

HUMANISM AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL: THE IMPACT OF THE HUMANIST INSTITUTE

Good morning! While some of you may know me, I still feel relatively new to this Society. I started coming to FUS just over 2 years ago. Prior to that I had been working down the road at First Universalist for a couple of years. While I enjoyed the congregation I served, I wasn't sure Unitarian Universalism was for me, in fact when I applied for the job at First Universalist I had to Wikipedia Unitarian Universalist because I had never heard of it. I thought it was a pretty great place for a church, especially because it was in a building that started as a synagogue. However, I didn't think it was quite the religion for me. I've spent quite a bit of time wrestling with the idea of religion. I've been an atheist for a decade and a half, which at the age of 27, means I haven't held supernatural beliefs for over half of my life. I felt secure in this position, and I wasn't looking to question that part of my identity. However, as I entered professional life, domestic partnership, and contemplated raising a family I began to think: what did I believe in?

Atheism was the only negative identity I held, and by negative I simply mean that it described what I wasn't -- I wasn't a theist. In no other aspect of my life did I use words to describe what I wasn't. I'm male, I'm white, I'm Irish, I'm gay, I'm a Mac. All of these describe some part of who I am, not who I am not. I've been fascinated by religion, mythology, and fantastic stories since I was a child but I continued to run into a limit to the answers my atheist identity could provide me about major questions such as: What is my life's purpose? Why do I want to help other people? What does it mean to be good? What will I leave behind after my life ends?

When I entered the Humanist Institute, it was largely with the intent of personal deepening and learning. I also want to be clear at this point, I am still an atheist. That word still holds meaning for me personally and accurately describes my view of the existence of deities. My move into humanism didn't change my belief about gods, it has instead helped me decide what to do with the rest of my life after coming to that belief.

So I came to the humanist institute, within a year of discovering and beginning my exploration of humanism as a personal philosophy or

worldview. I came to learn more about just what a humanist is and about our history. It strikes me as a largely self-fulfilling reason. Like my search for humanism in the first place, I was left asking the question of how my experience within the Humanist Institute creates change in the world around me and leaves some mark of my passing.

This background brought me to a project, reflecting on how one person can increase the awareness of humanism. My hope with this project is two-fold; first to help myself reflect on the ways I am using the knowledge and experiences of the humanist institute to grow the humanist movement at large and second to demonstrate to others that each individual can make an impact that is real and beneficial to those around them.

In my professional life I work in nonprofits, creating marketing and communications vehicles to help organizations share their stories more broadly and more effectively. As I began this project it seemed natural for me to look to online communications as a way to increase my impact.

I began a blog called "Humanist Notes: freethoughts, bright ideas" hosted at HumanistNotes.com. I've used this blog to reflect on experiences directly related to my studies at the Humanist Institute and as a platform to discuss topics I see in popular culture.

I've had a fair amount of positive responses from loved ones and strangers alike. It has been surprising to me that my humanist identity is in a constant state of coming out, similar to my gay identity. Both are parts of me that people make assumptions about when I am out in the world. It has been interesting to observe that of these two identities, at least in the Twin Cities, it often seems to be more difficult for people to accept my humanism. I think this has to do with the power of media, specifically television and movies that have dramatically changed the acceptance of gay men specifically, and other sexual minorities to greater or lesser degrees. I'm hopeful for the Will & Grace or Modern Family equivalent for atheist and humanist characters.

The original goal of my blog and website was to be a resource to humanist Minnesotans, providing an events calendar that would span

the many groups statewide, as well as a directory of services for humanists. This may still come to fruition but I'm not sure if my site is the place for such a resource. For now, my blog serves as a place for me to reflect on what I'm learning and experiencing. I've been lucky to also contribute to the Humanist Community Project's Blog that is run by folks at the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard.

As I mentioned, I've been a member of this humanist community for the past two years. My initial motivations for attending a community were to meet fellow humanists and to hear the Sunday morning sermons. Experiencing an assembly hall full of others who held a similar belief was cathartic, before the first Sunday morning I had never been in such a gathering of people who largely believed the same things about how the world works. It was akin to my first experience of going to a gay bar at 18, though with a few obvious differences. But they were very similar experiences in how they made me feel normal or ordinary in a way I had never before experienced, even if only for a short while.

The sermons were also a big motivator for my initial involvement in the Society. To hear inspiring and thought provoking speeches, based in humanism and naturalism, that discussed how the humanist worldview could be used to build a full human existence and as motivation to better oneself was what I largely had been missing in recent years.

As I experienced community and sermons, formed relationships and socialized, I began to get involved in organizational activities. Most recently I am serving on the strategic planning committee, looking at how the Society's strategic plan can be implemented and renewed over time.

Since becoming involved at the Society, the circle of community has continually expanded and so has the involvement. I've been involved with the Humanists of Minnesota in website development and I've been interviewed for their monthly television show. I've brought Chris Stedman from the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard to discuss humanists role in interfaith work at First Unitarian Society and my employer, Hamline University.

Bringing Chris in to speak served as a catalyst for continued work beyond the Society. I've been a part of conversations around starting a group for non-theist students at Hamline. I've also had discussions with local interfaith organizations about humanist involvement and been asked to speak to high school students at the local Youth Interfaith Day of Service, held recently at Macalester College.

Community involvement has really become a way to be grounded in what it means to be a humanist. It helps to remind me I am not alone and to reinforce how the ideals of humanism can inform how I participate in society.

Through my participation in the humanist institute I became aware of an opportunity to use my skills to help create something very exciting. Almost a year ago I was hired to redesign and expand the Continuum of Online Humanist Education (COHE). More acronyms for you! The COHE site initially consisted of six online courses on broad topics and how they relate to humanism such as activism, law, science, and religion.

The first phase of this project is complete with courses live at COHE.humanistinstitute.org. There were close to a hundred participants in the two months of the site's launch from locations around the globe and at present there are over 250 registered students. We've recently launched a new course on Humanist Philosophy, written by Dr. Howard Radest. The next steps are to expand this resource to reach even more people who are searching for a worldview such as humanism. A marketing campaign, additional courses, multiple language support, and partnership with other organizations are all possibilities that are being explored.

This project has the potential to be a great resource touching many people I may never meet. It is accomplishing many of the pieces I was hoping my first project, HumanistNotes would and many that I wouldn't have been able to on my own.

And finally we come to my last example of how a single person can increase their impact: public speaking. Since I began developing myself as a humanist leader I have known that one of my growing edges is public speaking. I'm very comfortable in the background or in small

group conversations but getting in front of a room has always been challenging. In order to become as effective as possible I have actively been seeking out venues in which to speak, with some apparent success.

I have spoken at Minnesota's Alphabet soup conference, a conference for college students that identify as LGBTQ or allies. I spoke with a Jewish identified person about the intersection of non-Christian and queer identities. I also spoke at the prairie star district UUA conference on a panel focused on church communications. Next I had the opportunity to speak at two state-wide conferences organized by the Minnesota council of nonprofits, at both I focused on how nonprofits tell their story in order to raise money.

Finally, I recently spoke at an interfaith youth day of service on humanism 101 where I was able to discuss and share some core ideas about humanist identities with a room full of 7-12th graders. This last was particularly exciting to me as it gets to the heart of what I would like to speak about.

During the past year two years I've been in the Humanist Institute, it has been so much more than personal learning, I've made connections to people throughout the country who are doing a variety of great work to further humanist causes. I have also been able to write and promote humanist ideas online and in person to people already a part of humanist communities as well as those for whom humanism is a new concept. Through the power of online communications, public speaking, self publishing, and community involvement I've had the opportunity to learn as well as teach. Lastly, my hope is that my story might serve as just one of many examples of folks taking the step to enter this great program and bring back their experiences to our humanist community.

It is my belief that with current technology and the proliferation of the Internet that an individual now has the ability to have a voice that is heard further than at any point in history. We can find the audience that already exists anywhere on the planet and reach new people we may never actually meet in person. The time to raise our profile is now and each of us can add to this work.