

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

Good Morning! It is a pleasure to be back at the First Unitarian Society. This was my home community from 1968 until 2001, when my husband and I retired to Carefree, AZ. With help from this congregation we reared our two children here. We taught religious education classes, sang in the choir, served on committees and the board. I was on the search committee that brought Khoren Arisian to FUS from his position as Leader of the Ethical Culture Society of New York. I served as Board Chair when he arrived and later when our Religious Education Director left for a new position, I decided to apply for that job. I loved working with Khoren. He was always up for doing something cutting edge and interesting. We developed a new curriculum ranging from Kindergarten to Adult level classes. My graduate work was in Moral and Ethical Development, which was my preparation for designing this program. I am pleased to say that while it was written in 1984, it has just been adopted by the American Humanist Association as their program guide for chapters and affiliates.

Several years before coming to FUS in 1979, Khoren was approached at an IHEU World Congress. That is The International Humanist and Ethical Union. In the 70's IHEU met in London, Brussels and Hannover. The people who attended were from humanist groups across the spectrum. UUs, Ethical Culturists, people from the Society for Humanistic Judaism, the American Humanist Society, the Rationalist Society, and Council for Secular Humanism were all there. Leaders of these groups talked with Khoren about forming a group in North America that would pool the talents and resources of all these separate groups to create an organization that could more effectively promote the humanist movement.

Remember that at this time the fortunes of humanism in North America were declining. Increasing numbers of Americans who repudiated traditional religion were turning to New Age religionism and a search for "spirituality." The Moral Majority was at its height. The humanist wing of the Unitarian movement, dominant in the Midwest, was collapsing because humanist ministers were aging and dying and there were no replacements. Some new pragmatic effort to strengthen humanism was needed to reverse the decline.

Khoren's conversation with the other leaders resulted in a plan to defend humanism against the assaults of its enemies and to find an effective way to bring the message of humanism to a wider public. The emerging plan featured two steps. The first was a coordinating committee representing all humanist organizations in North America. Thus NACH (the North American Committee for Humanism) was born. The second step was the establishment of a school for the training of humanist leaders. Thus the idea of the Humanist Institute was born.

Why am I telling you about those good old days? Because it is important to understand what these founders did for this movement. Today we are out in public like never before. This is the result of what they started and the movement is stronger than it has ever been before. This Society has played an important part in this positive development, as you will soon hear.

In late August of 1982 this group of organizers met at the Center for Continuing Education of the University of Chicago. Khoren invited me to attend. Am I ever glad I said yes! It turned out to be a life-changing

event for me. I knew about UU humanism, but had not really run into any one with a different version. Here was a hall with 45 people who ranged from religious humanist to staunch atheists. Before this day there was no professional collegiality that crossed the boundaries of these groups. Unitarian humanist ministers in particular spent a significant amount of time connecting to non-humanists in their denomination and very little time connecting with leaders outside of their group who shared their conviction.

NACH launched the Humanist Institute in 2 years. In 1984 the first class began at the Ethical Culture Society of New York, which is still our main campus. I was in that first class and can tell you that it was far more stimulating than the years I spent in Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota and that was an excellent experience. At the Institute I could combine my study of moral and ethical development with my humanist philosophy. My brain hurt from over work. I remember one day when we took a class break in Central Park. We were jabbering away, arguing this and that point and had gathered into a circle. Next thing I knew a crowd had gathered around us and were

listening in with great curiosity on their faces. We were all a little red faced with the attention.

The debates and arguments were all done with great respect for each other's personhood and position. We'd sometimes end the sessions with a stop at a local pub or café and then we would exchange our personal stories, favorite jokes and special life moments. This resulted in great comradeship. This was the unexpected surprise for the founders. They had no idea that these interchanges would become the glue that stuck us together. When a couple of classes overlap, then this connection extends between them. I am still in touch with my fellow alums. These relationships enrich our lives and provide support for the humanist work that we do.

Upon graduation, I joined the Institute board and was determined that other humanists should share this rich, stimulating and thought provoking experience. I was a co-mentor for class 8 with our former Dean, Bob Tapp, a member of this community and a hard working Dean of the Institute for many years. His contribution was invaluable. We call people who lead the class co-mentors not teachers because this is a

cooperative learning program. We use the readings for grounding ourselves and then using the Socratic method, we question and push the material to gain more understanding and deepen our grasp of our humanist life-stance.

When I became President of NACH, the original umbrella organization, it was decided that our mission was really the Humanist Institute and not being the coordinator between various humanist groups. The Institute was acting as a coordinator, in that the students who come from the various groups begin to network as the result of their positive experience in our classes. This network is one in which people care about one another and want to be of help with projects that their various humanist groups are undertaking. Yes, we educate and train new leaders, working to provide continuing education programs for these lay and professional leaders, but we are also lending support to each other and thereby strengthening the humanist movement as a whole. Only an ecumenically minded organization can do that.

In 2003 Kendyl and I were asked to be Co-Deans of the Institute. I had been the chair of the Search Committee for Kendyl, so I knew what an

outstanding person I was going to be working with and delighted in the prospect. Our first task was updating the curriculum. We were not throwing the baby out with the bath water, but we were providing baby with some new cloths. An emphasis was put on leadership, both theory and skills, to help students become effective at whatever aspect of humanism they choose for their activism. We aimed to combine our commitment to a strong and rigorous intellectual program with the practical and institutional so that students would be able to articulate humanist values and positions and be effective practitioners as well.

Kendyl was the pioneer mentor of the new curriculum and the esteem with which her students hold her, speaks to the effectiveness of her teaching/mentoring skills and the worth of the new curriculum

In brief, in three years with three sessions each year, we cover nine topics. **The program** begins with the philosophy, history and institutional structuring of humanism, and moves to examining what it means to be human, and then the variety of humanist ideas in world religions. The second year starts with a look at what constitutes humanist leadership, and moves to the humanist tools, critical

thinking, and science, its methods and uses. The final year deals with issues in contemporary culture, aesthetics and humanist celebrations.

We are about to begin class 19. We are in conversation with a couple of colleges and universities about obtaining credit for our courses toward a Master's Degree. We have on-line courses. Please go to our website [www.humaninstintute.org](http://www.humaninstintute.org) to see what Kevin and Kristin have created. They exemplify the tech. savvy generation that is taking over and energizing this movement.

Our former faculty colloquium is now a separate think tank called The Institute for Humanist Studies. Anthony Pinn, a former faculty member at Macalester and mentor of class 15, is the Director of Research. The first volume from a conference at Columbia University in New York will be out soon. It is entitled, *What is Humanism and Why Does it Matter?* We are working on a conference for this fall at Rice University and have sponsored humanist conferences that a couple of our Fellows have put on. The IHS think tank is working with other humanist groups to do research on issues that are of great importance to their work.

Did you know that we have a humanist lobbying group in Washington?

One of the Institute's board members, Herb Silverman created the Secular Coalition for America. A large number of humanist groups joined this coalition to press Congress and the White House on issues that matter to humanists. It's first Director was a faculty member of the Institute. Besides lobbying Congress, they have been invited to the White House and attended press sessions. This group sponsored the successful "Reason Rally" in D.C. this spring. Google them to see all of their activities.

The Humanist Institute recently has become an affiliated organization with the American Humanist Association. This is a very successful working relationship enhancing both organizations.

There is a meeting every January of all the heads of the various humanist groups, ironically called "Heads". The program for this year was how to use the social media and marketing techniques. The AHA was the leader in coming out in public with their billboard campaign.

Not everyone agrees with their choices, but their campaign was not ignored.

A young man, Greg Epstein, who became the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard a few years ago is working with the Institute to bring some of his students to our program. These students have a new outlook that is quite typical of the new millennial generation. These civic minded young people are interested building communities that serve the public interest. They are tired of the selfish, greedy culture that is in ascendance today and want to accept social responsibility for actions to improve life for all people. These are the types of people we are working to bring into our movement as we share so many values.

When I lived in Brussels between 1986 and 1991, I was the Executive Director for IAHECL (don't you love this acronyms), The International Association of Humanist Educators, Counselors and Leaders, which was part of IHEU, the world humanist organization. Through this group I met Peter Derkx who is Professor of Humanism and World Views at the University for Humanistics in Utrecht, Netherlands. He is part of our IHS think tank, our advisory board of the Institute and eventually when

the economic situation betters, he will work with us on an exchange program between our two schools. I add Peter, as I want you to see how far we have come in terms of national connections and even global ones.

We have come a long way since the days of those conversations with Khoren and the leaders of humanist groups of his day. What they founded as a program to educate leaders has grown into one that does that and more. The Institute is the place where tomorrow's movers and shakers gather to learn how to be effective in making humanism not only a life-stance that is recognized across the land, but one that is respected and has influence on our culture.

Khoren, Bob, Kendyl and I all got involved not only in this Society but knew that being here in this flag ship for the movement, that we had to reach out further to protect, enhance and further this movement so that every local group could benefit from the national recognition and acceptance of our life position. This humanist community is to be congratulated for supporting us in this work.

The symbol of the Humanist Institute is a torch. It is the torch of light that it passed to the next generation so these young people can carry on the mission of illuminating our world with our perspective on life.

Kevin and Kristin represent this future and they are two outstanding people who we can be trusted to take up the cause and lead us forward.

Support for the Institute is support for the future of this Society as well. Your future leaders will most likely come from this program. And those who have served you so well in the past were part of creating it and making it a success.