

“Two Types of Humanism”

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We're all human beings. We're born, we live, we die. This is the human predicament. This is where we find ourselves. How, then, do we live our lives?

This is the big question of humanism. Humanism says that there are no stone tablets that contain all the answers. There is no oracle to go to, to receive ultimate truth. We need to figure things out for ourselves. What a responsibility. Humanism is about taking on that responsibility.

Today, we're going to discuss 2 types of humanism, 2 ways that we might reasonably live our lives.

First, let's look at what these types of humanism have in common.

First of all, humanism says that we should live ethically. We shouldn't let custom or received morality dictate our behaviour. We need to consider: what is right behaviour. We won't always know how to live ethically, but we ought to try.

And how do we figure it out? We use our minds. This is a 2nd attribute of humanism: reason. Not cold logic, but reason tempered by human values. We listen to our conscience and intuition, we consider our feelings and beliefs, we test our beliefs with experience and experiments, we dialogue with each other. We engage in discernment.

A 3rd attribute of humanism is about how we govern ourselves. Humanism says that we should govern ourselves democratically. Not simply by majority rule, though, because majorities can make mistakes just like individuals can. So we make decisions democratically, while protecting individuals by valuing human rights.

A 4th attribute of humanism is that it combines freedom and responsibility. We all ought to be free, and we should use whatever freedom we have to help all be free, to help sustain and expand our freedom.

That's the framework of humanism: Live ethically, thoughtfully, and democratically, valuing both freedom and responsibility.

This brings us to the ultimate goal of humanism. The ultimate goal of humanism is to maximize fulfillment. Humanist Canada points out that fulfillment comes not just from living ethically and thoughtfully, but also from the arts, from creative living, from addressing the challenges of our time.

That leaves a lot of room for variety, and brings us to our topic for today: 2 types of humanism. 2 different ways of finding fulfillment. I got these types of humanism from the author Yuval Harari, but the descriptions are my own.

Our first type of humanism is liberal humanism. The emphasis here is on freedom. Freedom for you, freedom for your neighbour, freedom for the stranger, freedom for the oppressed. This is the traditional type of humanism that came to dominate early Unitarian culture. Perhaps you picture Henry David Thoreau, living alone beside Walden Pond. You can do what you want, where you want. Rev Don Stout, minister of the Mississauga congregation back in the 1950s (when it was called South Peel), had a vision "To be free in the sunlight with none to call him in or hush his song." That quote is on a plaque outside the Mississauga congregation, beside a maple tree. "To be free in the sunlight with none to call him in or hush his song." That's liberal humanism.

There is a part of us that needs to leave home and explore, that needs to blow in the wind and rise in the sea, that needs to turn up every rock and look beyond every horizon. In Carolyn McDade's phrase "Roots hold me close, wings set me free", liberal humanism puts the focus on wings setting each of us free. We have enormous capacity to be free spirits.

This can be fulfilling for awhile, perhaps breathing life into some adventurous living in your 20s, but we can also get homesick. Our second type of humanism is social humanism. The emphasis here is on relationship and commitment. We give up some of our freedom in order to share life, because this is where we find meaning. We know our neighbours. We go to birthday parties. We have songs that we all know and love.

Wendell Berry said, "A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives." Our commitments limit us, but in doing so they open up new opportunities for connection and meaningful living.

In the phrase "Roots hold me close, wings set me free", the emphasis in social humanism is on roots holding me close. We put down roots. As humanists, we should be free to choose; and social humanists choose to give up some freedom for relationship.

Liberal and social humanism. Freedom and relationship. Two ways to be human. Two ways to love and nurture the interdependent web. Two ways to be you. Both have a place in this community.

Let's take a moment to tune into our inner humanists (and if you're not humanist, I trust that you will find meaning in this in some way). Listen to that part of you that wants to blow in the wind and rise in the sea. Listen for that part of you that yearns to be free and deserves to be free. And breathe. And listen for that part of you that wants to connect, that wants to go where everybody knows your name, that part of you that wants to sing songs that have been sung for a thousand years.

And just breathe, and notice what flavours of humanism are within you.

I simplified when I said that there are 2 flavours of humanism. There are many flavours of humanism. There is a future-oriented humanism, focussed on growing the seeds of tomorrow. There is a naturalist humanism, connected to life and the interdependent web. There is a mystic humanism, that doesn't have answers but wants to connect with the mystery within and the mystery beyond. We find meaning as humans in many different ways.

These flavours of humanism feel like family to me. I love them all. They're all within me.

Sometimes they get along great. The social humanist is helping everyone to co-create deep community. Life is rich and meaningful. So much humanity. As I said: neighbours, birthday parties, singing songs that everyone knows.

The liberal humanist is keeping things fresh by challenging stale ideas and researching better ways.

The liberal humanist is working so that everyone is free. By learning best governance practices and ensuring that rules are fairly enforced, they aim for a free society. The social humanist has the depth of relationship to find out what each of us actually needs to feel free. The liberal humanist ensures that there is food for all. The social humanist knows your food sensitivities. Our humanists benefit from working together.

The liberal humanist encourages everyone to leave home and explore the world, to learn new recipes, new songs, new ways of being. The social humanist provides a home to come back to, and an ongoing choir that loves to learn new songs.

If liberal humanism comes to dominate, we have a problem: Everyone is going off into the world to explore, and there is no home to come back to. And what do these free spirits do out in the world? They discover the need for relationship.

I wonder how many people here joined hippy communes in their younger days, in order to live as free spirits. That over-the-top freedom didn't last long, as you discovered that a common culture is needed to work out things like, who is doing the dishes, and when are quiet hours. And the over-the-top freedom of hippy communes didn't lead to democracy, it led to being taken over by charismatic leaders. The 1960s and 1970s had a lot of experiments in how to navigate both freedom and community.

If social humanism comes to dominate, there is a different problem: When social ties bind too tightly, relationship is no longer a choice made freely; it is a requirement. If everyone is on Facebook, you need to be there, or you'll miss out. And community doesn't naturally blossom like a highly-choreographed contra dance; doing community is often more like trying to run a group 3-legged race, with people tied to each other but running off in all directions. People in the community need to be willing to shape themselves into the community. Social humanism depends on the free choice to cooperate.

On Canada Day, I prioritized social humanism, relationship. Here in Peterborough, longer known as Nogojiwanong, my partner and I went to a park downtown, to an event organized by two Anishinaabe women. We sat with people both indigenous and non-indigenous. We listened to the heartbeat of the drum. A man sang a healing chant. We brought attention and love. Together in that park, in a shimmering of orange t-shirts, we mourned the children killed by intention or negligence. We acknowledged the culturcide. We then marched down George St, again to the heartbeat of the drum. We felt the growing potential of the moment.

Most of the t-shirts and signs honoured the children. My inner social humanist said, I'm here. For what it's worth, I believe the stories, and hold the grief, and care for everyone involved. And that could have been enough. Honouring and grieving the children was more than enough.

But there was more to the event: Some of the placards called for land back, culture back. My inner liberal humanist said, this is about people being free to live their lives as they wish. It's enshrined in Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

My partner and I talked about what to do next. Some things seem straightforward: Continue to hold space for healing. Continue to celebrate the renewal of indigenous cultures.

And some things seem complicated: How much land to give back. How to overcome intergenerational trauma. We're going to become more familiar with the Calls to Action.

Dr. James Makokis, from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, is a doctor and educator on indigenous health and transgender health. When he came here to give a talk, he showed pictures of a fire ceremony that he created with friends. He talked about staying in relationship with his elders, learning as much as he could from them, so that their ways would be passed down. But he didn't like that women couldn't be fire keepers, so he ignored his elders' guidance about that. For Makokis, in his relationship with his elders, there is room for both relationship and discernment.

And it is similar for me. As I gain more and deeper relationships with indigenous people, I learn that there is a diversity of opinion about goals; a diversity of opinion about strategies and tactics. I need to use discernment about who to follow and who to partner with.

So on Canada Day, I went to the park to be lead in a healing ritual; and I also spent time at home learning pre-contact history and different ways of indigenous living. My social humanist showed up to mourn the loss of these children, and my liberal humanist honoured diverse ways of living. I made space for both relationship and liberation, because that's what the leaders asked for.

Our flavours of humanism need each other. When one goes too far, the others can swoop in to renew, or swoop around and circumvent. We need multiplicity. We need multiple centres, multiple perspectives, multiple strategies. As Carolyn McDade wrote in the song Spirit of Life, we need both roots and wings. Sometimes they'll complement each other, and we'll feel like a movement living in harmony. Sometimes our different outlooks will challenge each other, and

call for change. There is room for your gifts and your inner humanists. In difficult times, when my soul is weary and I don't see a way forward, what gives me hope is that humanity is resilient. There are many ways to be, and love will find a way.