Introduction of the Video:

Our topic this morning is "The Future of Humanity." To get us in the right frame of mind for this vast-and-important topic, I wanted to share this four-minute video of leading British cosmologist and astrophysicist Sir Martin Rees, provocatively entitled "Will Humanity Survive This Century?"

Video Before the Sermon:

"Will Humanity Survive this Century?"

By British Cosmologist Sir Martin Rees (Approx. 4 minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQFD5oSPSL0

Sermon Introduction:

As we introduced with this morning’s video, my topic this Sunday (the second sermon in my year-long series “This I Believe”) is another vast and vexing subject, “The Future of Humanity.” What I will be offering you this morning is an overview of how (personally) my mind has evolved on this topic over the course of my ministry…for after all this sermon series is focussed (at least initially) on what I, as your minister, believe. But my sharing how my PERSONAL thinking has evolved and changed (over the years on this important topic) is really about providing YOU with an opportunity to reflect (in your own mind) precisely what YOU believe about the human future, and how your ideas have possibly changed too over time – in response to the new realities that have emerged about the human prospects on this planet -- be they similar (or very different) from what I articulate this morning.

And this process (of thoughtfully reviewing what we believe) is, after all, a significant part of what it means for all of us to be Unitarian Universalists. In our liberal faith tradition, we each spend our lifetimes studying life…and honing and re-considering our beliefs and commitments, by the light of our unfolding understandings, as our world inevitably changes. So let me begin this morning by sharing with you (the congregation I serve) how my own thinking (about the human future) has evolved over the years.
On January 1, 1974...

(Pictures of Houlton, Maine, Church and VW Microbus are projected up on the chancel screens)

The First Church of Houlton, Maine – Established 1811

My bright new orange WV microbus, January 1974

(almost 46 years ago now...when I was just 24 years old) I arrived (freshly minted in hope and optimism...right out of seminary from sunny California) at the First Church of Houlton, Maine (in the absolute dead of winter!) – driving a spanking new, bright orange WV microbus (with a totally inadequate heater for that northern clime!) which my parents has given me as a graduation gift. I began my ministry in that small-but-vibrant congregation (41 souls, soon to grow to 65)...in the far-northern (and frigid) reaches of the United States...with a full and eager heart, sure that I could (and would, God help me!) make a positive human difference both in that rustic little community, and in this vast world of ours.

(Ordination photo is projected up on the chancel screen)

This is me (on April 26th 1974) being ordained, by the church’s lay leaders Henry White and Fred Donald) into the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Many things have changed for me since that beginning...not the least of which (obviously!) is my physical appearance! But at least as
noticeable (at least to me now in my 7th decade of life) many of my ideas (about life and religion) have changed as well, including (for this mornings’ purposes) my ideas about the prospects for the human future.

From my youth growing up in the upbeat Unitarian Universalist church in Racine, Wisconsin (for I am a third-generation Unitarian Universalist, born-and-raised right into this faith)...and from my classes at the UU seminary out in Berkeley, California...I had been fully and faithfully immersed in the unwavering historic optimism of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. And so, as I began my ministry in the mid 1970’s ...despite the anxiety of the continuing “Cold War” with the Soviet Union...and recent civil right turmoil we all endured during the 1960s...and the emerging social turmoil (with the Vietnam war raging and all our traditional cultural institutions and assumptions under seige by a new generation...not to mention general human turmoil and conflict around the globe)...as I began my ministry, I still had great faith (and assurance) that humanity (as obviously flawed and imperfect and querelous as it was) would nonetheless (when all was said and done) find its way to some sort of a safe and acceptable world order that would preserve the species and the planet.

In seminary, I had learned that In the 18th and 19th Century, what distinguished the Unitarians and the Universalists from most other early American faith traditions was their unshakable optimism about human nature, and the potential for humanity (through its use of “reason, conscience and the good heart”) to bring (at least an approximation!) of “The Kingdom of God”...HEAVEN...to earth.

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Ralph Waldo Emerson 1803 -1882

“We believe in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, and the Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever.”

It was no less a Unitarian luminary than Ralph Waldo Emerson who famously wrote these optimistic words of affirmation, which were repeated, Sunday after Sunday in many of our congregations during the 19th and early 20th Century. [SCOTT READS THE EMERSON QUOTE] And that last phrase, “We believe in the Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever,” succinctly summarizes the extreme confidence our religious forebears had in the capacity of
our human species to (steadily and incrementally) create a noble world order of peace, justice, decency and equality for all.

And what gave our religious forebears such confidence in the human future was their almost universally UPBEAT ANALYSIS of HUMAN NATURE. Listen again to Ralph Waldo Emerson as he spoke about the nature of the human soul, suggesting that it reflects nothing less than the perfect “Soul of God”:

[RALPH WALDO EMERSON ON “HUMAN NATURE”:

Let [us] learn the revelation...that the highest dwells within [us]...that there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul when we – the effect – cease, and God – the cause – begins...Within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal one. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affection, it is love.”

So...theologically related to our historic UU optimism about human nature was our historic confidence in the inevitability of human progress, and the brightness of our shared human future:

[REV. JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRESS]

Rev. James Freeman Clarke 1810-1888

"The one fact which is written on nature and human life is the fact of progress, and this must be accepted as the purpose of the Creator."

The Rev. James Freeman Clarke – the famous (abolitionist) Unitarian minister who helped spread the optimistic gospel of our faith westward from New England from his pulpit in Louisville, Kentucky – proclaimed (in a sermon written late in his life) that "The one fact which is written on nature and human life is the fact of progress, and this must be accepted as the purpose of the Creator." In other words, he believed that God – in all his loving wisdom -- had
ORDAINED human progress forever! He went on (in that famous sermon) to say, “The gospel teaches us that in human life there is always something to look forward to, always some higher attainment, some larger usefulness, some nearer communion with God. And this accords with all we see and know: with the long processes of geologic development by which the earth became fitted to be the home of humanity; with the slow ascent of organized beings from humbler to fuller life; with the progress of society from age to age.”

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREEN]

And as the Unitarians and Universalists theologically moved into the 20th century – and began to move away from our traditional Christian and theistic roots -- this long-standing belief in the inevitability of human progress was also reflected in (or “transferered” to) the emerging Humanist impulse of our tradition, which came to inform and dominate our liberal faith. Listen to these optimistic words from the Humanist Manifesto II (the guiding document for the American Humanist movement) which was written (largely by Unitarian Universalists) in 1973:

The next century can and should be the humanistic century. Dramatic scientific, technological, and ever-accelerating social and political changes crowd our awareness. We have virtually conquered the planet, explored the moon, overcome the natural limits of travel and communication; we stand at the dawn of a new age, ready to move farther into space and perhaps inhabit other planets. Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life-span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life. [We believe] the use of reason and compassion [will] produce the kind of world we want – a world in which peace prosperity, freedom and happiness are widely shared. We can initiate new directions for humankind...we believe that humankind has the potential intelligence, goodwill, and cooperative skill to implement [a better world for all].

And then if you want even more optimism about human nature (and the possibilities for a bright human future) just look at the current 7 principles of our Unitarian Universalist denomination. We are proud of them...they are printed every Sunday morning on the front of your order of service...and are even posted in big, bold print on the lighted front wall of our lobby for all to see.

They affirm (among other things) our confidence in:

1) the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” (which directly harkens back to our historic UU optimistic analysis of human nature) and...

2) the possibility of “justice, equity and compassion in human relations,”) and...

3) the goal of “world community with peace, liberty and justice for all,” (both statements that are certainly optimistic about the human potential...and directly harken back to our 19th Century dream that humanity could together build heaven on earth...and, finally...
4) the preservation of our natural world, because we will honor “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

[PAUSE…]

So…say whatever you want about Unitarian Universalists over the generations, but we are certainly NOT a religious movement that has been short on optimism, confidence and hope for human progress and a brighter global future!

[PAUSE…]

But back (if I might) to how my thinking has changed on this topic over the years of my ministry. Forty-six years ago when I was starting out (again immersed as I was in the unvarnished optimism – and “positive humanism” -- of our faith tradition) I began my ministry (awareness, hesitations and caveats about human weakness and wrongdoing aside) I began with a great deal of hope that the human future would be one of reasonably-steady progress and possibility for people everywhere. I was – in a word -- pretty upbeat about our collective human prospects on this planet!

But, honestly I must tell you that my optimism and hope for the human future has been (how can I say this?) SIGNIFICANTLY DIMMED by the painful and difficult flow of human history over recent decades. I am not yet in despair for what lies ahead for us on planet earth…and more on that enduring hope before the end of the sermon…but must admit that under the weight of all of humanity’s recent problems and troublesome behaviors (and I’m going to spell some of those out in a moment) I AM HONESTLY FAR LESS SANGUINE THAN I ONCE WAS ABOUT THE HUMAN FUTURE…and maybe you (under the agonies and fears of the 21st Century) are feeling somewhat less optimistic yourself?

Let me just briefly mention a few of the troubling realities of humanity’s current global condition that can lead one to reasonably worry -- and worry significantly -- over our shared future on this fragile planet.

[PROJECT THE FOLLOWING UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS – SEVERAL SLIDES AS NECESSARY]

Over recent decades humanity has tragically (again and again) proven itself utterly incapable of:

- Ending genocide, warfare, terrorism, and other forms of pointless violence.
- Protecting and extending democracy, freedom, human and civil rights.
- Eradicating poverty, income inequality and starvation.
- Ending exploitation of marginalized, vulnerable and disempowered people.
- Investing in basic health care for all, and eradicating “eradicable” diseases.
- Ending the reckless abuse, exploitation and destruction of our natural environment, our fellow species, and the planet itself.

Over recent decades – as you all are painfully aware -- humanity has (again and again) proven itself utterly incapable of:
1) **Ending genocide, warfare, terrorism, and other forms of pointless violence.** Humanity regularly proves itself a cruel and violent species, more than willing to wreak cruel and unnecessary havoc upon itself.

2) **Extending democracy, freedom, human and civil rights.** Once assumed to be superior and inevitably spreading form of human governance)...sadly democracy is in decline around our globe, trampled or replaced (in many nations, on all continents) by authoritarian leaders and dictatorial regimes who willfully ignore and strangle basic human rights and freedoms.

3) **Ending poverty, income inequality and starvation.** Humanity has consistently proven itself unable or unwilling (with emphasis here upon the “unwilling”) to justly and compassionately distribute its wealth and resources so that no one anywhere in the globe lives (or dies) for lack of basic sustenance and protection. As an intelligent (and dominant) species, humanity has created more than enough food and other resources to ensure the survival (not to mention a quality standard of living) for all of its more than seven-and-one-half-billion brothers and sisters...yet a substantial portion of the human population worldwide (a substantial portion!) lives in excruciating and unnecessary want.

4) **Ending exploitation of marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed people** – women, children, racial, gender and sexual minorities, immigrants and refugees, the sick, the poor, and elderly – continue to be dehumanized and disempowered – brutal human inequality can be seen in every corner of the globe, and shows no signs of lessening.

5) **Investing in health care for all...eradicating “eradicable” diseases.** Over recent decades, humanity has resisted working together to provide basic health services (and prevention and vaccine modalities) to ensure the physical well beings of its own population. The rich nations have allowed terrible outbreaks of eradicable diseases in poor corners of the globe.

6) **Ending the reckless abuse, exploitation and destruction of our natural environment, our fellow species, and the planet itself.** In the face of urgent and undeniable evidence, humanity has proven itself systematically incapable of rationally acting in unison to address global climate change, the extinction of countless species, and the destruction of the planet’s fragile, interconnected ecosystems. Unless the human population – which is growing rapidly -- finds a way to lessen its footprint on the earth, we will (in relative short order, the scientists assure us) render our beautiful blue/green planet home uninhabitable (or at least nightmarishly inhospitable) to human life.

So these are my deepest fears for the human family...and I’m sure if we put our minds to it, we could come up with an EVEN LONGER LIST of human folly and failings to cause us to question the inevitability of human progress and nobility. **DEAR HOMO SAPIEN FRIENDS...WE ARE...AT BEST...A FLAWED AND TROUBLESOME AND BRUTAL SPECIES!**

[SCOTT PAUSES AS THE LIST OF CURRENT HUMAN FAILINGS COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

So...when I (as one 21st Century Unitarian Universalist steeped in our historic optimism) face all these sobering (and harrowing) realities about the current state of human affairs, I realize that
my own theological ideas about human nature (and humanity’s potential for ever creating a
good, just, sustainable and peacable world) have moved – over my career -- significantly from
the unbounded optimism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other early Unitarians and
Universalists...to a more circumspect and skeptical view. My mind and heart – sobered as they
have been by so much obvious human folly, violence, cruelty and injustice -- is not able to
crown humanity with a DIadem of unbridled nobility.

[PICTURE, CAPTION AND POEM OF CARL SANDBURG ARE PROJECTED ON THE CHANCEL
SCREEN]

Carl Sandburg 1878-1967

The people yes, the people will live on.
The tragic/comic two-face: hero and hoodlum...
Born with bones and heart fused in deep and violent secrets,
Mixed from a bowl of sky-blue dreams and sea-slime facts,
A seething of saints and sinners – toilers, loafers, oxen, apes.
In a womb of superstition, faith, genius, crime, sacrifice –
The one and only source of armies, navies, work gangs,
The living, flowing breath of the history of nations,
The little family of man hugging close to the little ball of earth for its life and being.

I am more persuaded by the painfully dualistic (and measured) assessment of human nature
offered by American poet Carl Sandburg -- who, while ever the optimist about the human
family (he was, after all a Universalist!) was nonetheless able to see the painfully dualistic
nature of humanity. In his famous poem “the People, Yes...” he wrote this mixed review of
what it means to be human. [SCOTT READS THE POEM ALOUD]

I honestly don’t know – in the face of the rather tortured events of the last human century –
how anyone could any longer sing Emerson’s fulsome praises of human godliness, nor assert
(with James Freeman Clarke) that the future of humanity is pre-determined to be one of
endless progress and ennoblement. As I reach my 71st year on this planet, I am not at all confident that the human future will be one of nobility and promise for me, and the rest of my species.

[PAUSE...]

Now...believe me...it is NOT my intention here (on this otherwise gentle and congenial Sunday...here in this wonderful tropical paradise called Vero Beach) to drag you into despondency and despair about the prospects for our shared human future. While I fully realize that the realities about the current rather troubling and uncertain state of human life on earth are not cause for giddy [boundless] optimism, I nonetheless believe – passionately believe -- that there is still the opportunity (and ample human time and instinct and resources) for our species to rise to the occasion of its own moral, economic, scientific, technological, and spiritual challenges. I am not at all spiritually ready to give up on the human enterprise...and I most certainly do not think we are – in a word – together doomed to an earthly future of suffering, misery and death.

I once heard a UU minister (who liked to be dramatic, for sure) preach a sermon where – in talking about the human future -- he shared the true (and inspiring) story of the (heroic) band on the Titanic...suggesting it metaphorically applied to all of us here on planet earth. Many of you know the historical details.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF THE TITANIC AND THE BAND ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS – SIDE BY SIDE]

The Steamship Titanic

It seems that after the mighty and beautiful ship (which was said to be “unsinkable”) hit the iceberg and began taking on water, many of the passengers (once they realized they were in life-threatening danger) began to panic, which only worsened the perilous situation. Survivors of the sinking remember how the ship’s 8-member band (rather than don their own lifejackets and seek safety in the lifeboats for themselves) continued to fulfill their duty as members of the crew, playing music – including familiar hymns -- to calm the passengers as the crew struggled to load the lifeboats.
As one survivor of the sinking put it, “Many brave things were done that night, but none were more brave than those done by men playing minute after minute as the ship settled quietly lower and lower in the sea. The music they played served alike as their own immortal requiem and their right to be recalled on the scrolls of undying fame.”

It is a powerful image, this…the great ship’s brave band...making beautiful music...(as that UU preacher I was listening to put it) making “Music for The Lord to hear” even as the ship (and so many of the passengers) went down to their tragic fate.

Now I don’t know about you, but this is NOT the way I would like to think about my role (as one human being) on this earthly vessel of ours (as we sail into the future) that may – or may not – be perilously “taking on water.” As one Unitarian Universalist firmly committed to doing everything I can to save and serve the human cause...and that is a fundamental part of our faith tradition...fight for the human future...I would rather be one of those brave and practical people (there are always many!) down below deck...working to seal the water-tight compartments...or working the pumps...or patching the hull...doing anything (and everything) I can (with other well-intentioned human beings) to keep the ship afloat and moving forward!

I guess I’m glad on that terrible night in the North Atlantic that “the ve band bravely played on” but I’m personally NOT EVEN CLOSE TO BEING READY to giving up my hope for the human future. Every day of my life, I want to join with others of goodwill doing everything they can (“lending their last few stubborn ounces” to the fight) to save the ship!

[SLIDE WITH TITANIC AND BAND COMES DOWN OFF THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Let me say all this again:

The fact that human nature (and the path of human history) is littered in our own imperfection, folly and error DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN MORAL PERMISSION TO GIVE UP THE FIGHT FOR A BETTER (OR AT LEAST SUSTAINABLE) HUMAN FUTURE.

As I have repeatedly affirmed from this pulpit over the years...
**THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS**

The hopeful and saving fact of human existence is that each and everyone of us is born with **“human agency”**, the ability and freedom to act for the good in any set of circumstances.

**PHOTO AND QUOTE OF DR. VICTOR FRANKL IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS**

Holocaust survivor Dr. Victor Frankl

**“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”**

It was Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl who reminded humanity that we are always free (and capable) of lending ourselves to the fight for a future worth having.

**SCOTT READS QUOTE **“Everything can be taken…”**

Dear Unitarian Universalist friends… I must tell you… under the best of circumstances… our human future is going to be anything but smooth, glorious or secure. It will be a real struggle for us -- together as a species -- to create a just and sustainable and humane future. Given the obvious vagaries of human nature (and the troubling realities we have created and allowed on this tiny spinning globe) the road ahead for the human family is surely anything but smooth and secure. But here is the good news, my friends. We homo sapiens are empowered children of this earth... and we are always capable of acting... and acting wisely and humanely. We are not helpless, flawed cogs in the wheels of history... we are a species free to rationally choose our way in any set of circumstances, and to **“lend our few stubborn ounces”** to the fight for a better world. I won’t lie to you this morning... the voyage ahead will be surely perilous and painful at times, but together we human beings have everything we need... MOST OF ALL THE HEART... to create future worth having and holding. So let’s get to work!

Amen.