Humanism

Presented by Maxine Beech

Key themes: Festivals, making a difference, honesty

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| Time reference | Summary / Key themes | Transcript |
| 00:00 | Festivals | I’m sure that most of you can name a few religious festivals like Christmas or Easter. Perhaps you know some from other religions besides Christianity like Diwali or Hanukah but actually the word ‘festival’ means a day or period of celebration so it doesn’t have to be religious at all. Humanism is not a religion because religions all have a belief in God or the supernatural. Humanists believe that everything in existence is natural and can be explained by science so we say that humanism is a belief system or a world view because it is all about a particular way that humanists view the world. Most humanists will celebrate the main religious festivals in the place that they live because all festivals have a link to community and culture like getting the family together to eat Christmas dinner or exchanging presents but humanists would be unlikely to go to midnight mass at Christmas or to go to church on a Sunday at Easter. That said, there are certain days in the calendar that humanists do mark as a day of celebration. |
|  | Make a Difference Day | One of these days is called Make a Difference Day. It’s held on the fourth Saturday of every October. It’s only started quite recently; it has been going twenty-five years. It started in America to get more people to volunteer their time with a single mission to improve the lives of others. In the UK we are quite use to festivals where we receive as well as give gifts like presents or chocolate eggs and so on but this festival is all about helping people without expecting anything back in return. I wonder who you would think to help? Your parents, your grandparents, brothers or sisters, what about helping your teacher? What about somebody that you don’t know? What if they wouldn’t be able to give you anything in return? |
|  | Starfish story – making a difference | We often see stories in the news about people less fortunate than ourselves, it is sometimes hard to make a difference. That reminds me of a time when I was a teacher and I went on a teacher training day. There was a man there who wore a silver starfish badge on his jacket. It looked quite unusual so I asked him what it meant, was it a sign that he was part of a club perhaps. The man said that he just saw it in a shop and just bought it because it reminded him of the starfish story. I wasn’t too sure what he meant by that so he told me the starfish story he said:  There is a child walking along a beach after a storm and on this beach there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of starfish that had been washed up and they are stuck there on the sand, dying in the heat of the sun. The child then starts to pick up the starfish and throw them back into the sea. A man’s walking along the beach and he says to the child, “Why don’t you go home and play? You’re wasting your time here, there are thousands of starfish. Throwing these few back won’t make a difference.’  To that the child picks up the next starfish and throws it into the sea and turns to the man and says, Well it made a big difference to that one.’  The man with the starfish badge told me that he goes out to help teach in a school in the Gambia, which is a very small country on the western side of Africa. Many of the people of the Gambia are very poor. The schools often lack things like pens, books and furniture; all of the things that you have in your school. Some of them don’t even have teachers there, so every year he travels over to spend one week in a school taking with him a few pens, books and supplies and he helps to train the teachers out there. He knows that he can’t help everyone, in fact across the world two hundred and sixty million children don’t get the opportunity to go to school but instead of just staying at home saying he can’t make a difference, he does what he can and goes out to this school and makes all the difference to those children and the teachers at that particular school. |
|  | Reflection on making a difference | Many humanists will try to use Make a Difference Day as a reminder that we can all do something to make a difference. You don’t have to fly to Africa and teach in a school, it might just be a very small gesture, something that doesn’t cost a lot or take a lot of effort. For example, we often feel like are living in a rather unfriendly kind of world. Now what could we do about that? Perhaps we could make an effort to smile more at people for a day or perhaps we could give out compliments to help people feel good about themselves or maybe if you’re in the local park and you see some litter, just pick a little bit up and put it in the bin, then at least that one area will be cleaner.  Humanists don’t try to help other people because it’s written down in a book or because we’re told to or because we think we’re going to get a reward later on. Humanists try to do good things because we feel it’s the right thing to do in our heart. Whether or not you wear a starfish badge, try to keep the starfish story close to your heart to protect you from giving up before you’ve even started. It can help to remind you that we can all make a difference, whether that is on Make a Difference Day or any day. |
|  | Honesty – Johnny’s story | Let me start with a short story and then I will ask you a question. Johnny is in trouble at school because he took another boy’s pencil without asking him. He stole something and now he’s really upset because he knows what he did is wrong and he’s truly sorry. He gave the pencil back to the boy and promises that he will never do it again. When he gets home his father finds out. His father is furious with him; he says, “Johnny we are honest people we don’t take things we don’t steal, anyway if you needed a pencil you should just have asked me - we’ve got a whole box of them at the office and I could have brought you a dozen back”.  Now who do you think the pencils in the office belong to? They don’t belong to Johnny’s father, so who is the more dishonest? Johnny, who took one pencil is truly sorry and will never do it again, or his father, who is happy to take (or to use the correct term to steal) a dozen pencils and yet still thinks that he is an honest man? We see in the newspapers and TV lots of cases of awful dishonesty of managers taking money from companies, people not paying their taxes or people making insurance claims for accidents that haven’t really happened. Of course then there are the out and out criminals, people who are bank robbers or fraudsters who trick people but thankfully there aren’t a lot of those.  It’s been shown by psychologists (who are scientists that study how and why we do things) that actually most dishonesty is done by people just like me and you. These little acts of dishonesty are bad enough for people to benefit from, like Johnny’s father taking pencils from work but they are not bad enough to make us think of ourselves as dishonest people. |
|  | Individual responses on honesty and excuses for dishonesty | Well I’m feeling pretty honest let’s see:  · Would I take money from somebody else’s purse to go and buy a DVD? No of course not, that’s theft.  · Would I go to a shop and steal a DVD? No way.  · Would I illegally download a movie from the internet that I haven’t paid for? Well no but that’s mainly because I don’t know how to do it, but then I do recall on a number of occasions friends have given me technically illegal downloaded copies of DVDs, was I dishonest. Hmm.  Well if a friend has stolen some money then had given me some of that stolen money would I have felt dishonest? Yes of course I would, so I should be feeling guilty about accepting a downloaded DVD shouldn’t I? The giveaway is that I said, ‘technically illegal’ because actually I am trying to excuse my behaviour. Of course it really was illegal and it was dishonest. As a humanist I really should have known better, I know that all of my actions, however small they seem to be, have a knock on effect. If we all downloaded our movies for free and illegally then there would be nobody paying for the films that are made. People worked very hard to make those movies; somebody wrote it, somebody directed it, people acted in it, people filmed it and edited it. You only need to watch the end credits of a film to realise quite how many people were involved in the making of that film that I really enjoyed. If nobody paid for those movies, then no new ones could be made. As a humanist I would like to live in a world where people get paid fairly for the work that they do and where there are lots of brilliant new movies that came out, when I think about it like this then what I did was definitely wrong. |
|  | Reflection about honesty | We all tend to make excuses for our little acts of dishonesty and I just said it’s not actually money that I’ve taken, so it’s not that bad. I might excuse myself by saying somebody else actually did the download, even though it was me that benefited from it, or I might claim that the production companies have far too much money anyway but thinking like that would justify robbing a bank because they have a lot of money too. Then of course there’s the poorest excuse of all: everyone else is doing it. So although it’s a bit sad that most of us aren’t as honest as we claim, the good news is that most people do want to be honest, so it’s the excuses that we make that’s the problem.  Punishing people we find to be dishonest helps a bit, like the teacher giving Johnny a detention for taking the little boy’s pencil. Encouraging people to be more honest helps a bit, but really to make a difference we need to understand our true nature and guard against the excuses that we make that allow us, like Johnny’s dad, to be dishonest and still feel good. Richard Feynman, who was a famous scientist and humanist, said that the first principle of truth is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.  Humanists think that honesty is a really important value. They don’t think there is a god watching over us who will punish us if were dishonest, they also don’t believe there is a set of rules written down in a book to follow but they still believe being honest is the right way to act because it makes the world a fairer and happier place for everyone. |

Humanist Glossary:

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| Humanism | Humanism is a broad worldview with varying shades of opinion, but fundamentally a humanist trusts in the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic) · makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals · believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same. |
| Humanist Celebrant | A humanist trained to lead ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, and naming of babies. |
| Make a Difference Day | Make a Difference Day. Make A Difference Day is an unofficial secular holiday or observance that emphasizes community service and volunteerism. It has been celebrated on the fourth Saturday of October since 1992. |