

Acceptance of other views a worthy goal

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Acceptance of one another is an easy phrase to embrace, at least in our minds, if not in our daily practices. When we feel other people are like us, it is easy to accept them. Conversely, acceptance is more difficult when others do not share our values, our likes, or dislikes. Ethical people try hard to be broad-minded about the preferences of others. Generally, we respect the religious choices, political views, occupational paths, and sexual orientations of those who differ from us. On an intellectual level, we try hard to be pluralistic without abandoning our own moral values.

As a secular person who holds humanist views, I suppose to some religious acquaintances, humanism and ethical principles may seem to be polar opposites. It is true that often humanists feel a little uncomfortable about the term spiritual. This may be because we think it can be overused and expanded in its meaning and hence lose clarity.

The challenge for humanists is not to eliminate spirituality, but instead to embrace meaningful concepts that draw us closer to understanding how religious believers think. So what does spiritual mean to most humanists? As synonyms, I choose words like awe, wonder, fulfillment, at-oneness, inner peace, enrichment, or acceptance of one another.

Spirituality for me is about connections with people, with animals, and nature. Perhaps I may be judging the spirituality of my religious friends a little too quickly or I may sometimes confuse what I think they believe with my own earlier main-line Protestant Christian beliefs.

One of the mistaken perceptions of some of my religious friends is their belief that humanists lack emotional feelings of joy, compassion, humour, awe, and wonder. For them, spiritual experiences are expressed in traditional religious terms, as though spirituality and religion are inseparable. Their view may be that if you are not a believer in God you cannot experience emotions of awe and wonder or caring. Although this reasoning is fallacious, it is a matter of concern for humanists. It can

become a barrier between humanists and non-humanists in understanding each other.

When humanists use the term “wonder,” they are referring to the natural world, which offers experiences of awe as well as excitement and joy in the present. Humanists have a vision of how a peaceful and environmentally healthy world might function, and they hope that people will make use of good sense, good values, and their ability to be rational in order to make positive things happen in this present world.

Sometimes religious friends ask me how I can be hopeful about my fellow human beings when there is so much around us that is not right. To be sure, it is easy to find examples of poverty, pollution, disease, war, hunger, and crime. But these unfortunate conditions have come about over the years, not by accident, but by poor decisions made by humans. If such problems are ever to be solved it will be through humans applying our best efforts. We need to have confidence that human beings are capable of recognizing and implementing solutions.

The question of spirituality, for both humanists and non-humanists alike, remains. I am convinced I share the joys and concerns of the world as readily as my more traditionally religious friends. I feel as passionately and deeply emotional about improving this world. I share with humanists and non-humanists, joy at the birth of a baby, happiness at the sound of children playing, satisfaction in helping those in need, and gratefulness in receiving an unexpected offer of help from a stranger. I shed tears at the bedside of a dying friend. I marvel at the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a beautiful butterfly. I feel the satisfaction of a job well done. I am thrilled by the music of Mozart, the nature paintings of Robert Bateman, the beauty of the Taj Mahal, and I am delighted by the songs of the goldfinches at our bird feeder. I am emotionally enriched by the gift of human love. I am optimistic when I hear political leaders talk of peace rather than war. A scientific discovery promising a cure for a medical problem or a new way of looking at the world gives me a spiritual lift.

As a humanist I do not often use the term “spiritual” to describe these feelings because the word seems to carry many meanings with it. For example, my enthusiastically religious friends often attribute the wonders I have mentioned to a God dwelling beyond nature. I sometimes question whether their belief in the ever present power of the supernatural may

encourage them to hand over the task of improving our world to this powerful entity.

Humanists share the emotions of joy and wonder with other humans, both religious and non-religious. We share these emotions, not because they flow from heaven, but because they are part of being fully human.