The Magic of Humanism
For those who are interested in learning about Humanism, this short book is a place to start. For Humanists who want to explain their worldview to their friends, we hope this free resource will be of use. We also hope this book will serve as an inspiration for Humanists who wish to think more deeply about their life stance—a set of meditative readings, perhaps.

What is Humanism? In some ways Humanism is like a religion. It is a comprehensive way of life which orients us and helps us make decisions. It is based on principles—here represented as six ideals—which embody our highest goals and our deepest beliefs.

In other ways, Humanism is unlike almost all religions. Humanists focus on this life, and do not look to the supernatural, either to gods or an afterlife, as a basis for meaning or to offer us guidance. Our worldview accepts that human life is limited and finite, and that we must make the most of this, the one life we have.

This is the core of Humanism: the conviction that our only life is this life, our only world is this world, our only hope is each other, and this is enough.
We seek truth. We desire to know what is true and discard what is false, to winnow the wheat from the chaff. Everyone desires this. Even those who lie are unwilling to admit it: few are those who proudly call themselves a liar. Human beings have an innate desire to know, to learn, to grow in understanding—the search for truth is part of who we are.

Humanists follow the truth wherever it leads. We discard dogma and are skeptical of certainty, embracing the provisional nature of all that we now believe. We appreciate that, as our understanding grows, we will need to revise our beliefs, even to the point of abandoning cherished convictions.

We take no scripture or teacher to be an ultimate authority: all exists to be interrogated, revised and, if necessary, replaced. We know this to be a form of progress—we want to discover where we are wrong, so we can become more right.

We are not extreme relativists, though. We believe in truth. It is precisely because Humanists believe in truth that we pursue it so voraciously. We understand that reality does not bend to our whim, and that to make our way through life we must first understand our predicament. Our commitment to truth is pragmatic, and we map the terrain to chart a path through. How do we map it? Rejecting revelation and received wisdom, we harness the power of the human intellect, individually and collectively. We seek out evidence, employ reason, discuss with others, and draw our own conclusions. Thus science—the distillation of humanity’s best truth-seeking practices—is of special importance to Humanists as we seek the truth, together.
We are part of nature, an animal among other animals, related to all life on earth. Our pursuit of truth reveals we evolved from other organisms, millennia of tiny changes shaping the simplest lifeforms into the abundance we see around us. We are a part of the cosmos: the same tiny fragments which make us up are the building blocks of every piece of matter in the universe. Everything, from a neutron star to a neuron in our brain is made of the same matter, everything that is a thing shaped from the same stuff.

In this sense, we are not special. We were not created for any particular purpose, and there is no plan which guides our lives. The universe cares not for us, leads not to a given end. Humans are not exalted above other animals, or even above trees, stones, or atoms. We are an accidental by-product of physical forces, not created, but evolved by chance. We are born, age, and die like all other animals, and have no evidence that another life follows this one. We are part of nature, nothing more.

This does not mean that human life is meaningless. There is no Cosmic Meaning, but we can make human meaning. We generate meaning and caring in relationship with others. By matching our gifts with others’ needs; by developing deep relationships; by working to improve our world; by cherishing nature and non-human life; by seeking to broaden our understanding—in all these ways and more we make meaning. We know our lives will one day end, and see that as a spur to make a difference while we can. Our limited, finite, natural existence is, for Humanists, not a reason for despair, but the source of all caring and meaning in our lives.
We are both unique individuals and members of the human species, part of a global community, similar to all other humans. We have our own experiences, physical bodies, fears, and dreams. Our unique identity is shaped by our country of upbringing, our ethnic background, our race, the languages we speak, our sexuality and gender. None of us can truly understand what it means to be another—there will always be distance between us.

Yet we seek to bridge that distance. Human beings thrive in community. We reach out to each other in countless ways, through speech and song, writing and ritual, touch and travel. We come together as families, tribes, cities, and nations. Like hives of bees and prides of lions, we were born to be in community. Within us, we yearn to connect. Luckily, although we are all unique, as members of the same species we share a huge amount in common. Our uniqueness doesn’t prevent us from making common cause with others, or working for the common good.

Humanists appreciate our need for each other and recognize that it is only through community that we can live our best lives. We see in our shared humanity a basis for solidarity, a bedrock of shared experiences and concerns which enables us to communicate and cooperate. On this common ground all humans stand together, and we can connect despite our differences. The communities we create fulfill our need for connection, help us appreciate the diversity within humanity, and enable us to build a better world. While honoring human uniqueness, Humanists seek to engender fellow-feeling between all people, and ultimately create one community of humankind.
We yearn to be more than we are—stronger, smarter, kinder, better. We have within us a drive to learn and grow. When we are born, we need to grow both physically and mentally just to survive. Growth is a necessity. As we age, our instinct to grow broadens. We are curious, seeking after knowledge; competitive, seeking to be our best. We delight in new experiences and strive to learn new skills. Growth is part of who we are.

Growth is also a Humanist commitment. Humanists are committed to personal growth, and to the creation of a society in which all can pursue their own growth how they wish. We look to the arts, culture, and science to tune our senses, expand our empathy, and grow in understanding of the world. We champion teachers and mentors who bring out the best in us, helping us go further than we can go alone.

The Humanist commitment to growth is not an obsession with progress in all areas without limit, but a realization that we each have unique capacities we wish to develop, and that our dignity is bound up in our opportunity to develop those capacities. We want to grow—to become more fully human—for our own sake and the sake of our community, because everyone benefits when we create a society in which we all can live into our potential.

Humanists seek to grow so as to more fully represent every one of our ideals: we wish to uncover more truths which help us live; we hope to contribute ever more to our community; we try to fill our lives with more goodness, becoming better people; we work to bring about a more just world.
We strive to do good. The search for goodness is at the heart of all religious traditions, and each offers their own path. Yet frequently religions have led their followers to treat others in inhumane ways, limiting their life choices and demeaning their dignity. Uplifting moral messages have ossified into rigid rules, texts written by those long dead taking precedence over the needs and desires of those still living.

Humanists don’t believe there is a single set of rules which will lead you to live a good life. There are no Humanist Commandments. Nor do we promote a single vision of goodness which all are exhorted to follow. We hail no Messiahs and are skeptical of saviors. Instead, we encourage people to develop a process of discernment such that, even in highly complex situations, we can work out an ethical outcome.

Humanists recognize that many ethical decisions are difficult and require careful thought. We speak with others, weigh the outcomes of our actions, consider how our choices reflect on us, then act and take responsibility—because our decisions are our own.

In all our ethical decisions, we are guided by one overriding principle: we seek to uphold the dignity of people. Humanists affirm the intrinsic worth and dignity of all, and we hate to see that dignity diminished. If our commitment to truth is the head of Humanism, then our commitment to dignity is the heart. This commitment guides Humanists in our everyday lives, calling us to treat others with kindness and respect, and has led Humanists throughout history to champion equality, democratic governance, and the right of people to make decisions about their own bodies and lives.
We fight for justice. Humanists hope to create a world in which no person is enslaved, no one is ensnared in poverty, and no one is limited through lack of education. Humanists oppose totalitarianism and authoritarianism, believing everyone deserves a say over the laws which govern their lives. Humanists understand that the government and religion must be separate, to protect the right of conscience of all people.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and all forms of structural injustice are evil to Humanists, who despise all violations of human dignity. The Humanist commitment to Truth leads us to recognize the reality of systems of oppression which place some people above others in a hierarchy of worth: white over black; straight over gay; cis over trans; men over women; rich over poor; able-bodied over those with disabilities.

Humanists work to create a shared world, a global community in which the fruits of the earth—and power over it—are shared fairly between all people.

Humanists understand that if justice is to be advanced, it must be by human hands. The universe cares nothing for justice, and has no moral arc. We make our world, whether just or unjust, and it is our duty to forge further on the road to a more just world. Humanists heed the call of justice by protesting in the streets, lobbying national governments and international institutions, and forever working toward a world in which the dignity of every person is fully recognized.
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