I feel in that holy place where I will tell you my story from deep inside, hoping that you will hear it with a loving mind. Preparing this sermon, I was also in a holy place because I found resources that helped me completely heal hurts sustained years ago when I first encountered religious humanism in my path. As I read the main source I used for this sermon, Reason and Reverence by the Rev. William Murray, past President of the Unitarian Universalist Meadville Lombard Theological School, I heard my own voice reflected back to me in the most soothing and healing way. How I wish I had written this book!

Today, I bring good news for believers, agnostics, skeptics, for those on the fence, and for plain atheists and unbelievers. How is this possible? Thanks to Murray’s Reason and Reverence, where, after pointing out the weaknesses of traditional Religious Humanism, he proposes ways to revitalize it and making it relevant for the 21 Century.

When I entered seminary, I was looking for a deeper understanding of Unitarian Universalism and a deeper connection with the Mystery. I was not prepared at all for the deep hurts some of us would experience in our encounters with the religious Humanism prevalent in seminary at the time. One day I was in a group of students having an animated conversation when I just happen to mention God. With a good dose of hubris, and with disdain in his voice, a student two years ahead of me warned me: Here we don’t mention the G word. Being so new there, I felt embarrassed and ignorant. I promised myself right and there to learn about this religion that apparently was taking over our seminaries and many of our congregations.

I learned how Humanism was presented as an alternative for those disenchanted with established religion, particularly those who had an autocratic God at the center of their beliefs. The First Humanist Manifesto, published in 1933, points out the dangers of outmoded beliefs and emphasizes the need to heed the discoveries of science. Its intent was to serve as the guide for a new religion which would leave behind the myths, symbols, and rituals of traditional religion and would base its ethic, and find truth and meaning, through the use of reason. Humanists proposed to replace supernaturalism with naturalism. Also, they repudiated the idea of divine revelation insisting that religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

However, according to Murray, Humanism lacked the sense of openness to the mystery and the unknown. It was naively optimistic in thinking that the unknown is simply that which science is not yet able to understand. Although Humanism was born championing freedom of belief, it became too dogmatic and seemingly intolerant of other perspectives, especially theism. By the 1970s, the UU Christians were already questioning whether they had a place among the Unitarian Universalists.
Trying to correct some of the deficiencies of the first manifesto, another one was signed in 1973 by scientists, philosophers, and Unitarian Universalist ministers. There the humanists recognized that science could be used for good and for evil, and although still emphasizing reason and intelligence, they caution against regarding them as independent of or in opposition to emotion. They also affirm a full range of civil liberties, and advocate elimination of all discrimination based on race, religion, sex, age or national origin. They urge nonviolent means of settling international disputes and call for international cooperation to reduce the threat to the environment... However, similarly to the first one, this second manifesto is short on religious and spiritual concepts and does not show an adequate understanding of human evil or the role of the emotions. In 2003, thirty years after the signing of the second manifesto, the American Humanist Association signed a third one titled “Humanism and Its Aspirations.” In this document they eliminated the word religion, and stated that humanism was a progressive philosophy of life which stresses the idea that serving to benefit society is the path to happiness.

By the time this last manifesto was published, hundreds of unsatisfied congregants who did not find enough spiritual sustenance in Religious Humanism, left our Unitarian Universalist churches, and many newcomers in search of spirituality did not stay. This led to a mounting recognition among lay and religious UU leaders and congregants that although Humanism was another valuable philosophy of life, it was not a very fulfilling spiritual path.

None of us living today, and no institution for that matter, could have escaped the influence of the horrendous acts committed by nations against nations, by the amazing discoveries in science, by the outer space explorations and by the civil rights, women’s, and LGBT movements which characterized the last century. As a result, we ended up with a different mentality and culture known as postmodernism. One of the main gifts of postmodernism was to instill in us a sense of humility. We came to realize that we are not the end of it all; and that although we have a lot of power to affect the quality of our lives, forces immensely more powerful act in the universe.

Another gift was a palpable resurgence of religiosity and spirituality, particularly in this hemisphere, with the primacy of reason and science as human guidance giving way to intuition and mysticism. These changes diminished the influence of Humanism which with time, could not prevent the development of weaknesses and could not overcome its intrinsic limitations.

According to Murray: With its emphasis on reason and the intellect, traditional religious humanism has little place for such qualities as awe and reverence. A main characteristic and need of a full human is to be in relationship. Yet, traditional religious humanism tends to prioritize the individual at the expense of valuing the connections among people and with all of life. Humans are bound to hurt very deeply and, when that happens, they need supportive, compassionate hearts and hands that provide human touch and companionship. Many of our Unitarian Universalist humanist societies and congregations, which emphasize reason and mind have not been very successful in offering that human touch in times of trouble and pain.

Murray writes about something that has become fairly common, thus: In many Unitarian Universalist churches today, there are two groups of people, those who emphasize spirituality and those who emphasize social justice. ... That is unfortunate, because rather than being two
disparate ways of being religious, they belong together ... Genuine spirituality should lead to social concern and engender a commitment to social justice, whereas social justice ministry without spirituality will lead to frustration and burnout.

One of the main events in our faith was the union of Unitarianism with Universalism in 1961. To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of this amazing feat the famous Mins lectures were dedicated in 2011 to the theme “Faith in our Future.” In her presentation titled “Risk Blessing,” the Rev. Christine Robinson, senior minister of the church of Albuquerque said:

I get it that secular Unitarian Universalism has been really important to some people and that change will be a loss. ... Talking about the kinds of people that are our constituency, she added: They want a safe place to explore what happens to them when they start to deepen their lives. They are looking, in short, for a religious community—not a secular one. If we don’t serve their needs for depth, heart, spirituality, hope, faith, and love outside of an orthodox setting, who will? ... To avoid decline, Unitarian Universalism must risk offering heart, spirituality, and blessing.

Human history suggests that we are hard wired to be religious, or if you prefer, spiritual. How can we tell this is so? Poetry, prose, art of all kinds are expressive of the human longing for answers to the larger questions: Who or what put me here? Is there an afterlife? What is my place in this wondrous universe? What does it mean to be human?

I was very happy learning of William Murray’s new vision of Humanism which will make it easier for many to be a Humanist Unitarian Universalist. We could say that his vision started to formally take shape at the 2004 GA when a group called Unitarian Universalist Religious Naturalists met. The Rev. Bill Murray who was part of this group wrote the book mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, Reason and Reverence launching Humanistic Religious Naturalism as a new religion for the 21 Century. Murray describes this religion as an improved melded theological stand of Religious Humanism and Naturalism articulated in fifteen affirmations.

Some of these affirmations are:

~ Human beings are of great worth and value, the highest form of life we know. But we are not self-sufficient—we are dependent beings, dependent on nature and natural processes. We are creatures of nature and products of biological evolution.

~ The human body and mind are part of one unified whole. What we call mind and soul and spirit are not separate entities but simply different functions of the brain. Human beings have no conscious survival after death. This life is all there is, and our challenge is to make the most of it.

~ We can only know what we actually experience with our five senses, plus what we can deduce and induce from that experience through rational mental activity, especially the scientific method.

~ The goal of human beings is to become more fully human. Whatever enriches and enhances human life is good; whatever diminishes human life is evil. Growth is essential to realizing the goal of greater humanness—personal growth, spiritual growth, intellectual growth, moral growth.
~ Awe and reverence at the incredible universe in which we live and at its remarkable evolutionary history are important aspects of religious experience, and I would add gratitude. The ethical corollary to this includes preservation and protection of our natural environment and nature’s resources.

As Meck Groot says in the following quotation, we Unitarian Universalist have turned a corner. I agree. We do not seem to be afraid of using language of reverence any longer. We are increasingly realizing that we are a religious body whose main business should be to help grow minds and souls.

In her report from this past General Assembly titled, *Making the Invisible Visible*, Meck Groot, Mass Bay District Justice Ministries Coordinator, writes: *I arrived in Phoenix with assumptions that turned out not to be true. I had assumed that social action would trump worship and theological reflection. I assumed that strategies like activist-oriented political organizing would be elevated above congregationally-based justice ministry. I was wrong, and I left more hopeful than ever that Unitarian Universalism has turned a corner away from secular activism toward spiritually mature witness in service of beloved community.*

Having been a witness and participant at times, in the struggle to bring spiritual justice as a foundation of our social justice programs, I, too, am more hopeful with the turn that is taking place in our congregations and in our faith at large. It pleases me to be able to offer to those seekers who identify themselves as agnostics, atheists, skeptics, that come to our doors looking for something more than just a secular society, a new, complete, and fulfilling alternative such as Murray’s Humanistic Religious Naturalism.

Here at First Parish, we are welcome regardless of our theological beliefs. So, come all, let us continue striving hard, every day, to fulfill our Mission *to create a multicultural, spirit-filled community that works for justice, fosters spiritual curiosity and faith formation, shares joy, heals brokenness, and celebrates the sacred in all.* Let us continue doing this awakened by worship, nourished by tradition, and united by love.

Amen and blessed be.

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Please join me in body or in spirit in singing *Hymn #34, Libertad*, in your purple hymnal, Las Voces del Camino. Let us sing it twice ending with joyful, full voices.

*Benediction*

Let us open our hearts and minds to receive the blessing. Let us let the words sink into our consciousness.
Once we have received the blessing, we might want to pass it silently to those we love and to the whole world.

Que la profunda paz de las olas del mar sea contigo.

Que la profunda paz del aire ondante sea contigo.

Que la profunda paz de la serena tierra sea contigo.

Que la profunda paz de las fulgurantes strellas sea contigo.

Que la profunda paz de la infinita paz sea contigo. Amén y que bendito sea.

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Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

Amen and blessed be.