means that we don’t have **free will**. Generally humanists agree about rejecting dualism, but they are more divided about whether we have free will or not. Those who favor keeping the free will concept are often the ones who emphasize human ability to strive for **higher levels of self-actualization**, such as Abraham Maslow and Felix Adler.

-- Those who reject free will, like Jerry Coyne, Sam Harris and me, are frequently more inclined to emphasize leniency and rehabilitative help to law offenders in the justice system. We favor **restorative**/rehabilitative justice rather than **retributive**/punitive “justice”. (And, we frankly detest the way the media panders to the public in referring to “justice” persistently in the sense of vindictive punishment. It’s a view that reinforces **mean spiritedness** generally in our society.)

Whatever your philosophy, the extent of mass incarceration and lengthy harsh sentences in the U.S. is an international disgrace, which is compounded with inadequate rehabilitative/ corrective treatment and too little assistance toward successful return to society when they are released.

-- Social researchers have shown that gross inequality has terrible anti-humanistic impacts on society (See the TED talk on the internet by Richard **Wilkinson** on “*How economic inequality harms societies*”). In it he provides a long list of unfavorable social impacts that are highly correlated with gross inequality, including crime of all kinds, poor health, shorter life expectancies, unhappiness, and a general lack of trust, to name just a few.

-- One excellent way to help reduce inequality and make our society more humane and humanistic would be to implement real **universal medicare** for all. Its time has come, since most of us know now that it would also save us all a lot of money. But it is going to take involvement of a lot of us, and our spare shekels, to help get it accomplished. I will be recruiting after the current mid-term election is over – don't even try to hide.

And, **Wars**, they are really dumb, aren't they? They are barbaric, stupid, massive wastes of money and people, with no real winners – in the modern era – except for a few merchants of death and destruction. Among the biggest victims – not heroes, victims – are the men and women who get sucked in to fight them.

When asked if I'm a veteran I have decided to respond, "Why, yes, I am! I am a veteran of a life-long struggle to end all wars!" My hope is just to try to get people to consider, what should we value anyway? It's time to find better ways, and to turn away from wars and threats of wars. Bullying other countries with more destructive weapons and bigger armies is not an acceptable substitute for patient, honest diplomacy.

I have just a little post script to my talk, something I want to get off my chest before I sit down, if you'll allow me: With all these beliefs I've expressed, of course, there are some words and terms used in our fellowship that don't fit well for me, like *God, faith, worship, pray, prayer, soul, spirituality and spirit* (unless we're talking about what's in a bottle from the liquor store), just to name a few. However, we UUs believe in **tolerance** for others' beliefs, and I **support** that. But, please don't call me a *non-believer*.

I **believe** in many things: the earth, the sun and stars, natural forces, evolution, the wonder of life, nature, the universe, our ability to determine when evidence outweighs erroneous beliefs, and our capacity to lay down our disgusting barbaric weapons and make the world a better place for all humanity and for all the creatures of nature, and I *believe* we have the **capacity** and **responsibility** to create a brighter, better future for generations to come all over this beautiful earth.

Thank you!