

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

January, 2012

Happy New Year, we hope. We wonder if we're getting smarter, who among us is dumbth-est, and whether we care about God. We celebrate jazzmen, give Santa a pass, visit bleakest Russia in 1945, brilliant Broadway in 1998, the Dark Ages in Saudi Arabia and Oklahoma City, and the cloud-cuckoo land of politics in America. We compose another elevator speech, debate theist debaters, and consider "So what?" as a philosophy. But first we say good-bye to one of the best of us. – JR

## CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

1949 – 2011

John Rafferty

*"Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it." – Christopher Hitchens*

He got one thing spectacularly right: God is *not* great. I did not always agree with Hitchens; who could? His unflagging defense of the illegal and immoral Iraq War never made sense to me, and some of his views of women were Victorian-era sexism shod in Doc Martens.

But he got it right about "lying, thieving" Mother Teresa and "war criminal" Henry Kissinger, about the Pope's cover-up culpability in the church's abuse scandal, and about dozens of other frauds, hypocrites, and villains, often going way over any line of propriety in his indignation. Of the just-deceased televangelist and political meddler Jerry Falwell, while other commentators observed the usual speak-no-ill-of-the-dead rule, Hitch opined, "If you gave Jerry Falwell an enema, you could bury him in a matchbox."



Beyond humor and wit, he defined positive atheism:

*"Atheism strikes me as morally superior, as well as intellectually superior, to religion. Since it is obviously inconceivable that all religions can be right, the most reasonable conclusion is that they are all wrong. Does this leave us shorn of hope? Not a bit of it. Atheism, and the related conviction that we have just one life to live, is the only sure way to regard all our fellow creatures as brothers and sisters."*

And in his 2007 best-selling *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Hitchens wrote the textbook for

what is now called "new atheism".

*"Faith is the surrender of the mind (he wrote); it's the surrender of reason, it's the surrender of the only thing that makes us different from other mammals. It's our need to believe, and to surrender our skepticism and our reason, our yearning to discard that and put all our trust or faith in someone or something, that is the sinister thing to me. Of all the supposed virtues, faith must be the most overrated."*

Indeed, in accepting the Freethinker of the Year Award of the Atheist Alliance of America in 2011, he said:

*"We have the same job we always had: to say that there are no final solutions; there is no absolute truth; there is no supreme leader; there is no totalitarian solution that says if you would just give up your freedom of inquiry, if you would just give up, if you would simply abandon your critical faculties, the world of idiotic bliss can be yours."*

Hitchens, in my opinion our time's inheritor of the mantle of Aristophanes, Juvenal, Swift, and Orwell, continued at that "same job" even as he fought the battle with esophageal cancer that he knew he could not win.

*"Death is certain," he wrote in The Portable Atheist, "replacing both the siren-song of Paradise and the dread of Hell. Life on this earth, with all its mystery and beauty and pain, is then to be lived far more intensely: we stumble and get up, we are sad, confident, insecure, feel loneliness and joy and love. There is nothing more; but I want nothing more."*

**FEBRUARY 10**

**DARWIN DAY & SHSNY ANNIVERSARY DINNER  
BOOK YOUR SPACE NOW – PAGE 7**

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *Vice President*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Lee Loshak, *Secretary*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Elaine Lynn; Carl Marxer; Irv Millman; Carlos Mora; John Wagner

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SHSNY is an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

**HAPPY 2012:  
ANOTHER YEAR OF GETTING SMARTER**

**David Shenk**

*(Reprinted from The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You've Been Told About Genetics, Talent, and IQ Is Wrong, excerpted on daily@delanceyplace.com, 5/26/2012)*

*"Children develop only as the environment demands development."*

In 1981, New Zealand-based psychologist James Flynn discovered just how profoundly true that statement is. Comparing raw I.Q. scores over nearly a century, Flynn saw that they kept going up: every few years, the new batch of I.Q. test takers seemed to be smarter than the old batch. Twelve-year-olds in the 1980s performed better than twelve-year-olds in the 1970s, who performed better than twelve-year-olds in the 1960s, and so on. This trend wasn't limited to a certain region or culture, and the differences were not trivial. On average, I.Q. test takers improved over their predecessors by three points every ten years – a staggering difference of eighteen points over two generations.

The differences were so extreme they were hard to wrap one's head around. Using a late-twentieth-century average score of 100, the comparative score for the year 1900 was calculated to be about 60 – leading to the truly absurd conclusion, acknowledged Flynn, "that a majority of our ancestors were mentally retarded". The so-called Flynn Effect raised eyebrows throughout the world of cognitive research. Obviously, the human race had not evolved into a markedly smarter species in less than one hundred years. Something else was going on.

For Flynn, the pivotal clue came in his discovery that the increases were not uniform across all areas but were concentrated in certain subtests. Contemporary kids did not do any better than their ancestors when it came to general knowledge or mathematics. But in the area of abstract reasoning, reported Flynn, there were "huge and embarrassing" improvements. The further back in time he looked, the less test takers seemed comfortable with hypotheticals and intuitive problem solving. Why? Because a century ago, in a less complicated world, there was very little familiarity with what we now consider basic abstract concepts. "[The intelligence of] our ancestors in 1900 was anchored in everyday reality", explains Flynn. "We differ from them in that we can use abstractions and logic and the hypothetical ... Since 1950, we have become more ingenious in going beyond previously learned rules to solve problems on the spot."

Examples of abstract notions that simply didn't exist in the minds of our nineteenth-century ancestors include the theory of natural selection (formulated in 1864), and the concepts of control groups (1875) and random samples (1877). A century ago, the scientific method itself was foreign to most Americans. The general public had simply not yet been conditioned to think abstractly.

The catalyst for the dramatic I.Q. improvements, in other words, was not some mysterious genetic mutation or

magical nutritional supplement but what Flynn described as "the [cultural] transition from pre-scientific to post-scientific operational thinking". Over the course of the twentieth century, basic principles of science slowly filtered into public consciousness, transforming the world we live in. That transition, says Flynn, "represents nothing less than a liberation of the human mind".

The scientific world-view, with its vocabulary, taxonomies, and detachment of logic and the hypothetical from concrete referents, has begun to permeate the minds of post-industrial people. This has paved the way for mass education on the university level and the emergence of an intellectual cadre without whom our present civilization would be inconceivable.

Perhaps the most striking of Flynn's observations is this: 98 percent of IQ test takers today score better than the average test taker in 1900. The implications of this realization are extraordinary. It means that in just one century, improvements in our social discourse and our schools have dramatically raised the measurable intelligence of almost everyone.

So much for the idea of fixed intelligence.

**A POST-CHRISTMAS CAROL**

**Donna Marxer**

I'm a jazz buff and this Christmas past eagerly attended a Jazz Museum of Harlem concert in a private New York City club, The Players.

A little dismayed, I saw a stage full of really old musicians looking dead on their feet. The oldest one was a tall stately gentleman wearing a suit and holding a stained, antique tenor sax. He turned out to be Fred Staton, jazz great singer Dakota's older brother. We found out he was age 96, and had just come from the hospital after suffering a fall earlier that day, but headed straight for his gig. We were filled with admiration.

Then the graybeards swung into "Take the A Train", and the years fell away. They glowed, turned rosy, grooved, and the audience jived with them for nearly two hours. Staton played a lovely solo of "That's All", and further won our hearts.

Let me stop to explain that I don't believe in an afterlife but I do believe in a kind of immortality, whereby our gifts, deeds and influence are passed on to others. It is my version of humanist grace. Here's what happened:

Toward the end of the concert, and following the Jazz Museum's mentoring custom, they introduced two gifted youngsters direct from music camps. A young 15-year-old Chinese musician, sporting a shining soprano sax, played a short, sweet solo and then turned his eyes, staring longingly, to Fred Staton, seated next to him and head to head. Finally Fred, aware of the boy, turned and held out his hand.

They both beamed. When their hands touched, I was reminded of Michelangelo's "God giving life to Adam" in the Sistine Chapel. It was a magical moment, and who needed a god?

It was about passing the baton. There were 81 years

between these two musicians, almost four generations, but the rapport was tangible.

It was a great humanist moment.

It was about the only immortality we can know for sure, and right then it was enough.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT SANTA

Walter Balcerak

I think the unkindest thing I ever did to my daughter was telling her there is no Santa Claus. I still rue that action. However, the experience has given me a perspective on how, as a skeptic, to deal with believers.

Laura was seven when I told her. Now sixteen, she recently said, “When you’re a kid you believe. Your parents are like gods. I was confused and disappointed. I thought you might be joking, so I asked Mommy.”

My wife, Dolores, was annoyed at me, but she had no option but to answer honestly. To this day, she and Laura won’t let me forget that I was wrong.

And they’re right. It’s not that I ruined Christmas for Laura. She continued to receive as many gifts as before, maybe more. But I had stolen part of her childhood innocence, a trusting belief in the words of adults and in the magical thinking of fairy tales and religion. No longer could she anticipate and dream about a visit from a jolly fat man arriving from the North Pole in a sled pulled by flying reindeer, bringing her a bagful of gifts. How exciting that yearly drama must have been for her, until I brought the curtain crashing down. Gone, too, were the beloved rituals: leaving milk and cookies for Santa and scattering treats for his reindeer.

I wasn’t thinking of those things when I told Laura the truth. I acted because, as a skeptic, I disliked the steady indoctrination she was receiving in religion at the insistence of Dolores, a practicing Roman Catholic. I wanted Laura to begin to share my skepticism toward irrational beliefs. But I failed to understand that skepticism does not fulfill psychological needs the way supernatural beliefs do. Skepticism is a method for understanding the universe, and thus is an orientation toward reality. Belief in Santa, fairies, angels, or God, on the other hand, is a form of wish-fulfillment that has no regard for evidence.

We humans need beliefs. We have a consuming desire, for example, to think that there is a meaningful narrative to our lives. For the religious, that narrative generally is provided by a holy book and the prospect of eternal life. Most skeptics, on the other hand, do not believe in heaven or hell, or in divine beings in the sky. Yet we also yearn for a meaningful narrative. That is why many of us profess to be secular humanists. We lend meaning to our lives by believing we have a mission to be better people and to make the world a better place.

I did not make the world a better place when I told Laura there was no Santa. Clearly, depriving a child of a harmless belief that makes her happy is not a humanistic action. Instead of being humanely concerned about the impact of disillusioning my daughter, I imposed my own

skepticism on her when she was not ready to receive it.

Most religious people, no matter their age, are not prepared to receive the message of skepticism, for they have too much invested in their beliefs to even consider subjecting them to reason. And who can blame them? For true believers, religion is a controlling theme of their personal narratives. They are baptized into religion, indoctrinated in it, married in it, and buried in it. They observe rituals and practices that require regular devotion. They are given answers to unanswerable questions, and are promised a reunion with loved ones in eternal life. Not many people would readily give up those things just because there is little or no evidence for their faith.

In the past, I engaged more than once in discussions with believers who tried to convert me. I, in turn, tried to foster a skeptical viewpoint in them. Needless to say, this was an exercise in futility for both sides. Similarly, persistent skeptical comments to my wife about religion have done nothing to alter her devotion to her church.

The Santa episode taught me that there is no point in challenging irrational beliefs that are emotionally rewarding. After all, it took me many years to cast off my own Catholic upbringing. If people are going to change their thinking, they will do so on their own initiative, if and when they are ready. As for me, I won’t try to convince them.

## ELEVATOR SPEECHES FOR “CHRISTIAN NATION” NUTS AND BORN-AGAINS

John Rafferty

PIQUE readers have responded to the idea of “elevator speeches” – simple, short statements you should have ready to reply to questions or challenges about humanism, even in a short elevator ride. In the past few months, I have offered sample speeches—and readers have responded with their own—on the subjects: What is secular humanism? Why don’t you believe in God? Evolution is just a theory, and (its corollary) I don’t believe in evolution.

Just so you know, Lori Lippman Brown, Founding Director of the Secular Coalition for America, whose idea “elevator speeches” is, told me in December that she’s delighted with the ideas you’ve come up with so far. Let’s please her with your responses to:

### “AMERICA IS A CHRISTIAN NATION.”

(15 seconds)

Most Americans are Christians, but we are not a “Christian nation”. The *fact* is that both Article Six and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution specifically prohibit the establishment of *any* religion in America.

(30 seconds)

Most Americans are Christians, but we are not a “Christian nation”. Both Article Six and the First Amendment to the Constitution specifically prohibit the establishment of *any* religion in the United States. While most of the Founders were Christians, they deliberately wrote a *secular* constitution to avoid the religious strife that caused millions of deaths in Europe, and to allow all religions to flourish in America.

(60 seconds)

Most Americans are Christians, but we are not a “Christian nation”. Both Article Six and the First Amendment to the Constitution specifically prohibit the establishment of *any* religion in the United States. Yes, most of the Founders were Christians, but they deliberately wrote a *secular* constitution to avoid the religious strife that caused millions of deaths in Europe, and to allow all religions to flourish in America. Our founding document was the first in western civilization not based on a religious justification—you know, “By the grace of God”—but rather on the will of “We the people”. And the Founders got it right. America is by law a secular nation, but in our land where there is no established religion, more people belong to a religion, and attend church, synagogue, temple, or mosque than in any other western nation.

And when you hear ...

**“SINCE I ACCEPTED JESUS CHRIST AS MY LORD AND SAVIOR, HE HAS TURNED MY LIFE AROUND. YOU CAN’T ARGUE WITH THAT.”**

(15, 30, and 60-second versions)

I don’t *want* to argue, and I’m glad that your faith has improved your life. But there are literally hundreds of millions of us who are happy to live meaningful and moral lives without superstition or dogma. So, please, let us be.

**Readers respond to:**

**“EVOLUTION IS JUST A THEORY”**

**Jason Torpy**

(15 seconds)

Yeah, right. It’s as lock-tight certain as science can be, no room for Intelligent Design at all. You should go after gravity, it’s just a Law; scientists don’t have any clue how that works. Teach the controversy about gravity, and maybe you can get some Bible-based Intelligent Falling in schools.

**THE BARMAID SHOCKS JESUS AND MO**

(Transcribed from [jesusandmo.net](http://jesusandmo.net), 11/15/2011)

**Jesus:** Barmaid, you don’t show enough respect for our religions.

**Mohammed:** Yes, we find your attitude toward our deeply-held metaphysical opinions to be highly offensive.

**Barmaid:** So what?

(Stunned silence)

**Barmaid:** Shall I rephrase the question?

**Jesus:** No, shhh ...

**Mo:** Thinking.

**Comment:** This cartoon, which originally ran in 2008, was based on a real incident, when atheist actor/writer/director Stephen Fry first posed the “So what?” question in a public forum. Maybe “So what?” should be our 2-second elevator speech answer to the complaint that we don’t respect other people’s myths. – JR

**Y**our parents lied to you about Santa Claus. What makes you think they didn’t lie to you about Baby Jesus?

– Anonymous

**WHO DO THE SAUDIS THINK THEY ARE, TEXANS?**

**S**audi Arabia, the oil-drenched kingdom that successive U.S. administrations tell us is our most steadfast Middle Eastern ally (ally against whom, by the way?), carried out its 73rd execution of 2011 on December 12. The criminal? A woman named Amina bint Abdulhalim Nassar, who was beheaded in the northern province of Jawf for “practicing witchcraft and sorcery”.

What, exactly, was her “practice”? The interior ministry declined to say, but a spokesman for Amnesty International said, “The charge of sorcery has often been used in Saudi Arabia to punish people, generally after unfair trials, for exercising their right to freedom of speech or religion”.

**A BURKA COVERS EVERYTHING EXCEPT A WOMAN’S EYES. OH, WAIT ...**

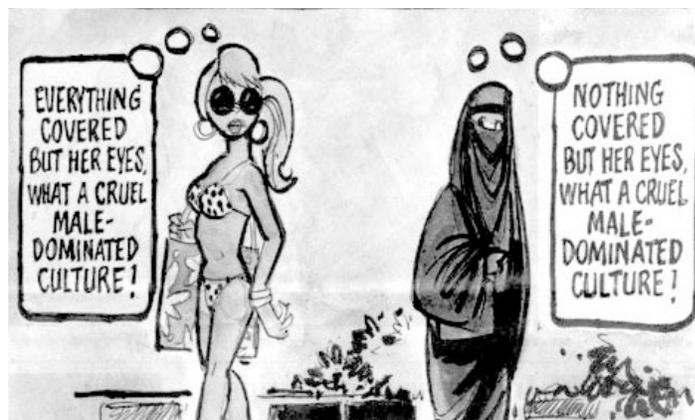
(Excerpted from “Saudi moral committee threatens to cover ‘tempting’ women’s eyes”, in *Harper’s Weekly*, 11/22/2011)

**W**omen with sexy eyes in Saudi Arabia may be forced to cover them up, according to the spokesperson of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) in the conservative Gulf kingdom.

Spokesman of the Ha’ael district, Sheikh Motlab al-Nabet said the committee has the right to stop a woman whose eyes seem “tempting” and order her to cover them immediately. The announcement came days after the Saudi newspaper *al-Watan* reported that a Saudi man was admitted to a hospital after a fight with a member of the committee when the committeeman ordered the man’s wife to cover her eyes. The husband was then stabbed twice in the hand.

The CPVPV is Saudi’s Sharia executive arm and was founded in 1940 to ensure Islamic laws are not broken in public, yet over the years, the committee has been largely criticized over its human rights violations. It’s the same committee that in 2002 refused to let female students out of their burning school in Mecca because police and firemen would see the girls “without their proper head cover”.

Fifteen young girls, children, died.



**Comment:** Clever cartoon, yes, but the Western woman has a choice; she can wear whatever she wants. – JR

**WHO GETS THE DUMBTH-OF-THE-YEAR  
2011 AWARD? CAST YOUR VOTE!**

It's time to decide: Which nationally-recognizable personality was most spectacularly wrong-headed, denying or clueless about reality in 2011?

"Dumbth" is the coinage of the late secular humanist and humorist Steve Allen. In 1992, PIQUE Editor Warren Allen Smith proposed that SHSNY give Dumbth Awards to "those who deserve to have their illogic pointed out".

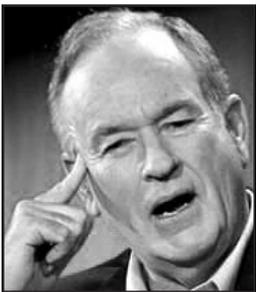
Who would get a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example,

*"A person who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with 'a miracle'."*

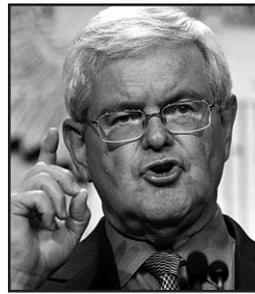
So, who among our numbskull nominees will receive the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy first won by TV personality Star Jones, who said in 2005 that God "blessed her" by postponing the 2004 Christmas-week tsunami that killed 230,000 people until after her honeymoon? It was passed on to 2006 winner Pat Robertson, who claimed that God gave Israel's Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians. (In fact, we decided Pat deserved a special Lifetime-in-Dumbth Award – remember gay pride parades causing hurricanes?)

In 2007, right-wing harridan Ann Coulter beat out stiff competition with her suggestion that American Jews needed to "be perfected" by becoming Christians (we put a blond ponytail on the award's behind in her honor). But in 2008 there was no real contest, as Darwin-denier Ben Stein walked away with the award for opining that while prayer leads to beauty, "Dachau is where science leads you ... to killing people". His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI left all other 2009 contenders behind with his pronouncement that "You can't resolve [AIDS] with the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, it increases the problem." And finally, last year, now-rich TV actor Craig T. Nelson took the 2010 tail for his anti-government-bailouts complaint that, "I've been on welfare and food stamps - did anyone help me?"

Tough acts to follow, certainly. But some dunderhead has to win, so here, in the order of their nominations, are 2011's contenders for the Secular Humanist Society of New York's Dumbth Of The Year Award.



On his Fox News show in January, early-betting-favorite bloviator **Bill O'Reilly**, who seems not to have learned about the moon or gravity in middle-school Earth Science, told American Atheist Group president David Silverman that religion wasn't a scam because: "Tide goes in, tide goes out. It always comes in, and always goes out, never a missed communication. You can't explain that."



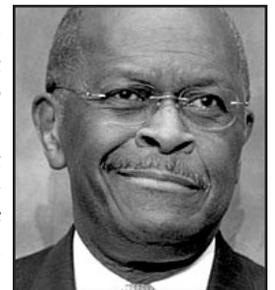
Nominated for the third time (the charm?), presidential hopeful **Newt Gingrich**, who some consider an intellectual, challenged that assumption in March with the spectacular illogic that unless America turns rightward, we could become "a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists".

In June in New Hampshire, half-term ex-governor **Sarah Palin**, confused as to who the recipients of Paul Revere's warnings were and what the American Revolution was all about (not the Second Amendment, Sarah), announced that the famed midnight rider "... warned, uh, the British that they weren't gonna be takin' away our arms ...".



A hurricane and a minor earthquake hit Washington in August, and presidential candidate **Michele Bachmann** earned her second straight Dumbth nomination with this: "I don't know how much God has to do to get the attention of politicians ...", oblivious of the fact that Congress, including her, was out of town both times.

In December we found an essay by I faux candidate **Herman Cain**, who wrote that Jesus was "the perfect conservative ... who helped the poor without one government program ... healed the sick without a government health care system, fed the hungry without food stamps ..." for all of which He was condemned to die by – wait for it – "a liberal court".



Yes, we know, we know: all the nominees are conservatives, and four out of five are or were (Cain) Republican presidential hopefuls. And honestly, we really do know that liberals and Democrats can be just as batty as right-wingers, but no one alerted us to a single example of liberal dumbth this past year. If you're a conservative and want to get even, the pages of PIQUE and the nominating process are wide open. But remember – dumbth is not exemplified by ideas and opinions you don't agree with, but by counter-factual and/or reason-impooverished illogic. Funny helps, too.

**Cast Your Vote Now, and Again in February**

Okay, balloting – online and by phone – begins now, and lasts through January 31. Cast your vote via editor@shsnyc.org, or leave a message at 212-308-2165. Celebrators will get a second chance to vote at our February 10 Anniversary/Darwin Dinner (see page 7), at which the winner of the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy will be announced. – JR

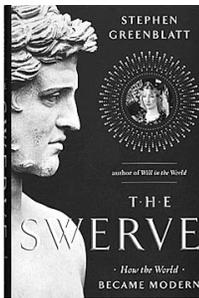
# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2012

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURSDAY, JAN. 5, 6:30 pm**  
 in the Gallery room of  
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
**OF NEW YORK**

**28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)**  
 (3 doors West of the church - red door)

**We'll discuss**  
**THE SWERVE: How the World**  
**Became Modern**  
**by Stephen Greenblatt**

An innovative work of history and a thrilling story of discovery, in which one manuscript, the ancient Roman philosophical epic, *On the Nature of Things*, by Lucretius, plucked from a thousand years of neglect, changed the course of human thought and made possible



the world as we know it. That book was the last surviving manuscript of an ancient Roman philosophical epic, a beautiful poem of the most dangerous ideas: that the universe functioned without the aid of gods, that religious fear was damaging to human life, and that matter was made up of very small particles in eternal motion, colliding and swerving in new directions.

*"The Swerve is one of those brilliant works of non-fiction that's so jam-packed with ideas and stories it literally boggles the mind."* – NPR

*Paperback and Kindle editions*

**Join us even if you haven't finished reading.**

**The SHSNY Book Club**

**is open to all ... and free!**

**YES, REASONABLE NEW YORK WILL JOIN REASON RALLY IN WASHINGTON, D.C. MARCH 24. JOIN IN! – DETAILS TBA.**

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURSDAY, FEB. 2, 6:30 pm**  
 at The Community Church  
**28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)**  
**THE BETTER ANGELS**

**OF OUR NATURE:**  
**Why Violence has Declined**  
**by Steven Pinker**

Part One of two Book Club meetings devoted to this outstanding new history, an exploration of the essence of human nature, mixing psychology and history to provide a remarkable picture of an increasingly nonviolent world. The key, Pinker explains, is to understand our intrinsic motives – the inner demons that incline us toward violence and the better angels that steer us away – and how changing circumstances have allowed our better angels to prevail. Exploding fatalist myths about humankind's inherent violence and the curse of modernity, this provocative book is sure to be hotly debated.

– *Kindle edition available*

**Part 2**  
**of our discussion of**  
**"The Better Angels ..."**  
**THURS, MARCH 1, 6:30 PM**

## PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays and disasters aside, the *usual* monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:

**Book Club: First Thursday**  
 at the Community Church of NY.

**Movie Night: Second Monday**  
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

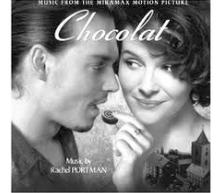
**Brunch: Third Sunday**  
 at BXL East Bistro.

**Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday**  
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

More info: [www.shsn.org](http://www.shsn.org) and at [humanism.meetup.com/515; reasonablenewyork.org/](http://humanism.meetup.com/515;reasonablenewyork.org/) and 212-308-2165

**MONDAY, JAN 9, 7:00 pm**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**"CHOCOLAT"**

An iconoclastic single mother (Oscar nominee Juliette Binoche) and her young daughter move into a peaceful



French village virtually frozen in time, and open an uncommon chocolate shop during the height of Lent – directly across the street from the church. At first, the shop's rich, sensuous desserts scandalize the town and its hyper-conservative leading citizen (Alfred Molina). But the villagers (including Judi Dench, Lena Olin, Leslie Caron, and Johnny Depp) soon learn to savor the sweetness.

**SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.**

Check out the menu and prices at [www.stonecreeknyc.com](http://www.stonecreeknyc.com)

**BRUNCH!**  
**SUNDAY, JAN 15, 12 NOON**  
**Gather for our**  
**MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH**  
**GET-TOGETHER**  
**at BXL East, 210 East 51 St.**

We'll meet at Noon at our new favorite bistro just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and prix-fixe Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18. Check it out at [bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/](http://bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/)

Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome.

**Bring friends!**

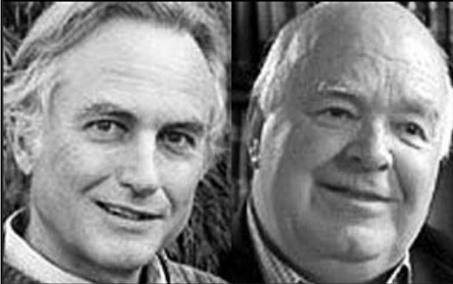
# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2012

## GREAT LECTURES

**TUESDAY, JAN 24, 7:00 pm**  
**"HAS SCIENCE BURIED  
GOD?"**

*A Debate, at Oxford, between  
Richard Dawkins  
and John Lennox*  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

**Richard Dawkins vs. John Lennox**



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## AND THEN WHAT?

Robert Bohr

In the spring of 1945 I lived in a small provincial town of Russia. The war was still raging in the West, the allied forces were closing in on Germany, but here, in the depth of Russia, life was gradually becoming normal. There were still ruined buildings destroyed by German bombs on the other side of the town; the remnants of them could still be seen through the windows of a passing tram.

My father was a trader of tobacco he bought from the villagers who grew it in the suburbs. Then he resold it in the town. I assisted him. The trading usually went very well: I would sit on a small square trunk full of tobacco, and cry out, "Come up, grab it, tobacco, strong tobacco!" And lots of people would line up to buy my tobacco and not that of other sellers, maybe because I was very small and had a piercing voice, or maybe because my father was a war invalid; he lost his leg in action. Maybe it was both.

Anyway, the trade ran well, but other sellers were jealous of us and reported our success to the authorities. "Speculation" was banned by law at that time. As a result my father was punished with a five-year prison term, our family was stripped of all of its possessions, and my mother and I were relocated to a small room in a communal apartment which we shared with two other families. During this period I recall visiting my father in prison together with my mother (but that's a topic for another story).

Thinking about my childhood in Russia, I remember another incident that affected me strongly, when I was about four years old. We lived at that time in a small dwelling next to an asphalt road that ran through the town to its outskirts, then to the local cemetery and then continued outside of town. There were no private cars in town at that time. The traffic was not busy, so noise outside didn't bother us.

On an early spring day, when my father was on a business trip, my mother decided to see her friend who lived not far from us to have a "small chat" with her. She told me she would return "soon", then locked the door, as she usually did in such cases, and left. I knew from my past experience that this "soon" could last for hours, and so it did. After I told all of the stories that I knew to my beloved homemade Teddy Bear, the only toy of mine, I didn't know what to do next. At that moment I heard the sounds of extremely loud and unpleasant music. I looked out of the only small window of the apartment and from an inconvenient angle saw part of a procession of people who were walking and running along the road. I was extremely curious and wanted to take a closer look at what was happening there. Was this possible? I recalled that once mother showed my father a hiding place where she kept a reserve key from the apartment. Risking a punishment (beating with ropes used for drying laundry) I decided to use the key to get out of the apartment before my mother returned, and so I did.

After joining the crowd, what I saw was really shocking and disgusting to me. I would not even say it was scary, because I saw a thing like this for the first time in my life and didn't really understand the meaning of it. The sound of the

music was extremely screechy and unpleasant. A man was lying in a red coffin (an unpleasant color to me) and didn't move at all. His face for some reason was extremely yellow and worn out, and his nose was very bony. I looked very attentively at him, hoping that this terrible and extremely loud and penetrating music would awaken him, but it did not. It is at that moment I became extremely afraid, because I felt that something really unusual was happening, and I ran back home as fast as I could.

When my mother returned, I told her what I had seen "out of the window". She looked at me and said nothing.

Where did they carry him? I asked.

To the cemetery, she said.

And why he didn't move?

He died.

What does that mean?

He fell asleep forever.

And would never wake up?

Never.

And why is he yellow?

He was ill for a long time, but now he doesn't feel any pain.

And what will happen to him at the cemetery?

They will bury him in the grave.

And then what?

Worms will eat his body.

Will he feel it?

No.

And then what?

Only a skeleton will remain.

And then what?

Even this will eventually decay and fall apart.

And then what?

Nothing will remain of him at all.

And will you also die?

Yes, but it will happen after many, many years from now. You will be an adult yourself by that time.

How many years?

Maybe fifty, maybe more. Don't worry about it, it will happen many years from now. Everything will be fine.

And will I also die?

Everybody and everything will eventually die, but you will die after many, many years after me and your father, so don't worry about it now.

So, I will die?

Yes, everybody will, don't worry about that now.

And she embraced me.

What happened to me after that is difficult to describe, but I felt an extreme strangeness and weirdness that I had never experienced before. The whole world seemed to turn upside down, and I saw everything in me and around me in a completely new and different light. I looked at the trees, at the streets, at the buildings, at the people around me and kept repeating to myself: That will be gone, that will be gone, even *that* will be gone. Everything will be gone. And what will remain?

Nothing? Nothing at all?

## AMERICANS: UNDECIDED ABOUT GOD?

Eric Weiner

*(Reprinted from The New York Times, 12/10/2011)*

The holidays are upon us again – it sounds vaguely aggressive, as if the holidays were some sort of mugger, or overly enthusiastic lover – and so it's time to stick a thermometer deep in our souls and take our spiritual temperature (between trips to the mall, of course).

For some of us, the season affords an opportunity to reconnect with our religious heritage. For others, myself included, it's a time to shake our heads over the sad state of our national conversation about God, and wish there were another way.

For a nation of talkers and self-confessors, we are terrible when it comes to talking about God. The discourse has been co-opted by the True Believers, on one hand, and Angry Atheists on the other. What about the rest of us?

The rest of us, it turns out, constitute the nation's fastest-growing religious demographic. We are the Nones, the roughly 12 percent of people who say they have no religious affiliation at all. The percentage is even higher among young people; at least a quarter are Nones.

Apparently, a growing number of Americans are running from organized religion, but by no means running from God. On average 93 percent of those surveyed say they believe in God or a higher power; this holds true for most Nones – just 7 percent of whom describe themselves as atheists, according to a survey by Trinity College.

Nones are the undecided of the religious world. We drift spiritually and dabble in everything from Sufism to Kabbalah to, yes, Catholicism and Judaism.

Why the rise of the Nones? David Campbell and Robert Putnam, of the University of Notre Dame and the Harvard Kennedy School, respectively, think politics is to blame. Their idea is that we've mixed politics and religion so completely that many simply opt out of both; apparently they are reluctant to claim a religious affiliation because they don't want the political one that comes along with it.

We are more religiously polarized than ever. In my secular, urban and urbane world, God is rarely spoken of, except in mocking, derisive tones. It is acceptable to cite the latest academic study on, say, happiness or, even better, whip out a brain scan, but God? He is for suckers, and Republicans.

I used to be that way, too, until a health scare and the onset of middle age created a crisis of faith, and I ventured to the other side. I quickly discovered that I didn't fit there, either. I am not a True Believer. I am a rationalist. I believe the Enlightenment was a very good thing, and don't wish to return to an age of raw superstition.

We Nones may not believe in God, but we hope to one day. We have a dog in this hunt.

Nones don't get hung up on whether a religion is "true" or not, and instead subscribe to William James's maxim that "truth is what works". If a certain spiritual practice makes us better people – more loving, less angry – then it is necessarily good, and by extension "true". (We believe that

G. K. Chesterton got it right when he said: "It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.")

By that measure, there is very little "good religion" out there. Put bluntly: God is not a lot of fun these days. Many of us don't view religion so generously. All we see is an angry God. He is constantly judging and smiting, and so are his followers. No wonder so many Americans are enamored of the Dalai Lama. He laughs, often and well.

Precious few of our religious leaders laugh. They shout. God is not an exclamation point, though. He is, at his best, a semicolon, connecting people, and generating what Aldous Huxley called "human grace". Somewhere along the way, we've lost sight of this.

Religion and politics, though often spoken about in the same breath, are, of course, fundamentally different. Politics is, by definition, a public activity. Though religion contains large public components, it is at core a personal affair. It is the relationship we have with ourselves or, as the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, "What the individual does with his solitariness." There lies the problem: how to talk about the private nature of religion publicly.

What is the solution? The answer, I think, lies in the sort of entrepreneurial spirit that has long defined America, including religious America.

We need a Steve Jobs of religion. Someone (or ones) who can invent not a new religion but, rather, a new way of being religious. Like Mr. Jobs's creations, this new way would be straightforward and unencumbered and absolutely intuitive. Most important, it would be highly interactive. I imagine a religious space that celebrates doubt, encourages experimentation and allows one to utter the word "God" without embarrassment. A religious operating system for the Nones among us. And for all of us.

## WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #118

*(Excerpted from The Humanist, newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society, December, 2011)*

The Oklahoma City city council recently held hearings on a proposal to modify the city's employment and nondiscrimination policy by adding sexual orientation to the list of protected groups.

Oklahoma Baptist College president Dr. Tom Vineyard attended the hearings, where he cited "a New York judge" in claiming that more than half of all murders in large cities are committed by gay people, and that "Many homosexuals openly admit that they are pedophiles because they cannot actually reproduce. They resort to recruiting children. ... Folks, you're making a decision that will bring down God's judgment on your city if you vote in favor of this."

The council risked God's wrath and approved the change, protecting gays, but Dr. Vineyard enjoyed a long, loud, and standing ovation.

In a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority.

– Edmund Burke

## WHY IT'S SO TRICKY FOR ATHEISTS TO DEBATE WITH BELIEVERS – PART 1

Greta Christina

(Reprinted from AlterNet, 1/16/2010)

In conversations between atheists and believers, is there any way atheists can win? I've been in a lot of discussions and debates with religious believers in the last few years, and I'm beginning to notice a pattern. Believers put atheists in no-win situations, so that no matter what atheists do, we'll be seen as either acting like jerks or conceding defeat.

Like so many rhetorical gambits aimed at atheists, these "damned if you do, damned if you don't" tactics aren't really valid criticisms of atheism. They really only serve to deflect valid questions and criticisms about religion. But they come up often enough that I want to spend a little time pointing them out. I want to spell out the exact ways that these "no-win" situations are both unfair and inaccurate. And I want to point out the general nature of this no-win pattern—in hopes that in future debates with atheists, believers will be more aware of them, and will play a little more fairly.

*When we atheists focus our critiques on conservative or extremist religions, we get accused of ignoring the tolerant progressive ones and lumping all religions together. But when we do criticize progressive or moderate religions, we're accused of mean-spirited overkill, of alienating people who could be our allies.*

**Why this is untrue and unfair:** It doesn't make much sense to assume that the atheist critique of religion you're reading that moment is the only atheist critique of religion this writer has ever come up with. Most atheist writers who criticize religion do so many times, and from many angles. We critique extremist fundamentalism, *and* moderate ecumenicalism. We critique specific religious beliefs and practices, *and* the general belief in the supernatural. It's not "lumping all religions together" to point out the flaws and hypocrisies and evils committed by one in particular.

So if we're writing about the harm done by gay-hating fundamentalism or the pedophile-enabling Catholic Church, please don't complain that we're "lumping all religions together". We're not talking about *your* religion. We did that last week.

And yes, we can criticize progressive religions and still be their allies on issues we agree on. Just like any movement can be critical of other movements and still work with them as allies.

*When we atheists criticize Christianity, we get accused of being cowards for not criticizing Islam. But when we criticize Islam, we get accused of cultural insensitivity.*

**Why this is untrue and unfair:** And I say yet again: It's neither fair nor reasonable to assume that the atheist critique you're reading right that second is the only one this atheist has ever written. If an atheist is criticizing Christianity today, it doesn't mean they didn't criticize Islam last week.

Most American atheists do focus our attentions largely on Christianity — mainly because it's the religion that's most in our face on a daily basis. But I don't know of any serious atheist writer who hasn't criticized Islam. I certainly have. I've criticized Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, fundamentalist Christianity, progressive Christianity, Hinduism, Wicca, Baha'i, and that religion that worships a blue peacock. To name but a few.

As for cultural insensitivity in criticizing Islam, well, given how Islam and Islamic theocracies have historically treated women and gays, I'd call it culturally insensitive *not* to criticize it. I agree that some atheists can be racist, xenophobic jerks (especially on the Internet—the Internet does seem to bring the racist, xenophobic jerks out of the woodwork, from every group). But to slam as "culturally insensitive" any criticism of Islam as it's widely and commonly practiced — that's pretty freaking insensitive to the people who are victimized by it.

*When we atheists focus our critiques on ordinary religious beliefs held by the majority of people, we are accused of ignoring advanced modern theology and focusing on outdated beliefs that nobody takes seriously anymore. But when atheists do argue against modern theology, we are accused of elitism. What's more, when we argue against Modern Theologian A, we're accused of ignoring Modern Theologian B, and when we argue against Modern Theologian B, we're accused of ignoring Modern Theologian C ... in an infinite regress of movable goalposts.*

**Why this is untrue and unfair:** Most atheist activists don't care very much about religion as it's practiced by a handful of modern theology scholars. If all religion were the religion of modern theology scholars, well, we still wouldn't agree with it, but we probably wouldn't bother putting much energy into arguing with it.

We care about religion as it's believed and practiced by the overwhelming majority of people who believe it. By definition, those beliefs are not outdated. A belief in a personal interventionist creator god who answers prayers and doles out punishment and reward in the afterlife, that is not an outdated belief. It's what most believers believe in. Even belief in faith healing, demonic possession, magical objects and substances — these are still widespread, around the country and around the world. Heck, nearly half of all Americans believe in young-earth Creationism.

When atheists battle these beliefs, we are not fighting straw men. We are fighting real beliefs and practices, with real effects on people's lives. And as it happens, many atheists *are* familiar with modern theology. And we're really not impressed. How much of it do we have to read before we're allowed to conclude that it makes no sense?

*When atheists attempt to present an organized, unified front, we are accused of being Stalinist group-think robots. But when we're honest about disagreements among us, we are derided and dismissed for the supposed "schisms" that are supposedly dooming our movement to failure.*

**Why this is untrue and unfair:** I am so tired of hearing about the “schisms” in the atheist movement, I could plotz. Look. We don’t have a central dogma or organization to split away from. We’re a diverse movement with lots of differences among us, and we don’t view that as a weakness. We view it as a great strength.

Besides, how does this make us different from any other movement for social change? In all of history, I can’t think of any other social change movement that hasn’t had internal disagreements; disagreements large and small, disagreements over minor tactics and over major values and goals. Sometimes movements set aside these differences to focus on what everyone agrees on; sometimes they focus on these differences and try to hammer them out. And sure, sometimes that hammering-out process results in pointless in-fighting, but sometimes it results in real progress.

And in particular, the difference between firebrand confrontationalists and polite diplomacists (the supposed “schism” in the atheist movement that the news media has been pissing itself over) has existed in every single social change movement I can think of. And while it can be a source of tension, it can also very much work in our favor – for the same reasons that every other social change movement in history has been able to play “good cop, bad cop” to its advantage.

*When atheists say we don't believe in God, we're told we can't possibly be moral people. But when we make our morality clear in word and deed, many believers insist that we must be spiritual or religious or following God unconsciously – even if we deny it.*

**Why this is untrue and unfair:** Talk about an unfalsifiable hypothesis! If any act of morality is seen as an act of spirituality by definition, is there any possible way atheists can prove we genuinely don’t believe in God? Do we have to eat babies or push little old ladies in front of buses to prove that we’re not religious?

To say that ethical atheists must be motivated by religion is a classic case of assuming the thing you’re trying to prove. And it’s completely unfalsifiable; no possible evidence could show that it’s wrong. If atheists behave ethically, that somehow proves that we’re really religious; if we behave badly, it somehow proves that atheism is inherently bad and leads people away from morality. It couldn’t possibly be that atheists are just human beings – a mix of good and bad, some tilted more in one direction than others. And it couldn’t possibly be that our lack of belief in any sort of god is entirely sincere.

*Part 2 of Ms. Christina's essay will appear in February PIQUE.*

## “WIT” RETURNS John Rafferty

One of the best plays I have ever seen is being revived, and I urge my fellow humanists to see it. Cynthia Nixon will star in the revival of this 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by Margaret Edson. Previews start January 5 at the Manhattan Theater Club’s Friedman Theater, and the necessary info is at [witonbroadway.com](http://witonbroadway.com).

Here’s what I wrote in PIQUE in 1999.

I have just caught up with last year’s Pulitzer-winning play, “Wit”, by Margaret Edson, a Georgia elementary school teacher who has grabbed the brass ring with her first play. And deserves it. I have just seen a play I shall remember until my dying day. Perhaps especially that day.

“Wit” is about a 50-year-old professor of English whose specialty is the Holy Sonnets of 17th century metaphysical poet John Donne, and who is dying of fourth stage (“there is no fifth stage”, she tells us) ovarian cancer. At the outset, we learn that there is no real hope (“It is not my intention to give away the plot”, she tells the audience directly, “but I think I die at the end”) and that Professor Bearing has agreed to participate in an extended and painful regimen of chemotherapy for the sake of medical research. For two hours, we watch a bald, sick woman get sicker, throw up, scream in agony, rage against her fate and all the probing indignities and helpless humiliations to which depersonalized modern medicine can subject an individual and, finally, die.

Bummer, right? But wait.

During those two hours we also discover the real, live, living Professor Bearing, and what she is made of. And we learn a few things about Donne’s poetry in the bargain. We learn a great deal about a person who has dedicated her life to the search for truth and meaning (“wit” in the 17th century sense of the word) in what might seem a very small academic sphere, but one that encompasses the largest questions of all: life, death and humankind’s relation to the universe, eternity, to you know, what’sHISname. Playwright Edson takes belief in God for granted, and protagonist Bearing rises naked from her cast-off hospital gown in an ethereal white light in the last moment of the play and of her life, enacting the promise of the last line of Donne’s most famous sonnet: “And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.”

Baloney, my fellow humanists, right? But wait.

What we learn about this truly remarkable woman in the two hours we spend in her company is that she has created her own life. It is not a life many of us would choose: childless, without attachments (her friends are professional, her lovers forgotten), ascetically academic and, in many ways, lonely. But *hers*. Consciously chosen, rigorously self-examined and, in the end, triumphantly celebrated. She has taken no one else’s dictation, seeks no one else’s favor. Her courses are regarded among the toughest at her (unnamed) university, and the standards she applies to her students’ work are unflinchingly strict, but her greatest joy is in opening up and developing young minds. Her belief in God (protagonist Bearing’s, not necessarily playwright Edson’s, I think) is a belief in artistic perfection, or rather a belief in the striving for a perfect understanding of art, a complete commitment to truth. No dogma, no ritual, no theology, but absolute commitment.

And when she is asked, Vivian Bearing makes one last, painful commitment in the final weeks of her life; she creates her life anew even as that life is ending. She might not say it, so I’ll say it for her: She is all the god she needs.

Don’t wait. See this extraordinary play.

## GOD, THE POLITICAL PHILANDERER

Keith Olbermann

(Transcribed from "Countdown", on CurrentTV, 6/4/2011)

Michelle Bachmann has done it again: announced that she's had a calling from God about running for president, and felt that tugging on her heart that it is the right thing to do. God talks to the congresswoman a lot. While a state senator in 2006, Bachmann told a Minnesota mega-church that God had called on her to run for the United States Congress.

The problem is—I mean, the other problem, besides the fact that if you had said God told you to do something they might ask you to go see a psychiatrist, but nobody is suggesting that for Michelle—is that God is politically unfaithful. He also told Newt Gingrich that he was forgiven and could run for president, too.

[Update November: Herman Cain told an audience of Young Republicans that the Lord also persuaded him to run, and compared himself to Moses. "And when I finally realized that it was God saying that this is what I needed to do, I was like Moses, 'You've got the wrong man, Lord. Are you sure?'" ]

[Update December: The Lord's wishes notwithstanding, Herman Cain "suspended" his ~~book-tour~~ campaign.]

There is also Sarah Palin, who may or may not have suggested that she got divine instructions, or may simply think that she is God.

Actually there's a third problem here. It seems to me that of all the different lines of work one could pursue, political office is the only field in which God likes to have a

hand in the staffing process. Sure, He intervenes here and there in the outcome of major sporting events, but when it comes to recommending people for the position, political office is exclusively where He works. You never hear a sanitation worker explaining that he'd always been most interested in the field of psychology in his youth, but when he was 21, he heard the voice of God, which told him his real calling was sanitation.

When it comes to heavenly messages, I'm holding out for the first candidate to drop out, saying "God told me not to run." Him, I might listen to.

God told me to do this commentary.

**STOP PRESS! UPDATE DECEMBER 19:**

According to the always reliable Borowitz Report, within hours after the sudden death of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Il, on-again, off-again presidential pretender Donald Trump flew to that country to run for its presidency.

"Kim Jong-Il ruled North Korea as the egomaniacal leader of a personality cult", Mr. Trump told reporters en route to Pyongyang. "I can offer continuity of leadership."

## JOHN LENNON ON HAPPINESS

(Forwarded by David Rafferty)

When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down "happy".

They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life.

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