
PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

SHSNY Doings

Events in August:

Non-fiction Book Club: Thursday August 3rd. 7:00pm

The Code Breaker. Jennifer Doudna, Gene editing and the future of the Human Race by Walter Isaacson

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82413289962>. Meeting ID: 824 1328 9962

Book for September 7th: *The Vital Question: Energy, Evolution, and the Origins of Complex Life* by Nick Lane



Fiction book-club: Wednesday August 9th at 7:30

DEMON COPPERHEAD by Barbara Kingsolver.

In person — Karen Engel's apartment, 201 E 17th St. [corner of 3rd Ave.] Apt 18B

Zoom Meeting <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84734035691>. Meeting ID: 847 3403 5691



Monthly Luncheon — we will gather at 12:00 noon on August 20th at **Sathi**, 216 3rd Ave. between 18th & 19th St.



Happy Hour: August 27th, 5:00pm - 7:00pm. Place: Jon Engel's apartment, 201 East 17 St. Apt 18B. Feel free to bring refreshments, food or drink, to share with the others.

Maybe that should be named Happy Two Hours.

Albert Ellis & Rational Emotive Therapy

Brian Lemaire



I once attended an event where Albert Ellis and Paul Kurtz shared the stage, and the audience attempted to find the answer to the question, where do these two thinkers intersect?

Thirty years later, I think I have an answer.

Each was adept, possibly gleeful, at poking holes in the accepted orthodoxy in their respective fields: Albert Ellis, in the field of psychology, and Paul Kurtz in the field of ethics and morals, calling out Christianity. In doing so they both created a healthier and more benign space for the individual (Ellis) and for society (Kurtz).

If you're not familiar with Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Therapy, take the questionnaire below. He helps us root out some of the self-defeating ideas we tell ourselves. Once you're done with the questionnaire, you will feel a weight lifted off your shoulders.

Multiple-choice questionnaire:

1.
 - a) I must be loved by significant others for almost everything I do.
 - b) I concentrate on accepting myself unconditionally, on winning approval for practical purposes, and on loving rather than on being loved.
2.
 - a) we should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects or talented in some important area.
 - b) we would better do rather than always need to do well, and accept ourselves as a quite imperfect creature, who has general human limitations and specific fallibilities.
3. When people act to hurt others,
 - a) They must not. Their acts are awful or wicked, and the people who perform such acts should be severely damned as bad, wicked.
 - b) certain acts are self-defeating or antisocial, and the people who perform such acts are behaving stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically, and would be better helped to change. People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals.
4. When things don't come out the way we like, when you are frustrated or treated unfairly,
 - a) it is horrible
 - b) it is too bad; we better try to change or control bad conditions so that they become more satisfactory, and, if that is not possible, we had better temporarily accept and gracefully lump their existence.
5.
 - a) We must have certain and perfect control over things.
 - b) the world is full of improbability and chance and we can still enjoy life despite this.

6. When you feel pressure and have difficult experiences,
 - a) We have virtually no control over our emotions and we cannot help feeling disturbed about things
 - b) We have real control over our destructive emotions if we choose to work at changing the “musturbatory” hypotheses which we often employ to create them. Musts — see #10, and “musts” at the end of this piece.
7. If something is or may be dangerous or fearsome
 - a) we should be terribly upset and endlessly obsess about it and frantically try to escape it.
 - b) one would better frankly face it and render it non-dangerous and, when that is not possible, not dwell on it.
8. Life's difficulties and responsibilities
 - a) You find it easier to avoid than to face them. You can still lead a fulfilling existence.
 - b) The so-called easy way usually turns out much harder in the long run.
9. Something once strongly affected our life
 - a) it has to keep determining our feelings and behavior today
 - b) we can learn from our past experiences but not be overly-attached to or prejudiced by them
10. Musts. The idea that people and things absolutely must be better than they are and that it is awful and horrible if you cannot change life's grim facts to suit you. Avoid telling yourself *musts*. Replace them with ‘strongly prefer’.
11.
 - a) Human happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction
 - b) We feel happiest when we are vitally absorbed in creative pursuits, or when we are devoting ourselves to people or projects outside ourselves.
12. ABC's:
 - a) human misery is externally caused and is forced on us by outside people and events
 - b) neurosis is largely caused by the view that we take of unfortunate conditions

We are responsible for our actions. We cannot blame them on external events. Responding to the external event (A), first comes our thoughts and beliefs about it (B), and from that comes our actions (C). We humans have agency.

13. Reliance on a higher power:
 - a) We absolutely need something other or stronger or greater than our self on which to rely
 - b) it is better to take the risks of thinking and acting less dependently.

Ego:

Ego depends on the flawed view that one person rates as better than another. If we rate ourselves as better than others (high self esteem) or lower than others (low self esteem) this rating means nothing, because

- We cannot assign an overall rating to a person
- We therefore cannot say one person is better than another

High self-esteem requires denigrating someone else. Ellis prefers the strategy of self-acceptance: unconditional, not dependent on feeling you are better than someone else. Most of us find that happiness comes from getting involved in life rather than in thinking ourselves superior to others.

Ellis blows up Freud's conventional wisdom that a psychoanalyst has to dig into a patient's childhood issues. Ellis focuses on what the patient is telling themselves today. Whether or not these internal dialogues date from the past, it's the repeating of self-defeating thoughts today that causes a problem.



A huge thank you to Jon Engel, who served as SHSNY President in 2020 and 2021. As of July, Jon has set sail from the SHSNY board. But he is not going away — Jon will remain a SHSNY member. He is going to host Happy Hour at his apartment in August, and Karen continues to host the fiction book-club at their apartment. If you look up *mensch* in Webster's dictionary, you will probably see a picture of Jon next to that entry.

Changing the Perception of Secular Humanism

Part III in **Carl Marxer's** Chat GPT experiment

After my last Chat GPT question about the “Dangers of Secular Humanism”, I wanted to go deeper into the conversation, with the computer that generated the conversation with me. So I asked it “**What can Secular Humanists do to change the perception that they have a lack of moral values and societal norms?**” This is the answer that it generated for me:

Secular Humanism is a worldview that emphasizes reason, ethics, and human dignity. It promotes the idea that individuals can lead ethical and fulfilling lives without relying on religious doctrines or dogmas. Despite its positive principles, Secular Humanism has been frequently accused of lacking moral values and societal norms. This perception is largely due to the misunderstandings and misrepresentations propagated by religious groups and the media. In this article, we will discuss some practical ways that Secular Humanists can change this perception.

Promote ethical principles

Secular Humanism emphasizes ethical principles such as the Golden Rule, which states that we should treat others as we would like to be treated. Other important ethical principles include compassion, empathy, and respect for human dignity. Humanists should promote these principles through their actions, speeches, and writings. They can also support ethical causes such as social justice, environmentalism, and animal welfare.

Support secular charities

Secular Humanists can demonstrate their commitment to societal norms by supporting secular charities that work towards social good. For instance, they can volunteer for organizations that provide humanitarian aid, education, and medical assistance. They can also support charities that promote science education and critical thinking.

Engage in interfaith dialogues

One way to change the perception that Secular Humanism lacks moral values is to engage in interfaith dialogues with people of different faiths. By discussing ethical issues with religious individuals, Humanists can demonstrate that they share common values and principles. They can also learn from other faiths and gain a broader understanding of different perspectives.

Promote scientific literacy

Humanists can also promote scientific literacy to demonstrate their commitment to societal norms. By supporting science education and research, they can help combat misinformation and promote evidence-based thinking. They can also support scientific initiatives such as space exploration, renewable energy, and medical research.

Participate in civic activities

Finally, Secular Humanists can demonstrate their commitment to societal norms by participating in civic activities. They can vote in elections, join political campaigns, and support causes that promote democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech. They can also participate in peaceful protests and advocate for social justice.

In conclusion, Secular Humanists can change the perception that they lack moral values and societal norms by promoting ethical principles, supporting secular charities, engaging in interfaith dialogues, promoting scientific literacy, and participating in civic activities. These actions can demonstrate that Humanists are committed to creating a better society for all individuals, regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds.

Regarding this year's Supreme Court decisions



The Common Heritage of Humanity

This text is excerpted Dr. Stephon Alexander's remarks as he accepted the Isaac Asimov Science Award at the American Humanist Association's 82nd Annual Conference. Alexander specializes in string theory and cosmology. He talks about his math teacher at DeWitt Clinton High School. This is an inspiring tale of how a teacher transformed this man's life.

Growing up in the Bronx, I remember I was always a weird kid and I would always be the last to be selected in the basketball team. So everybody was like, okay, "I want, I want Jamal." Because he's taller than me and he's faster. I was always the last guy and I always felt dejected. It's like I remember that emotional feeling of not being accepted, not feeling welcome, right? No — there was another word — *invited*, welcome and belonging.

Fast forward, I'm in high school now. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School. At that time in the 1980s it had about 6,000 students. And let's say that it wasn't a great situation. But I remember my math teacher. We had this teacher, Mr. Daniel Fader. How many of you know what Papa Smurf looked like? He looked just like Papa Smurf. You know, he was just a short man with a big white beard. Seriously, a big white beard. He did have glasses. He was bald and he wore every day a white shirt and black pants. He was skinny, but he had a belly . . . Now, my high school was mostly Black and Latino. But the thing that I only realized later on in life—*every day*, rain, snow — Mr. Fader would walk to work. He was of his generation. He dreamt of becoming. He had his own dreams. He wanted to become a number theorist. So he went to City College to study number theory which is very high-level mathematics.

And then a tragedy occurred in his life. It involved the death of a child. And anyway, we kind of were aware of that. But here was the thing . . . I mean, first of all, many of us were broke kids. I mean, we were just in that school with a sixty-percent dropout rate, right? And this guy came in as if we were mathematics young whizzes. He didn't teach math in the way of this is, you know, Pythagorean Theorem, and this is trigonometry...

He was like, "All right, guys. I'm going to show you a trick of the trade here." And he basically lived vicariously through us. He was like, "Okay, Alexander, you know, if you do this, maybe you can join my research team." I was like, "We've got a research team at Clinton?"

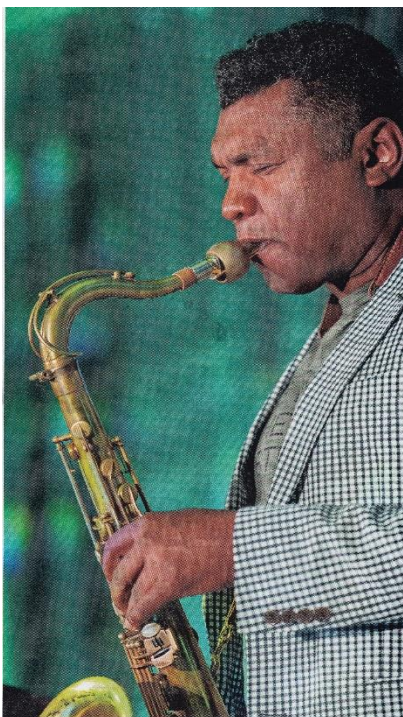
So there was this whole vibe where Fader engaged us as his minions, his mathematicians. We were learning these tricks of the trade, you know? He was like, "All right. You know how poker really works? I'm going to show you the math behind the poker games. Don't ever get played by those crooks over there. Let me show you the mathematics behind it."

There was never a sentiment with Mr. Fader that we were lacking. In fact, there were times where we'd cheat on the math exams. He's like, "Hey, you know, your exam looks really similar to Alexander's. I'm just saying, if you're going to do it, do better than that."

When I went to college, though, I went to a very good school. They were recruiting kids at MIT. It was hardcore. People won Putnam Awards and things like that. I was competitive there, because I learned tricks of the trade from Mr. Fader. I got that in a public school in the Bronx, New York.

So the point in that story for me is what I want to call **radical mentoring**, because the way Mr. Fader approached us was like, "Look, you're going to have to learn this stuff so you can learn the atomic orbitals of the hydrogen atom."

I'm like, okay, he actually expects that I should know this stuff? Think about that kid that was rejected on the basketball court. So here I am being embraced in this kind of way, right? I'm talking about this notion of radical mentoring. There's a quote by Abdul Salam in Stockholm after he accepts a Nobel prize in physics, the first Pakistani Muslim to receive that award, who was also ostracized from his community.



Stephon Alexander

His statement was: "Scientific inquiry is a common heritage of humanity." Now I want you to understand, when I first heard this I'm in college and I'm the only Black student among the physics students. And I'm also now feeling not just the rejection on the basketball court — but now the rejection of, "You can't study with us because we don't think you know anything." For me to hear that it was as if his Nobel prize actually was about unification. For Abdul Salam to say that was very validating for me. He wrote books about the contributions of mathematics and science from the Arabs, from Africa, from China, from India. For me, growing up in the context of the United States or the West, as a young person, I'm taught that science comes from Europe, right? But Scientific inquiry is a common heritage of humanity.

If you have material you'd like to appear in the next issue of PIQUE or a comment on one of these articles, you can email it to editor@SHSNY.org

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