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## Humanistic Mathematics: Personal Evolution and Excavations

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# Humanistic Mathematics: Personal Evolution and Excavations

Stephen I. Brown

The first online issue of HMNJ will feature a major article by Stephen Brown. To whet your appetite, we have included his introduction here.

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Professionals from many different disciplines and perspectives who frequently do little more than greet each other politely, have come to appreciate, acknowledge, and even communicate with each other. Those interested in exploring a diversity of fields in relation to mathematics have set up tents around a bon fire that was lit by Alvin White's newsletter, *Humanistic Mathematics Network* of 1986—a newsletter that officially became a journal in 1993. Fields as diverse as cognitive psychology, education, history, literature, linguistics, history, philosophy, and poetry are represented in the journal. This journal has also inspired the humanistic mathematics movement, now represented by a well attended topic group at the annual meeting of the American Mathematical Society and Mathematical Association of America. In addition, it has been acknowledged as an emerging force in a recent international handbook of mathematics education published in The Netherlands (Brown, 1996a). From a personal point of view, the journal has meant a great deal, not only because of the direct impact of its articles, but more importantly because it was a contributing factor in giving me the courage to write about and integrate a variety of fields—a feat that stretched considerably the bounds of my perceived expertise.

With much appreciation for such encouragement, I reflect in this essay on the evolution of my own writ-

ing about the concept of humanistic mathematics. I do so by setting my first publication on the topic in *bas relief* against my writing that emerged some thirty years later. I will not in this brief space (shades of Fermat and his marginal notes!) have a chance to paint the variety of self-portraits that emerged over this time span. I will, however, point to a number of contributing factors that influenced the change. I propose this act of introspection as a case study of one person's struggle with new ideas.

My first article, published in 1973, that explicitly highlighted the word "humanistic" was playfully entitled "Mathematics and Humanistic Themes: *Sum* Considerations" (MHT). The evolved book, published in 2001 is less playfully entitled, *Reconstructing School Mathematics: Problems with Problems and the Real World* (RSM). As I look back at MHT, it becomes clear to me that this article planted the seeds for much of my subsequent writing. Perhaps the most dominant theme—maybe an obsession—has been a focus on problems and their educational uses. As will be obvious when I discuss some of the humanistic categories, part of that focus is ameliorative with regard to problems. That is, I point out "near relatives" of such concepts as problem solving, and indicate the educational short-sightedness of excluding them from the educational scene.