

THE ELEMENTS OF A HUMANISTIC CEREMONY OF DEDICATION

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"Each night a child is born is a holy night. "

-Sophia Fahs

This paper presents various aspects for a Humanist ceremony of dedication. The purpose here is to identify the assumptions and elements in such a ceremony.

The Humanist view of the world focuses on the human condition, its aspects and possibilities. A Humanist child dedication ceremony, then, will likewise. Thus, its focus differs markedly from traditional Judeo-Christian "baptism." The ceremony's purpose is to publicly and intentionally commit the community of people found in the church, temple, or congregation to the nurturance of a fellow human being. We do not conceive the ceremony as a way to give the child's soul to the care of the church or temple as intermediaries between humanity and god. The ceremony has the simple yet profound human aspiration: the desire on the part of parents and supporting friends to commit themselves to a pleasurable burden of rearing of a child or children.

HUMANIST ASSUMPTIONS:

Before discussing the various aspects of the ceremony, it may be helpful to point out some of the assumptions at work in preparing for the ceremony:

1. Ritual is important. We assume, first, that the ritual act of dedication is worth doing and that there is a place for ritual in our lives. A ritual is simply an intentional (not accidental, not necessary) event. Typically, it takes place in predetermined ways, times and places.

The role of ritual is to mark events of importance. Ritual transforms the commonplace into something special psychologically, socially, and onto logically. It is a means by which we wrench the sacred out of the mundane. It is a vehicle which enables us to experience the wonder of life amidst the prosaic.

Rituals which mark life's transitions are of particular importance to human beings. It is characteristic of being human that we are meaning-makers. Our intentional valuing is what signifies events as meaningful. The Rituals of dedication, marriage, and memorial give meaning to life changes by demarcating them from others.

2. Each child is special. A second assumption guiding our preparation is that each living person is unique and of ultimate worth. In the course of the ceremony, we affirm this by giving the child his or her own name. No matter that it may be shared with others, the child becomes a distinctly known and valued human being by the rite of naming.

3. Each child represents hope. We Humanists assume that only human beings will redeem humanity from its troubles. So, in our ceremony we af-

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firm that each child has his or her contribution to make to humanity. We express as well our hope that this child's contribution will be for the better. Thus, the ceremony symbolizes renewal. The child represents a new chance for humanity. Or as Kenneth Patton has written:

*"For unto us are children born; unto us new
chances given, generation upon generation. "*

-A Thanksgiving for Children

4. *Human fulfillment is found within community.* We assume that the love and caring of fellow human beings is essential to human fulfillment. It is the human community that actualizes or shapes the child's potential. As there is nothing necessary in parenting, the ceremony affirms our intention to provide that caring and loving. Further, our participation is undertaken by free choice.

5. *Parents fulfill their humanness in loving the child.* We assume also that the intentional extension of giving by parents not only nurtures their child, it nurtures the parents. Childrearing evokes compassion, understanding, patience and other traits in adults. These emotions of bonding unite parent and child in ways which further growth in both toward full humanness.

6. *The child is free.* Lastly, we assume that the child is not a possession nor a thing owned by the parents or anyone else. We affirm that the child, because of or in spite of the community's care, has a choice in his or her destiny. The child will make of his or her life what the child will. Put differently, we assume that the child is a "child of the universe, of life choosing itself" (K. Gibran). The ceremony, then, becomes a commitment most of all to human freedom. To quote William Ellery Channing;

*"The great end in [parenting] is not to stamp your
minds upon the young but to stir up their own; not
to make them see with your eyes but to look in-
quiringly and steadily with their own; not to form
an outward regularity but to touch inward springs;
not to burden memory but to quicken the power of
thought, so that they may learn and approve for
themselves what is everlastingly right and good. "*

- The Sunday School, 1835

These, then, are some of the assumptions at work as we prepare for a ceremony of dedication.

CONTEXT OF THE DEDICATION CEREMONY:

The ceremony of dedication is an event that takes place within the context of family and community. The birth of a child is an expansion of a pre-existing community. The dedication ceremony, then, marks that birth. It also marks the change of two adults into the status of parents.

The dedication ceremony affirms three things: The ceremony affirms a) *the personal identity* of the child. It is always a specific child that is being dedicated. The ceremony affirms his or her unique identity. The ceremony affirms also b) *the bonds of community* into which the child is born. The rite

of dedication also represents the incorporation of the child into human society. The ceremony is a way of welcoming both the child and the parents into the wider concern of human fellowship. The ceremony affirms additionally c) *the ideals of human aspiration*. Insofar as the ceremony expresses our hopes for the child, it represents humanity's fondest dreams which we hope will become incarnated in this child's life.

The ceremony of dedication has the context of a living human community which it affirms and upon which it depends. There is something nonsensical, for example, of conducting the ceremony apart from a supporting community. The context is always the expandable network of human care.

FOR WHOM IS THE CEREMONY?

Although often called a "children's dedication," the ceremony is only indirectly for the child. First of all, the child (assuming him or her to be an infant or very young) is not particularly conscious of what is taking place. And older children are not likely to seek out such a ceremony. Indeed, most are embarrassed to be participants when they are.

Additionally, in contrast to the thinking in a baptismal ceremony, the Humanist dedication rite does not alter the child's ontological status. By Humanist thinking, the child is fully human at birth, not somehow deficient and in need of spiritual transformation. The child enters the ceremony genuinely, completely human and leaves the ceremony genuinely, completely human.

No, the ceremony is not for the child, per se. It is for the parents. The ceremony is a way the community honors their new status. It is a time for the parents to share their joy (and hopes and fears!) with others. In the setting aside a time and place where people gather, the ceremony brings the support of the community to the parents who face the profound task of rearing the human child. Finally, the ceremony is a way of reinforcing communal values within the parents.

The ceremony is also for the gathered community, by whatever name. The rite is a clearly explicit means of re-affirming the community's ideals and values. The presence of significant others, especially, is what sacralizes the event. Without a gathered community, there is no ritual, no ceremony! For the community also comes to witness and re-affirm their personal bonds with all persons. Said another way, the ceremony expresses the essential bondedness of humanity-in each child's fate is our own.

So, the ceremony may be more aptly designated as a ceremony for the "Dedication of Children, Parents and Community."

DEDICATION TO WHAT?

To what do we dedicate the parents and the child? There are two basic movements within the ceremony: the parents, covenants and the naming of the child.

1. *The parents' covenants.* The first movement involves the parents' covenanting with the child, with themselves, and with the community to take

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on the special role of parent. This -recognizes that the parents are the child's primary models of humanness; from them he or she learns how to become a human being. Typically, the parents are asked to commit themselves to providing for the child's multiple needs-nurturing the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. We ask the parents to do whatever is necessary for the child to evolve into the fullness of that child's humanness.

Perhaps one of the most vital things we ideally should seek from parents and the supporting community is a commitment *to respect the personhood* of the child. There are two aspects to this: a) We ought to ask the parents to affirm the child's worth simply for being human, to affirm that the child is not a function of the parents or anyone or anything else. To say with Ezra Pound,

For you are no part, but a whole;
No portion, but a being.
-Ortus

b) A second aspect considers the incomplete nature of the human being. We ought to ask parents to commit to a child's becoming as well. This will involve intentional support of enabling the child to choose his or her own life's direction, which may not be what the parents would choose. This time to say with Kahlil Gibran,

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's
longing for itself.
They came through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they
belong not to you.

- *The Prophet*

The first movement in the dedication rite includes asking parents to commit themselves to various ideals and values which fulfill humanness. There is a parallel to the wedding vows by which a couple exchange their mutual commitments. Although there are many ideals which could be singled out, each ceremony may emphasize some and ignore others. Here, in question form, is a sample listing of values we may ask parents to support in rearing their child;

- a) Will you commit to rearing your child to the love of truth; to be honest with self and others?
- b) Will you commit to developing in your child the skills of critical thought, of living a life based on reality, not illusions?
- c) Will you commit to developing in your child respect for others and for self? Will you commit to nurturing in your child a healthy faith in himself or herself tempered with humility?
- d) Will you commit to nurturing in your child the courage to side with good over evil, teaching your child that he or she is stronger than his or her fears?

- e) Will you commit to rearing your child in the ways of peace?
- O Will you commit to rearing your child to love life, to live with an attitude of hopefulness?
- g) Will you commit to rearing your child to have a wonder before the mystery of existence?
- h) Will you commit to nurturing your child a generosity of spirit, caring, charity, and compassion?

2. *The naming of the child.* The second movement of the dedication ceremony involves the naming of the child. The process of naming anything sets it apart from the chaos of experience. Thus, the function of formally naming the child is to make him or her a real person. Naming the child differentiates that child from all others. The choosing of a name affirms the child's uniqueness, autonomy, and worth.

The dedication ceremony marks a child's transition in several ways; It marks the a) *physiological separation* from the mother when the umbilicus is severed. It marks the b) *change from an anonymous "it" or "the baby" to a kind of person*; the statement of joy: "it's a boy/girl!" Finally, c) during the ceremony, the child *changes from a kind of person to a unique person*, an identity marked by a given name. The importance of this act cannot be underestimated, proof of which can be found in the degree of discomfort if there is an overly long interval between the birth and the naming of a child. Again, naming not only gives identity, it makes the child a real person.

The choice of a name is fraught with emotion and meaning. It is important to choose a fitting name. Possible sources of names include ancestors or other significant relations; these symbolize continuity within the family. Additionally, a child may be named for various attributes; "Hope," "Charity," "Prudence," "Joy," "Christian," "Tiny." These choices are not inconsequential. The potential for choosing a name which creates a limiting lifescrypt ought to give every parent pause. Consider what a child named "Joy" must go through in accepting her own feelings of "sorrow."

It may be possible to choose a name after various community events, ideals, or mythic figures. In many cultures, a child is given several names, from which he or she chooses a functional one as he or she matures. Lastly, parents may intentionally choose a name that has no associations, emphasizing in this way the individuality of their child.

Before moving on, we may briefly note that a possible third movement in the ceremony would include the community in some tangible way. There are many ways to symbolize the community's role in child-rearing. A series of questions and commitments may be one possibility.

SYMBOLS:

Symbols are the concrete representations of our ideas and ideals. There are, again, many possibilities. Age-old elements include:

- a) water, to signify cleansing or purity;

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- b) oils;
- c) special clothing for the child, parents, or officiant;
- d) Witnesses. The traditional role of the "god-parent" is to support and assist the parents in their role and to see that the child is reared properly in the faith. As Humanists, we may want someone to affirm the willingness of designated relatives or friends to be "back-up" to the parents, perhaps even to assure for custodial care in the event of something happening to the parents. A problem is what to call these persons. "God-parent" is wrong, "guardian" or "custodian" officious. Your suggestions?
- e) candles, to signify a child as "new light";
- O** flowers, to signify beauty, life's unfolding or growth;
- g) the time and place become important symbols of identity and belonging.

The careful selection of symbols will require being attentive to those elements that are meaningful to a particular set of parents and a given community.

SUMMAR Y:

A Humanist ceremony of dedication involves several elements: our Humanist assumptions and ideals, the context of the ceremony, the persons involved, and a variety of steps and symbols that present the child, parents, and community to one another. I have attempted in this paper to identify the various possible elements to consider in the preparation of a ceremony around the birth of a child. The reader most likely will have additional ideas. I hope you will add them to what is here, sharing these with others so we may all learn.

The development of effective rituals around life transitions is vital to building Humanist community. People will have their rituals. Religious institutions recognize this and are very intentional in fulfilling this human need. May we in the Humanist community be no less intentional in our provision of such services.