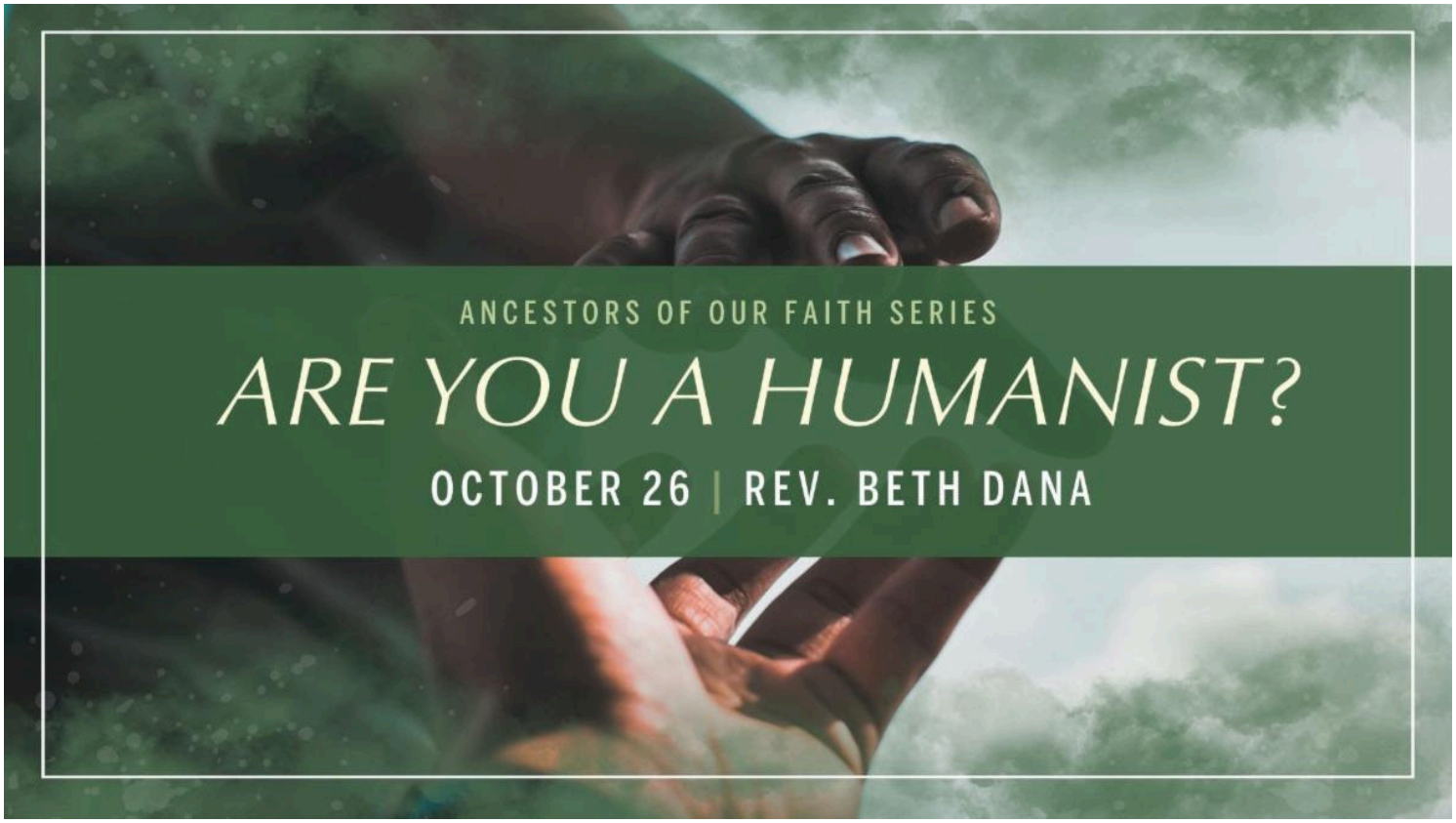

As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, I grew up in a Unitarian society. Note: a congregation that called itself a society, not a church. Very clear, not a church. This congregation was decidedly humanist.

This congregation was allergic to much of the language and trappings of church. And as was the approach of children's religious education at the time, I learned about all sorts of other religious traditions and some about my Unitarian Universalist forebears and their inspiring work for justice, and was given the freedom to figure out my own path.

While I remained deeply connected to and found great meaning in Unitarian Universalist communities throughout my youth and young adulthood, and the values it instilled in me have guided my life in profound ways, I did not have a clear idea of what Unitarian Universalism actually was or what I believed. It honestly wasn't until seminary that the picture came into focus.

I found a language with which to speak about my experiences of life and faith, which allowed me to understand and articulate more powerfully who I was and what was most important to me. It is now my mission as your Minister of Faith development to support each of you in developing this understanding at an earlier stage of your engagement with Unitarian Universalism than I did. It took me over 25 years, but after 25 plus years, I realized I am a Unitarian Universalist who believes in God, who is not afraid of churchy things and religious language, and I remain at my core a humanist, just as my childhood church raised me to be. I'm a humanist and I believe that if you are here at a Unitarian Universalist church, that you are too.

Unitarian Universalism is a tapestry of faith woven with the threads of many theologies and worldviews, textured and diverse. This month we have been exploring ancestors of our faith in worship. We've heard about the early non-Trinitarians and heretics who dared to make a choice and stand against the dominant religious views. We've heard about the radical transcendentalists, who urged us to distinguish between what is transient in religion and what is permanent, and to let the permanent, love of neighbor and love of God, guide our actions. We've heard about the origins of civil disobedience with one of our own Henry David Thoreau and how those ideas shaped history through people like Gandhi and King.

Today we learn from and reflect on our connection to our humanist ancestors of faith, those who have insisted on the dignity of human beings, the power of human agency, the importance of critical reason, and the necessity of our contributions to the betterment of humanity and society. In this time, when human dignity and agency are threatened, and so many in power are pressuring us to submit uncritically to false gods, it behooves us to reconnect with our humanist threads, and to ask ourselves what these ancestors are calling us to do and be today.

Humanist ideas go back to ancient times. They took the form of intellectual and cultural movements during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and developed both secular and religious expressions. Humanist ideas have been present in our faith tradition for a long time, but became a more powerful influence in the early 20th century.

In 1933, the Humanist Manifesto was published and signed by 34 philosophers and ministers, mostly Unitarians, with the goal of providing direction and structure for a modern humanist movement. They wished to introduce a new kind of religion in which the emphasis shifted from a supernatural deity to humanity, from heaven to earth, and from piety to social responsibility. Among its tenets were the natural universe is all there is, and human beings are a part of nature. Human beings have intrinsic value, and the goal of life is to realize our human potential in the here and now. Social justice makes it possible for all to reach their potential.

Nothing human is alien to the religious. In other words, there's no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Religion is a dimension of all of life. Human reason is the foundation of morality and meaning, and we alone are responsible for the realization of the world of our dreams, and we have the power to bring it into being.

As the horrors of World War II unfolded, and new movements such as feminism and postmodernism transformed ways of thinking, the weaknesses of this kind of humanism were revealed. It was highly individualistic, not accounting for the role of community or congregation. It was overly optimistic, paying no attention to the harsh realities of life or the extent and depth of evil in the world. It elevated the mind over the heart and body reason over feeling. It lacked a sense of history, saying that the unknown is simply that which science hasn't yet figured out. And its proponents were often dogmatic and intolerant of differing viewpoints, especially of those who believed in a God.

All of this is why in some circles, humanism became a bad word. "Oh, those crusty old humanists," People would say, "They're so out of touch with the realities of our lives and our world. They're stuck in their heads and they're unyielding and intolerant."

When I say I am a humanist, and I'm pretty sure you are too, this is not the kind of humanism that I'm talking about. I'm talking about a humanism that celebrates life, a humanism that has evolved over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, influenced by things such as black liberation theology and feminism and world events and religious naturalism.

In an effort to respond to the changing times. A second Humanist Manifesto was published in 1973 and a third in 2003. The third Humanist Manifesto begins with the premise that our bodies and minds are the ways that we engage this world and our existence. Acknowledging that we are social creatures, it claims that no person can live a good life at the expense of another or even while knowing another's misery. None of us is free and fulfilled unless all of us are free and fulfilled.

It affirms that this life matters and that we must create meaning here and now. Do you hear the difference between this and the 1933 Humanist Manifesto? Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have been an integral part of the development of all three Humanist Manifestos because our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all the authority of our own life experience, our commitment to justice and equity for all, and our agnosticism about what comes after this life align quite closely with humanist views.

Now I want to clear up a couple of common misunderstandings about humanism. These are misunderstandings that I myself held having grown up in a humanist Unitarian Universalist community. The first is that while some may use the terms atheist and agnostic interchangeably with humanism, they are not synonymous. One can deny the existence of God or be unsure about God's existence and still not embrace any of the ideas of humanism. Likewise, one can believe fervently in the existence of a God while also being deeply committed to humanism.

Many will also conflate skepticism and humanism. While humanists, both secular and religious do bring a skeptical mind to the quest for truth and are guided by the insights of science, none of this precludes the experience of wonder. As scholar William McNeil Dixon wrote, "If, there Be a Skeptical Star. I was born under it. Yet I have lived all my days in complete astonishment."

The experience of astonishment, of awe, of reverence, is a human experience that knows no theological bounds. Quite the opposite, it brings us together across such divides. The experience of reverence is a reminder of our connectedness, and it can be a shared experience like in our reading. I know what you mean. I've had that feeling too.

I had a conversation recently with a church member about things that are keeping them grounded in the midst of the chaos of the world and of life, and they talked about going to a body of water in their case, Lake Louisville. Maybe for you it's White rock lake or the Trinity River or the ocean or whatever big beautiful body of water is nearest to your home. Being there at the water's edge is a way that

many people find calm or escape or even wonder. Do you know what I mean? Have you had that feeling too?

This week, my daughter was learning about planets in her second grade science class she said to me on the car ride one morning with a tone of awe in her voice, "The sun is a star, a huge star, Mama." I said, "I know honey. Isn't it amazing? It's so big." And then I go on thinking, isn't it amazing that there are 100 billion galaxies in the universe, each with about 100 billion stars? As Carl Sagan reminded us, that's more than all the grains of sand on every beach in the world. Isn't it amazing that our bodies consist of 10 trillion cells and our brains alone contain about a hundred billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses? That's more neurons in a single brain than stars in the Milky Way.

As Kendall Gibbons, the author of the second reading says, somewhere this planet has a showstopper for you that takes your breath away and makes you tug on other people's sleeves to make them see what you see. Some people call this showstopper a God moment. For others, it's an experience of reverence for the majesty of nature or for the power of human life. Whatever you call it, it's a spiritual experience. It is a humanist spiritual experience, not requiring a supernatural deity, but sparked instead by reverence for nature of which humanity is a part.

Today, humanism is taking on such beautiful inclusive forms. One example is Cole Arthur Riley, a Black woman who lives with chronic illness who in her book, This Here Flesh, writes about embodied spirituality and her reverence of humanity, framing awe as a force of liberation, while drawing on Christian stories and her belief in God, as well as her lived experience and the historical injustices that live in Black bodies. She presents a deeply humanist worldview.

In This Here Flesh, Cole Arthur Riley says, "Wonder includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own. It allows us to jettison the dangerous belief that things worthy of wonder can only be located in nature hikes and scenic overlooks. This can distract us from the beauty flowing through us daily. For every second, that our organs and bones sustain us is a miracle. When those bones heal, when our wounds scab over, this is our call to marvel at our bodies, their regeneration, their stability or frailty. This grows our sense of dignity to be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop, the sunlight refracting. This manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other. Wonder requires a person not to forget themselves, but to feel themselves so acutely that their connectedness to every created thing comes into focus. In sacred awe, we are a part of the story."

To this. I say, yes, we are a part of the story. And that's what I believe our humanist ancestors of faith would want us to remember. Humanity is responsible for the state of the world. We can't blame it on God, but if you believe in a God, then God, that God, will be with you as you strive for the betterment of yourself and others in the world. And you know who else will be with you? All of us.

Our humanist ancestors of faith, would want us to remember that we cannot leave the future of humanity and our world or our dreams of how things could be to someone else, whether that's someone else is a supernatural being or the elusive human, somebody else. Inspired by experiences

of awe, wonder and reverence for the power of nature to create and to destroy, and for humanity's dignity and agency, we must find our place in the larger story and take responsibility for what we can do now,

Lest I sound overly optimistic, like our earlier humanist ancestors, to be sure there are immense obstacles in our way right now to making this kind of progress. We, humanity must find the will and the courage to do hard things, to say yes, sometimes to say no. To set aside our self-righteousness and to do things that may be against our self-interest, but for the good of the whole. As Cole Arthur Riley says, "To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop. This manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other."

I think about this when I look at faces in the news. Faces of elected leaders, faces of those in war zones, faces of passionate protesters, and of the law enforcement officers surrounding them. Faces of young people, and of old, of those hungry for food, for freedom, for dignity. What would it be to experience awe in each of those encounters?

People ask me all the time these days, "What keeps me going and what gives me hope?" And first I say inertia. It's true even if it's not always healthy. And I also say, this church, these people, you. I am in of you. And that experience keeps me from destructive tendencies, but also helps me to face the literal destruction that is plaguing our world right now. Knowing that not everything is doom and gloom and destruction. There is awe-inspiring love and creativity at work too.

And this weekly ritual of coming together, for worship and community, is an opportunity to remember, affirm and celebrate these experiences of awe, wonder, and reverence, wherever we find them. Do you know what I mean? Have you brought those feelings here too? And if not, let others share their experiences with you.

My hope and my prayer for us all is that these experiences inspire us to connect more deeply, to give more generously of ourselves, to love more abundantly. To reach our human potential for goodness that our humanist ancestors and the humanist Unitarian community of my childhood believed to be possible. It's not a path of progress onward and upward forever, as some have said. But it's one of ups and downs, turning and returning to our home. May it ever be so and may we be a part of this story. Amen.