

What is humanism? Might you, in fact, *be* a humanist?



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During my years as a Christian minister I was privileged to work side by side with many religious people, including folks from most all Christian denominations. I was invited to give sermons in a variety of churches and always had warm welcomes.

My wife and I were close with Steve, an evangelical pastor, who overcame his initial concerns about interreligious activity to become a strong supporter of cooperative work. He celebrated when Carol and I were married, at a Zen Buddhist retreat, no less.

To everyone's shock and sadness, pastor Steve died the first morning of his retirement. We attended his memorial and offered our comfort to his widow. Such good people.

Steve and I had many differences of opinion when it came to faith, God and views of the supernatural. Thankfully we weren't distracted by these disputes and could simply enjoy being colleagues and friends. When I was the county shelter director, Steve was a leading advocate. His church enthusiastically contributed, opening its doors to "the stranger in our midst."

I shake my head thinking of those

who build high fences around their beliefs and spend their lives defending their orthodoxy ("correct opinions"). I used to spend lots of time defending my beliefs and trying to save souls before realizing that my soul — if I had one — probably needed more attention than fussing over others. Then, over time, I came to see that no one knows anything about "souls." Besides, who has time to worry about what that means anyway, with so much to be done?

Over the past month I've spoken with two humanist groups. In March I addressed the Ethical Humanists here in Asheville. My presentation centered on the wise, natural ethical musings of Henry David Thoreau. It was a lively discussion and I came away feeling that this kind of open exchange of ideas and questions is exactly what we need. In fact, if more religious congregations opened up to these explorations of ideas, maybe there would be a little more understanding between believers and nonbelievers.

There is Humanistic Buddhism and Humanistic Judaism and other "humanized" traditions. But what are the basic principles of humanism?

The American Humanist Association defines humanism as "a progressive lifestance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity."

Since there's no dogmatic creed, various humanist voices take different approaches to their understanding of humanist practice. One group defines it as, "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."

Another says, "this is the only life of which we have certain knowledge and we owe it to ourselves and others to make it the best life possible for ourselves and all with whom we share this fragile planet."

An international coalition presents this statement: "Humanism is a democratic and ethical lifestance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives."

Some merely summarize humanism as "Good without a God."

One remarkable thing about humanists is they have no interest in "converting" anyone to humanism. There are no evangelists because there is no "belief" to "believe in." People who identify as humanist or ethical people are interested in living ethical lives — practicing the good, right and just aspects of being human in human society.

Who could argue with that?

The second talk I gave last month was in Greenville, South Carolina. The humanist group there hosted me for

two hours of great conversation on what I called "Bible Belt and Secular Shoes." Another lively conversation on nature, science and life after faith.

This may sound like I want everyone to become humanists, but that's not my intent. Becoming more human and humane doesn't sound so bad though, does it? Those who feel threatened by "the secular humanists" might consider this.

Master Kung, whom we call "Confucius," once taught, "It is beautiful to make humaneness one's home. If you do not choose to dwell in humaneness, how can you attain knowledge?" (Sayings, chapter 4, verse 1).

Are we at home in our humanity?

Pastor Steve and I had another clergy friend who calls himself a "follower of Jesus." Like Steve, he was a good friend, easy to talk with — we would take refreshing walks together. I suspect that was possible because we were friends, worked with some of the same folks in the shelter and avoided the contentious nature of "god-talk games."

These two pastors and I got along so well because we were naturally humanistic people. Something to think about.

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