
Opinion

My Take: A humanist calling to serve

By Patricia Lynn Reilly

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My first “calling” to offer my compassion and capacities in service to the human community emerged while I was in a Catholic orphanage, inspired by the nuns whose lives were committed to service.

This calling was reinforced during my years in the Protestant fundamentalist community being trained to take leadership roles in the church and being encouraged to attend a Christian college. There wasn’t room within those male-centered theologies, however, for a young woman to use her gifts in an “official” ministry. I was groomed to be a minister’s wife.

My earliest “calling” to serve humankind was tenacious and ignored religion’s prohibitions. After graduating from seminary, I designed a “community ministry” inspired by Phyllis Trible’s book “Texts of Terror” and by my experience as chaplain-in-training at Boston City Hospital. I traveled throughout the U.S. facilitating “Telling the Untold Stories” workshops for women. As the women of old (Eve, Lilith, Tamar, Mary, and countless unnamed women) extricated their stories from male-centered interpretations, we received the courage to tell our own untold stories. These workshops launched an early version of the #MeToo movement.

I was introduced to Humanism in the 1990s and learned that, unlike most religions, it excluded no one from its wide embrace.

Through Humanism, I’ve come to believe that I am most fundamentally a child of life and a member of the human family. I am also one among millions in the U.S. and billions around the world who are religiously unaffiliated. We’re the ones who check “none of the above” when asked to

identify our religion on various surveys. Though we have many beliefs, we're inaccurately categorized as "non-believers" because many of us do not believe in a god or the supernatural.

Despite our historical oppression and marginalization for that, we are now the fastest-growing demographic in the U.S.

Humanist beliefs reflect natural rather than supernatural understandings of the universe and they are focused on life here and now rather than on an afterlife. I call upon the wisdom held within my beliefs in times of confusion, challenge and celebration. And these beliefs inspired me to become endorsed as a Humanist Chaplain charged with the responsibility to serve both humanists and non-humanists.

Dr. Rachel Remen's words guide my service: "Fixers respond with expertise to their perception of the other person's brokenness. Servers see the wholeness in the other person and trust the integrity of the life within them. Serving requires us to know that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise."

My early religious journey equipped me to walk through life's transitions with both the religious and non-religious. I found comfort in saying the rosary to Mary every day in childhood — thus I am privileged to join a fellow-traveler in saying that set of prayers when they need comfort. During adolescence I memorized the 23rd Psalm to repeat during fearful times — thus I am privileged to recite that Psalm with a fellow traveler whose heart steadies hearing those words. As a trained Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction advocate, I know that conscious breathing literally calms our minds and hearts in challenging moments — thus I am privileged to breathe mindfully with an atheist who is overcome with an unexpected diagnosis.

And as a result of interfaith conversations and partnerships with my religious colleagues and friends, I'm learning how my Muslim, Baha'i, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh neighbors walk through life's twists and turns. My heart is enlarged by the variety of ways we human beings find meaning, handle challenges, and understand death. Whatever our religious

or non-religious worldview, we share the human need for support and encouragement in the form of a reading, a prayer, a breath, and a hand to hold during life's transitions.

On Monday, I will speak about "Non-Religious Callings, Concerns, and Chaplaincies" at Herrick Library. In preparation, I've gathered the stories of the non-religious about their experiences in hospitals and hospices. I've learned that the two biggest fears of the non-religious are that, while feeling vulnerable in a hospital or hospice, the religious Chaplain or hospice volunteer will attempt to proselytize them, and that after death their religious relatives will plan a religious funeral that does not reflect their non-religious identity.

I hope to join the Chaplaincy roster of area hospitals and hospices to alleviate these fears and to stand alongside all members of the human family in times of illness and transition, honoring their wholeness and trusting the integrity of the life within them.

— Patricia is a Humanist Chaplain and a founding member of Holland Openly Secular Alliance.