

With no God, the humanist is left to search for spiritual sustenance in a way that often seems vaguely counterfeit, as if our yearning after spiritual fulfillment is only a faint copy of real spirituality, one open solely to those who have retained their faith in a God in which we no longer believe. The reality, though, is very far from actual circumstances.

Spirituality has had, at least for me, this vaguely Catholic, monastic air, a thing practiced to the sound of bells, the sight of candles and the smell of incense, something practiced on the knees before an absolute monarch of the supernatural realm, involving prayer and submission. This no longer works for me, but I had a difficult time imagining a humanist equivalent.

Reinforcing this Christiancentric sensibility among us, humanism in the press and in certain scholarships gets defined as anti- or post-Christian. Secular humanism. This last interests me. In the OED secular means first, a generation and last, human life or the world. In other words it does not mean over against the Christian church. In such

Christian marinated cultures as those of the United States and Europe this conflation of spirituality with the religious world seems the obvious, the easy characterization. Easy, yes. But accurate?

Think about it this way. If there were no monotheism, no polytheism, no reaching out beyond the natural world to a supernatural (anti-natural?) realm, then raising a Christian theology would be seen as anti-Humanist or, maybe, post-Humanist.

If you, like me, find the idea of a God out there, beyond us and our world, no longer viable, then we have to consider that there has not been a God out there right along. That means, further, that Christianity, Islam and Judaism, among many others, have never had their metaphysics right. In other words there was no God in Jerusalem, Mecca, Ephesus, Corinth or Rome.

In that case, humanism is counterpoised not to a deity, but to a story, rather stories, about deities; narratives that, like kudzu in the south, overgrew everything, changing their shapes and appearance until all that could be seen was a green, viny realm. Christendom.

These are narratives with a great deal of power, narratives that inspire devotion, sacrifice, even war, yet, for all that, narratives not substantially different from the very best fiction. The difficult part to keep in focus here is the difference between the narrative as fiction and the history of the narrative's power.

In other words, even though the Biblical material, from this perspective, has the same metaphysical punch as Hesiod and Ovid, compilations of Greek myth and legend, the historical actions of those who imbibed this narrative from their birth and acted on it in complete confidence of its veracity is nonetheless real, just as are the actions of Periclean Athens, Sparta and Corinth.

Ironically, these narratives themselves and their further expression in painting, sculpture, music and literature are the most obvious spiritual resources for humanists.

Before diving in to them though let's take moment to define our terms.

My old friend the OED has some light to shed. Spiritual.

Definition number 1: of, or pertaining to, affecting or concerning the spirit or higher moral qualities and number 4: of or pertaining to, consisting of, spirit, regarded in either a religious or intellectual aspect.

As you can see, the definition of the word spiritual has, not surprisingly, nested within it, the definition of the word spirit.

So. Our word spirit comes to us through the Latin, spiritus, which translated the two Biblical words: ruach, hebrew for breath and pneuma, Greek for breath. Spiritus, in Latin, carries these connotations: breath, breath of life, spirit, character. Definition number 1 for the english word spirit: the animating or vital principle in man and animals, that which gives life to the physical, the breath of life.

Ah. Now I began to see how we can construct our own spirituality. In a humanist sense spirituality reinforces, inspires, draws out our animating principle, especially in the sense of spirit as character derived from the Latin spiritus. Our spirituality then focuses on those things which encourage our best character, our best spirit, which make us more

human, those things which feed our best Self, which challenge or inspire us to know who we are and who we can be. Humanist spirituality seeks resources for vital living.

Understood in this light spiritual resources exist in amazing abundance, all we have to do is see them in the proper context.

The historical depth and reach of Christianity, for example, cannot be simply dismissed as fictitious, which so many flat earth deniers like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins suggest. It contains instead, in all its dynamism, the true force of myth and legend. A story like the passion of Jesus, because it includes compassion, sacrifice, redemption and the defeat of death, resonates energetically with day-to-day life, in particular the daily life of those on the wrong side of history.

We do not have to give up the mythic power of the Christian story as humanists. No, we can reach into the Biblical material and read these narratives with the same keen eye and open heart that Christians do. We don't have to buy the reality of Olympus to be inspired by the story of

Hercules, saddened by the story of Orpheus and enriched in our understanding of fall and spring through the story of Persephone.

Likewise, the message of, say, the gospel of Luke in chapter 4:18-19,

1 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me
8 to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty
those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

stands as a meme of Western culture at its very best, a value about our common life perhaps best summed up the liberal Senator from Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey when he said¹,

¹ When the United States Senate dedicated a building to former U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey he remarked:
"...the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the needy and the handicapped. "

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Here's another, more subtle example. This time from the Hebrew scriptures.

Last Speech of Hubert H. Humphrey
November 1, 1977
Washington, D.C.

Do you remember the story of Abraham and Isaac?² In case you don't recall Abraham was a wandering polytheist, a man of the Chaldees, an area that spanned the contemporary countries of Iraq, Iran, Israel, Lebanon and even parts of Saudi Arabia. He left his native polytheism behind and became the first man to follow Yahweh, for his

1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." 6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. 9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 12 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." 13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

faith God made a sacred with him and promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

God's demand that the centenarian Abraham sacrifice Isaac, his only son by his 90 year old wife Sarah, amounted to sacrificing not only Isaac, but the covenant. God placed an enormous burden on this new follower.

Abraham and Isaac accompanied by a servant depart for a three day journey to Mt. Moriah. When they arrive, Abraham says to his servant, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Soren Kierkegaard, a Christian existentialist, considered this the essential story of existentialist faith, an instance of faith in spite of soul

rending doubt, an instance of such faith richly rewarded with the producing of a ram for sacrifice instead of Isaac.

Christians and some Jews tend to look on the story as a test, perhaps the ultimate test, of faith, much as Kierkegaard saw it. In this version the man considered a founding patriarch by Judaism, Christianity and Islam, trusted God completely.

If the same God who had promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky wanted his only son as a sacrifice, well, that just meant the ways of God were not the ways of man. In this perspective Abraham is a hero of the faith, a resolute follower, even to the death of his own dream.

I would put the story in a different light as a resource for humanist spirituality. Abraham is a parent, a parent asked to sacrifice his son for a mysterious reason, a reason given to him by a power he considers greater than himself and therefore a power with wisdom beyond his own.

Do we face such choices in our own lives? I believe we do.

Is this not the same choice parents face when the State asks for their son or daughter, for say, the military. The sacrifice of a child to the purposes of the State relies on the notion that government has a broader and better understanding of the threats facing our nation.

How many parents follow Abraham in their assumption, on faith, that the State knows best? That somehow service in the military will work out for a greater good in a way not apparent at the moment.

Many parents willingly follow an Abrahamic path and deliver their children to the State. Only in this case there is no ram at the end of the journey. Too often Isaac's head lies on the altar and feels the knife cut into the soft flesh of his neck.

The story of Isaac and Abraham cautions us to step back from the terrible choice, that choice parents face with their children and the military, to step back and see it for what it is, an unreasonable, possibly even immoral choice for either God or the State to put in front of us. We can learn from this story to question the need for sacrifice, not to follow the State blindly to the altar.

Does this mean no children will ever go to the military? No. My own has. Jeff Walker has. But these children went into the military understanding the role it plays in our State and made the choice for themselves. The Isaacs of the world are led to their deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan by States who promise the sacrifice is needed while never intending to offer a ram at the altar.

The deeper resource for our spirituality lies in understanding the role of choice when confronted with authority that demands ultimate sacrifice. You might think here of the death penalty, too. Just because God or the State or the courts say so does not make it right, true or necessary.

This places on each of us the daunting responsibility to challenge authority when its demands would have us act against our own deeply held values. Think here too of end of life care and the often occurring attempt to prolong life unnecessarily.

Other resources for humanist spirituality come from classical literature.

Dante's story of a man lost at the mid-point of his life in the dark wood of error can be read, too, not only as a Christian tract on damnation and salvation, but as a story of unrequited love, the inner searching required of the Self to reach the realms of the blessed, the place of unconditional love. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains cautionary tales about hubris, think of the story of Narcissus, of the dangers of religious zealotry, Pentheus, the perils of innocent lust, Diana and Actaeon.

Museums throughout the Western world have interpretations of all these stories by some of the greatest painters and sculptors in our tradition. Poets have elaborated them. Symphonies and opera and theatre put them on the stage.

If the fine arts are not for you, or, better, not always for you, then we have to consider what else may inspire you, breath the life into you. It is no accident surely that the next three presentations here at Groveland feature sacred symbols and objects in your daily life, our

relationship with our fellow animals and a focus on how the body is a “portal of the (Divine) spirit.”

These matters are central to our lives as human beings. There is even some evidence that we have a genetic³ predisposition toward mystical experience and plenty of evidence that the search for a religious answer to the many puzzles of this life is a rare universal among human cultures.

Instead of DaVinci, Van Gogh and Haydn on any given day, you might prefer the embodied spirituality of gardening, or a quiet moment

3

According to this hypothesis, the God gene ([VMAT2](#)) is a physiological arrangement that produces the sensations associated, by some, with [mystic](#) experiences, including the [presence of God](#) or others, or more specifically [spirituality](#) as a state of mind (i.e. it does not encode or cause [belief](#) in [God](#) itself in spite of the "God gene" moniker).

Based on research by psychologist Robert Cloninger, this tendency toward spirituality is quantified by the self-transcendence scale, which is composed of three sub-sets: "self-forgetfulness" (as in the tendency to become totally absorbed in some activity, such as reading); "transpersonal identification" (a feeling of connectedness to a larger universe); and "mysticism" (an openness to believe things not literally provable, such as [ESP](#)). Cloninger suggests that taken together, these measurements are a reasonable way to [quantify](#) (make measurable) how [spiritual](#) someone is feeling.

with a lake, a sunset or a sunrise. Exercise or a spa treatment might open you to the wonder that is your body/mind. Sex can do the same. You might find your Self expanded or enriched by volunteer work of many kinds, by spending time with family, by making things for others like quilts or jams or dresses or bird houses or websites.

It may be a vacation, a slowdown, a rest from the noisiness of everyday life that nurtures you. Perhaps meditation, or a short retreat.

This is specifically not about stress reduction or healthy living. As fine and useful as those things may be, they are not necessarily resources for your spirit, your character, your uniqueness.

In a humanist sense spirituality reinforces, inspires, draws out our animating principle, especially in the sense of the Latin spiritus, spirit as character. Our spirituality then focuses on those things which encourage our best character, our best spirit, which make us more human, those things which feed our best Self, which challenge or inspire us to know who we are and who we can be.

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." - Howard Thurman
Howard Thurman, a key influence on Martin Luther King, gives us a concise expression of a humanist spirituality.

A humanist spirituality helps you come alive. And stay alive.