

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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December, 2016

Happy Holidays. Yes, really, because we'll get through this. And if the reign of George W. Bush is any predictor, SHSNY and freethought groups across America will soon see an uptick in numbers. Meanwhile, we have a Solstice to celebrate (page 7), a disappearing universe to consider, and spot-on essays by Krauss, Keillor, Moore and the Dalai Lama to read. But first, one of the 20th century's most brilliant bigoted essayists predicts the advent of the 21st century's most bigoted buffoon. – JR

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## TRUMP VOTERS WILL NOT LIKE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT Garrison Keillor

(Reprinted from The Washington Post, 11/9/2016)

So he won. The nation takes a deep breath. Raw ego and proud illiteracy have won out, and a severely learning-disabled man with a real character problem will be president. We are so exhausted from thinking about this election, millions of people will take up leaf-raking and garage cleaning with intense pleasure. We liberal elitists are wrecks. The Trumpers had a whale of a good time, waving their signs, jeering at the media, beating up protesters, chanting "Lock her up" – we elitists just stood and clapped. Nobody chanted "Stronger Together." It just doesn't chant.

The Trumpers never expected their guy to actually win the thing, and that's their problem now. They wanted only to whoop and yell, boo at the H-word, wear profane T-shirts, maybe grab a crotch or two, jump in the RV with a couple of six-packs and go out and shoot some spotted owls. It was pleasure enough for them just to know that they were driving us wild with dismay – by "us", I mean librarians, children's authors, yoga practitioners, Unitarians, bird-watchers, people who make their own pasta, opera-goers, the grammar police, people who keep books on their shelves, that bunch. The Trumpers exulted in knowing we were tearing our hair out. They had our number, like a bratty kid who knows exactly how to make you grit your teeth and froth at the mouth.

Alas for the Trump voters, the disasters he will bring on this country will fall more heavily on them than anyone else. The uneducated white males who elected him are the vulnerable ones, and they will not like what happens next.

To all the patronizing B.S. we've read about Trump expressing the white working-class's displacement and loss of the American Dream, I say, "Feh!" – go put your head under cold water. Resentment is no excuse for bald-faced stupidity. America is still the land where the waitress's kids can grow up to become physicists and novelists and pediatricians, but it helps a lot if the waitress and her husband encourage good habits and the ambition to use your God-given talents and the kids aren't plugged into electronics day and night. Whooping it up for the candidate of cruelty and ignorance does

"As democracy is perfected, the office of the president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be occupied by a downright fool and a complete narcissist moron."

– H. L. Mencken

*The Baltimore Evening Sun, July 26, 1920*

nothing for your kids.

We liberal elitists are now completely in the clear. The government is in Republican hands. Let them deal with him. Democrats can spend four years raising heirloom tomatoes, meditating, reading Jane Austen, traveling around the country, tasting artisan beers, and let the Republicans build the wall and carry on the trade war with China and deport the undocumented and deal with opioids, and we Democrats can go for a long, brisk walk and smell the roses.

I like Republicans. I used to spend Sunday afternoons with them, drinking Scotch and soda and trying to care about NFL football. It was fun. I tried to think like them. (Life is what you make it. People are people. When the going gets tough, tough noogies.) But I came back to liberal elitism.

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## THE MORNING AFTER – WE REACT

*Editor: The following are gleaned from the dozens of reactions by SHSNY members, friends and fellow-travelers sent to PIQUE, to me personally, and posted on FaceBook during the 24 hours after the disaster of November 8. – JR*

Don't be cruel. Elvis said it, and it's true. We all experienced cruelty back in our playground days – boys who beat up on the timid, girls who made fun of the homely and naive – and most of us, to our shame, went along with it, afraid to defend the victims lest we become one of them. But by your 20s, you should be done with cruelty. Mr. Trump was the cruelest candidate since George Wallace. How he won on fear and bile is for political pathologists to study. The country is already tired of his noise. He is likely to become the most intensely disliked president since Herbert Hoover. His children will carry the burden of his name. He will never be happy in his own skin. But the damage he will do to our country – who knows? His supporters voted for change, and boy, are they going to get it.

Back to real life. I went up to my home town the other day and ran into my gym teacher, Stan Nelson, looking good at 96. He commanded a landing craft at Normandy on June 6, 1944, and never said a word about it back then, just made us do chin-ups whether we wanted to or not. I saw my biology teacher Lyle Bradley, a Marine pilot in the Korean War, still going bird-watching in his 90s. I was not a good student then, but I am studying both of them now. They have seen it all and are still optimistic. The past year of politics has taught us absolutely nothing. Zilch. Zero. Nada. The future is scary. Let the uneducated have their day. I am now going to pay more attention to teachers.

Donald Trump tapped into the anger of a declining middle class that is sick and tired of establishment economics, establishment politics and the establishment media. People are tired of working longer hours for lower wages, of seeing decent paying jobs go to China and other low-wage countries, of billionaires not paying any federal income taxes, and of not being able to afford a college education for their kids – while the very rich become much richer.

To the degree that Mr. Trump is serious about pursuing policies that improve the lives of working families in this country, I and other progressives are prepared to work with him. To the degree that he pursues racist, sexist, xenophobic and anti-environment policies, we will vigorously oppose him. – *Senator Bernie Sanders*

There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that “my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge”. – *Isaac Asimov*

On the Sunday following Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, Merriam-Webster reported on Twitter that the most popular search terms on the famous dictionary's site were for “fascism”, “bigot”, “xenophobe”, “racism”, “socialism”, “resurgence”, “xenophobia”, and “misogyny”, in that order. – *altnet.org, 11/14/2016*

And the winners are ... Donald Trump, Newt Gingrich, Rudy Giuliani, Vladimir Putin, Julian Assange, Sean Hannity, David Duke, the KKK, evangelical Christians, Joe and Jane Sixpack, the right wing judges destined for both SCOTUS and lower federal courts, and the posthumous wisdom of H.L. Mencken. Everyone else across the globe loses. And the future for women's reproductive rights, LGBT rights, funding for public schools, police-minority relations and separation of church and state? As we say in Brooklyn, *Fugetaboutit!* – *Dennis Middlebrooks*

I'm gonna throw up. – *Edd Doerr*

Well, the nightmare came to pass after all, and I, for one, did not see it coming until yesterday evening. We were at a party with good, like-minded friends, and with TVs going at once, and I began to feel very apprehensive about the reports. We decided to go home early, with people telling me, “You're such a pessimist! It will be OK, just wait a bit!” We will all weather that, right, John? *Never give up, never surrender!* – *Martine Reed*

I've been reading and hearing the experts' explanations for the Trump victory, and *none* of them got it right. They all focus on the reasons for the dissatisfaction and frustration that a large segment of the population has with its condition and with the direction of the country. These are real problems but they are not the reason Hillary lost.

When questioned, Trump voters, those who dislike Trump as well as those who like him, *always* say, among other things, that they don't trust Hillary, that she is corrupt, crooked. This stemmed mostly from her private e-mail server which probably contained some classified material. That was a mistake but not enough to merit the level of hatred that it evoked.

However, the Fanatical Republican Fox News (FRFN) bullshit and slander machine is very skillful. Its forte is taking the finest accomplishment and virtues of its victims and turning them into shit. It swiftboated Hillary just as it did to John Kerry and so many others. Its pervasive, relentless harping about Hillary's supposed lying and corruption persuaded too many people, even some SHSNY members.

Would I trust Hillary to always tell the truth? No, but I wouldn't trust myself to always tell the truth either. However, I would absolutely trust her to use her knowledge, experience and utmost ability do the best she can for the U.S. and its people. That is what we gave away in exchange for an obnoxious, lying, degenerate ignoramus.

– *Giddian Beer*

Back in the J. Edgar Hoover era I said, "If we ever have fascism in America it's not going to come in a brown shirt, but in a blue suit with a red tie." – *Donna Marxer*

No accident that Trump's biggest supporters are the religious right who have faith in a fantastic piece of mythology. If you can believe that, you can have faith in Trump. – *Larry Shaw*

Please make space for me in your "Room of Fears". This is the first time in my long life that I'm afraid of my President-Elect. – *Adrienne Karp*

I am sad that my short time left has been so smashed. I never thought Americans would hurt themselves this way. Oh, for my shining city on a hill. – *Giles Kelly*

I note that Hillary won the popular vote. It's shameful that we are subject to the anti-democratic Electoral College. This is the third time in my lifetime that the actual loser of the presidential election has won because of it. We need to dump the Electoral College and go to One Person One Vote.  
– *Bob Murtha*

Ye gods! – *John C. Adams, North Yorkshire (UK) Humanists*

Almost my first thought when I woke up this morning was, "What am I going to say to John Adams?" An hour and a half later, I still don't know. I went to bed last night sick to my stomach, and I still am.

More when I ... I don't know. – *John Rafferty*

We live in a white Christian patriarchal society whose values, such as they are, Trump all others – pun intended.

– *Geraldine Cosentino*

Hollywood cannot have dreamed the scenario of the Trump triumph. Maybe it is a fictional movie that we can walk out of, or a nightmare to wake up from. Unfortunately, it's all too real. – *Remo Cosentino*

The "white working-class men" were fed up with the status quo where they grow poorer every year, while the Wall Street bankers get richer. The effect of Obamacare on them was to raise their insurance premiums. Bernie's revolution attracted working class support, but the DNC decided to unfairly and illegally rig the primaries against him, and to throw their support behind Hillary, who represents the status quo and the Wall Street bankers, in those workers' minds. Since the DNC denied them their revolution, they voted for Trump's counter-revolution to escape the status quo, even if they found Trump personally racist and misogynistic. I don't blame the workers, I blame the DNC. The DNC is what we need to be ashamed of. – *Flash Light*

I didn't even want to get up this morning. How can pollsters be so wrong? "A day that will live in infamy." – *Al Bloom*

Trump voters, liberals who gnawed away at HC, and those who did not vote: You are getting the president you deserve. Unfortunately, the rest of us must also live with this. – *Marjorie Vai*

I keep trying to describe my present feelings and thoughts through words, but the world feels upside-down. So, I think I'll just let the Bernie Sanders campaign speak for me: "We have nothing polite to say right now." – *Michael John DeDora*

I just had a FB discussion with a neighborhood friend who voted for Trump and posted about how we all just needed to grow up and respect people's rights and opinions about this election. When I calmly countered with the very real fear of many Americans terrified about losing their rights due to a Trump presidency, it quickly devolved into "Well I work hard and I'm sick of seeing people who don't work get everything for free while we are persecuted for doing the right thing."

I tried to be patient. I countered with, "If you research it for yourself you will find that most families receiving food stamps are working families."

Her response? "You're wrong, white people *never* get anything."

And there it is, folks. I never said the word "white", but somehow it was synonymous to her with "working".

I deleted this person from my Facebook and my life, but it made me realize we have a lot of work to do.

I figure I'm going to be really angry for a few more days, and then I am going to educate the *shit* out of people, whether they like it or not. Working on not getting Trump reelected in 2020 begins now. – *Sam Moon Rafferty*

The country wanted change. The Dems saw that in Bernie. The GOP saw that in Trump. Change won; just not the right change. But that democracy thing was fun while it lasted. Please don't assassinate Donald Trump. President Pence might be even worse. – *Brian Rafferty*

The world turned upside down. My daughter is working toward being an astrophysicist and we have a President-Elect who doesn't believe in the value of women or science. Am terrified. – *Christine Pointis Rafferty*

Way to go America, you've officially played yourself, I hope you're proud of your new racist Demagogue-Elect.

– *Aidan Rafferty*

It wasn't the FBI intrusion into the race, it wasn't the phony emails issue, it wasn't a lack of organization or effort, it wasn't her personality or her minor prevarications. It was the willful ignorance, racism, homophobia, misogyny and unfocused rage of white working-class men all across the country. I have never said this before, not even in the darkest days of the Vietnam war, but I am ashamed of my country; we are a shitty people. – *John Rafferty*

Hello John,

No, I don't believe this to be true. Americans have not become a shitty people, it is just that politics (at least in the "Western World") is going through a very strange period at present and people who feel (rightly or not) that they have been dispossessed, "left behind" or whatever have fallen easy prey to the slogans of what are little more than modern day rabble-rousers.

In the UK the slogan: "Get our Country back" (with the none-too-subtle suggestion that "foreigners" were the source of all our trouble) appealed to the atavistic fears that many had. "When you ain't got nothing" as the great man said "you've got nothing to lose", but who do you blame for your predicament? It's hard, really hard, to blame oneself. And the swaths of unemployed in the north of England, many of whom had not had jobs since the coal mines closed, could see someone to blame ... and they weren't English.

My guess is that something similar happened in the USA. Added to that Trump (or so it seemed to me) intuitively knew what an American Presidential election was ... it was a show. And he is good at shows. In a show it is not what you say that matters as much as how people feel when the show is over. "Make America great again" is a good slogan. How he is going to do that/what on earth it means, remains to be seen.

But shitty people, no. When I think of Americans, for every nutcase there is a Jefferson or Steinbeck, a Whitman or James, Fitzgerald or Roth ... and of course the great Mr Zimmerman.

We will survive all this ... I'm just not too sure how.

– John C Adams, North Yorkshire (UK) Humanists

I find it so hard to believe they elected this walking piece of man-shit. I am so heart-broken. The rest of the world has healthcare, but on the news I am listening to people say that we don't because employers cannot afford to insure their pregnant workers and give them maternity leave. I must live in a different world. – Eileen Regan

It was misogyny. It's taboo to talk about sexism, misogyny, and the sadistic need of the biblical patriarchs of our times who want to keep women down for a few more generations. The fear of women leaders and the hatred of women is deep and biblical. – Gretchen Robinson

As a student at post graduate level of American History I can attest that a distrust and fear of women is deeply entrenched in the American Psyche. – Dorothy Kahn

My grandson was moping about the morning after, and I asked him what was bothering him. "The election," he said. I counseled him, "Don't worry about it – the worst is yet to come." – Art Harris

I haven't felt this terrified since 9/11. – Anthony Rafferty

Breathe in. Breathe out. – Kathleen Morris

## WHO WE ARE AND WHO I AM

Jonathan Engel

To paraphrase a clichéd t-shirt, "I stood in line for 2-1/2 hours to vote, and all I got was this lousy backache."

Not to mention a hole in my soul, although I mean that metaphysically, not literally. Unlike our Vice President-elect, I don't believe that a person's soul is an actual thing; I'm talking about my human spirit, not spectral spirits. Anyway, for a while now I've been thinking about what President Obama tends to say when someone in the good old U.S. of A. does something terrible, which is, "This is not who we are." It's caused me to speculate that perhaps if the President finds it necessary to use that phrase often enough, the sad truth is that, yeah, this is who we are. So going into the election I thought, well, now I guess we find out who we really are; we discover our true essence. I wish we hadn't, as the truth sure feels pretty ugly at this point.

So how do we react to this horror? I'm sure that there are at least a few decent people out there, as evidenced by the fact that as of this writing it appears likely that Trump will lose the popular vote to Clinton. From what I have heard and read, many of them will throw themselves into renewed activism right away, which is great. Personally, I feel a little too battered and despondent for that right now. So I plan to do some self-nurturing by immersing myself in the near future in the things that give me pleasure and a sense of renewal: art, music, literature, cooking, old movies (I'm a TCM junkie), and English football (called soccer on this side of the pond).

And I intend to continue being the person I've always been. Maybe this election exposed who *we* are as a country, but it doesn't define who *I* am.

Which means I'm going to try to keep my sense of humor (even if it's of the gallows variety), and continue, in whatever small ways I can, to try to make this world a better place. Which may mean simply helping an elderly person with some packages, aiding a sight-impaired person to cross the street, giving a bit to some worthy charity, or other some such actions that might make a difference, no matter how small, while at the same time hopefully causing a fellow human being to smile.

Maybe if I do these kinds of things often enough, a smile will return to my own face as well.

## PATRIOTISM

Peter Rogatz, MD

President-elect Trump's persistent boast that he will "make America great again" is today's version of political flag-waving. In my view the concept of patriotism has always been widely misunderstood, with or without Mr. Trump's recent fanning of the flames.

Patriotism is not just a matter of waving the American flag and shouting down everyone who disagrees. The freedom to disagree is the lifeblood of our democracy. None of us can be right all the time, but we should each be free to argue for a course of action that we believe is right without

having our patriotism challenged.

In 1816 U.S. naval hero Stephen Decatur famously toasted, "Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right and always successful, but our country, right or wrong." I see that as a dangerous version of patriotism and I offer, in contrast, a statement I think is much wiser, though not so well-known, made in 1871 by U.S. Senator Carl Schurz: "Our country right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be put right." This is true patriotism.

A fervent plea by India's great philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore, expresses beautifully the way I love our country:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,  
Where knowledge is free,  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
by narrow domestic walls,  
Where words come out from the depth of truth,  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards  
perfection,  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into  
the dreary desert sand of dead habit,  
Where the mind is led forward into ever-widening  
thought and action,  
Into that heaven of freedom, let my country awake.*

If only this plea could be heard and understood, not only by President-elect Trump, but by politicians of every stripe.

## THE "DISHONEST MEDIA" MADE TRUMP

**John Rafferty**

*"CNN will make roughly \$100 million more in TV and digital advertising revenue this year than it would expect in a typical election year." – NPR, via FiveThirtyEight.com, 10/26/2016*

*Leslie Moonves, Executive Chairman and CEO of CBS: "The money's rolling in and this is fun. ... It may not be good for America, but it's good for CBS."*  
– *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2/29/2016

**F**ox News, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, NBC and all the social media and talk-radio outlets will also bank huge amounts of money this year.

And *that's* the single most important reason we have elected a psychopath to the most powerful position on the planet. Donald Trump was and is good – no, *YUGE* – for ratings, just like a train wreck or a terror bombing. Throughout his campaign he accused the "dishonest media" of being out to get him when, in fact, the media made him.

From the moment Trump and his trophy wife glided down the escalator in the gold-daubed lobby of his tacky tower, to address the actors hired (*\$50, cash, here's your T-shirt*) to cheer his announcement of candidacy, the marketing suits at every media company began to salivate. Money! Power! Sex! – the viewership trifecta! Outrageous claims? Ethnic insults? Baldfaced lies? Bring 'em on, because they'll bring in the eyeballs that advertisers will pay for – bigly!

Our national politics have now become reality-TV entertainment, sunk to levels of mendacity and vulgarity that would have been unimaginable even twenty years ago

(pre-Lewinski), and it's our own goddamn fault. In spite of our vulgar, Peeping-Tom, what's-the-latest-dirt? selves, we have been graced for the past eight years with a leader who is a dignified, even exemplary man (and his family), but the media-enabled Donald Trump will stamp a more lasting impression on America's public discourse than will Barack Obama. More and more of our political contests will become how-low-can-you-go, insult-laden races to the bottom, promoted by the media that enable and encourage the louts and loudmouths over the serious and sophisticated.

And *that's* what we have to fix.

How? I don't know, because *we* are the problem.

## A MORNING (AND MONTH)-AFTER TO-DO LIST

**Michael Moore**

1. Take over the Democratic Party and return it to the people. They have failed us miserably.
2. Fire all pundits, predictors, pollsters and anyone else in the media who had a narrative they wouldn't let go of and refused to listen to or acknowledge what was really going on. Those same bloviators will now tell us we must "heal the divide" and "come together". They will pull more hooey like that out of their ass in the days to come. Turn them off.
3. Any Democratic member of Congress who didn't wake up this morning ready to fight, resist and obstruct in the way Republicans did against President Obama every day for eight full years must step out of the way and let those of us who know the score lead the way in stopping the meanness and the madness that's about to begin.
4. Everyone must stop saying they are "stunned" and "shocked". What you mean to say is that you were in a bubble and weren't paying attention to your fellow Americans and their despair. Years of being neglected by both parties, the anger and the need for revenge against the system only grew. Along came a TV star they liked whose plan was to destroy both parties and tell them all "You're fired!" Trump's victory is no surprise. He was never a joke. Treating him as one only strengthened him. He is both a creature and a creation of the media and the media will never own that.
5. You must say to everyone you meet today: "Hillary Clinton won the popular vote!" The majority of our fellow Americans preferred Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump. Period. Fact. The majority of your fellow Americans wanted Hillary, not Trump. The only reason he's president is because of an arcane, insane 18th-century idea called the Electoral College. Until we change that, we'll continue to have presidents we didn't elect and didn't want.

You live in a country where a majority of its citizens have said they believe there's climate change, they believe women should be paid the same as men, they want a debt-free college education, they don't want us invading countries, they want a raise in the minimum wage, and they want a single-payer true universal health care system. None of that has changed. We live in a country where the majority agree with the "liberal" position. We just lack the liberal leadership to make that happen (see: #1 above).

Let's try to get this all done by noon today.

# SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER - FEBRUARY

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC 1, 7-8:30 pm  
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH  
OF NEW YORK

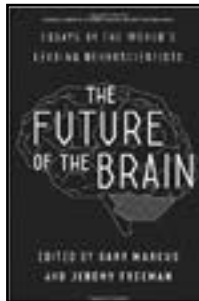
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

**THE FUTURE OF THE BRAIN:  
Essays by the World's  
Leading Neuroscientists.**

**Gary Marcus and  
Jeremy Freeman, Editors**

An unprecedented look at the quest to unravel the mysteries of the human brain, *The Future of the Brain* takes readers to the absolute frontiers of science. Original essays by leading researchers describe the spectacular technological advances that will enable us to map the more than eighty-five billion neurons in the brain, as well as the challenges in understanding the anticipated deluge of data and the prospects for building working simulations of the human brain.



A must-read for anyone trying to understand ambitious new research programs such as the BRAIN Initiative and the Human Brain Project, it sheds light on the breathtaking implications of brain science for medicine, psychiatry, and even human consciousness itself. – *Paperback & Kindle available*

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## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 5, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
**CONSCIOUSNESS**

**AND THE SOCIAL BRAIN**

**Michael S. A. Graziano**

What is consciousness and how can a brain, a mere collection of neurons, create it?

In *Consciousness and the Social Brain*, Princeton neuroscientist Michael Graziano lays out an audacious new theory to account for the deepest mystery of them all.

The human brain has evolved a complex circuitry that allows it to be socially intelligent, a “social machinery” that has only just begun to be studied in detail. One function of this circuitry is to attribute awareness to others: to compute that person Y is aware of thing X – and of itself.

– *Paperback & Kindle available*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, FEB 2, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
**THOMAS JEFFERSON:  
THE ART OF POWER**

**Jon Meacham**

Here is Jefferson the politician and president, a great and complex human being forever engaged in the wars of his era. Philosophers think; politicians maneuver. Jefferson's genius was that he was both and could do both, often simultaneously. Such is the art of power.

Drawing on archives in the United States, England, and France, as well as unpublished Jefferson presidential papers, Meacham presents Jefferson as the most successful political leader of the early republic, and perhaps in all of American history.

– *Paperback & Kindle available*

## SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, DEC 12, 6:30 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

**MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING**

Forget the disaster of the election! Forget His Orangeness! Let's have some holiday fun with probably the best-ever, joyous filming (1993) of a Shakespeare comedy. With



Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, Denzel Washington, Michael Keaton, Keanu Reeves and Kate Beckinsale (her film debut), and a host of great Brit actors.

*After-Film Discussion:*

*Shakespeare and humanism.*

**SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.**  
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

## BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, DEC 11, 11:30 am

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$12 breakfast



special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

*After-Brunch Discussion:*

*President Trump:*

*A Humanist Response.*

# SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER - FEBRUARY

## GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, DEC 28, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

**THE BRAIN - Part 2:**

**What Makes Me Me.**

**Dr. David Eagleman**

How do our personalities, memories and sense of self all emerge from neural activity?

Following up on our October screening and discussion, we take an extraordinary journey that explores how the brain, locked in silence and darkness without direct access to the world, conjures up the rich and beautiful world we all take for granted.

Begin with the astonishing fact that this Technicolor multi-sensory experience we are having is a convincing illusion conjured up by our brains. In the outside world there is no color, no sound, and no smell. These are all the constructions of the brain; our experience of reality is an electrochemical rendition of the world outside.

Each of our brains is different, and so is the reality it produces.

What is reality? It's whatever your brain tells you it is.

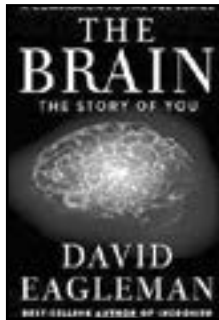
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*(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)*

## STUDYING HUMANISM

No Studying Humanism meeting in December. With our last-Monday-of-the-month schedule, we don't try to compete with Christmas and New Year's Eve.

See you January 30.



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WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY  
2016**

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6:30-10:30 PM**

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- Send your info (no pdfs I have to retype, please) to editor@shsn.org

## PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

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

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

**Brunch: Third Sunday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge

**Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Studying Humanism: Last Monday**  
at the Community Church of NY

**More info:** [www.shsn.org](http://www.shsn.org)  
and/or 646-922-7389

(leave a call-back number)

## PUTTING THE ELECTION OF DONALD TRUMP IN COSMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Philip Perry

(Excerpted from “Physicists Accidently Discover a Self-Destruct Button for the Entire Universe”, *Bigthink.com*, 11/1/2016)

It sounds like a plot from a comic book or a sci-fi film, a theory that got a boost with one of the greatest discoveries in physics in the modern era, the discovery of the “God particle”, or the Higgs boson, the missing piece in the Standard Model of particle physics. In the preface to his book *Starmus*, Stephen Hawking warns that the Higgs Boson field could collapse, resulting in a chain reaction that would take the whole universe with it.

Theoretical physicist Joseph Lykken says it would probably take billions of years before we reach that point. ... If it did happen though, you wouldn’t know it. One instant you are here, the next, you and everything else is swallowed up by an enormous vacuum bubble, traveling at light speed in every direction. Humanity would never see it coming. ...

The Higgs Field is maintaining a low energy state at the moment. But some believe it is slowly transitioning to a high energy state. When it does, it will kick off what is known as “vacuum decay”. In Hawking’s book, once the Higgs Field becomes metastable, the vacuum decay bubble will emerge. Being at a high energy state, it will quickly move to consume everything at a low energy state, or everything else around it. The vacuum bubble moves along destroying atoms, turning everything it encounters into hydrogen. ...

Another theory, called “supersymmetry”, states that every particle has its opposite. This helps keep the universe stable. Could the Higgs boson have a twin? Would that particle keep it from vacuum decay? No one is sure.

It is believed that when vacuum decay eventually takes place, what will be left is a superheated, hard, and extremely dense sphere. Some astrophysicists believe the universe, just before the Big Bang, may have looked like this. The Higgs Field is thought to have emerged shortly after the Big Bang. So it may be the driving force which deletes the universe and forces it to start over again.

This isn’t the only conceptualization which predicts the destruction of everything everywhere. Another is the Big Crunch theory. This is the opposite of the Big Bang. With the first, a collection of super dense material exploded, heaving everything out in all directions. With the Big Crunch, it’s thought that material eventually stops moving at some point, and begins traveling in the opposite direction, coming back together again.

So even if we are able to escape the planet and become an intergalactic species before the sun engulfs the earth, the universe itself may collapse. The only way to ensure longevity is if the multiverse actually exists, and we can become a multi-universal species. Whether it is the Big Crunch or vacuum decay that gets us, it’s interesting to think that perhaps after that dense, hot state, it could in theory explode again, causing a second Big Bang.

If true, how many times has the cycle occurred? And does history repeat itself exactly, or is a totally new universe born? It is of course important to remember that this is all in the realm of theoretical physics. The universe may yet hide a treasure trove of unknown particles which could change these predictions and speculations completely.

*Note: To learn more about vacuum decay and other abstruse physics subjects, watch the delightful and smart short videos at [patreon.com/kurzgesagt](https://patreon.com/kurzgesagt)*

## PUTTING THE ELECTION OF DONALD TRUMP IN COSMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE – Part 2

(From *FiveThirtyEight Newsletter*, 11/15/2016)

The NASA Center for Near-Earth Object Studies has identified 659 asteroids that have some chance of hitting Earth. If it’s any consolation, the organizers of an event called “Asteroid Day” maintain that there are 1 million asteroids that could potentially strike the planet, and that we have only found a very, very small portion of them.

## AND FAITH WON’T HELP US

Bob Seidensticker

(Reprinted from “How We Decide (And How Religion Subverts the Process)”, 10/22/2016 on *patheos.com*)

Faith is the world’s worst possible decision-making method. Nobody ever uses faith to decide anything that really matters. You wouldn’t rely on faith to pick out a used car or your kid’s college or even what brand of soap to use. For sure nobody—no, not the most ardent fundamentalist—would slap on a blindfold, put sealing wax in his ears, and rely on faith to decide when it’s safe to cross a busy highway.

No, the only time faith ever gets trotted out as a justification for anything is when there’s absolutely no other justification whatsoever. Nobody ever uses faith when there’s a better decision-making method available.

Not surprisingly, then, faith is the *primary* thing cited by preachers for why you should mortgage your brain to buy the huge crock of, let us say, fertilizer that they’re peddling. What else can they point to? Reason? Evidence? Common sense? Hardly.

Centuries ago, Christian leaders must have realized that they had an uphill struggle to get people to believe the enormous whoppers they were trying to sell. So they decided to back the process up a step and, instead of touting the *conclusions* they were pushing, speak glowingly of the *process* by which they arrived at those conclusions. That is, nobody in her or his right mind was likely to believe, from a standing start, that anyone would be able to change water into wine. But, soften them up by conning them into thinking that faith is a wonderful thing, then the whole water-into-wine thing becomes an exercise in faith, “... and didn’t you already say you were one of the faithful?”

To give credit where it’s due, Christian charlatans—with aid from the rack, the thumbscrew, and the stake—have been hugely successful in their efforts to create a wholly



undeserved good reputation for faith. Lutherans name their churches after it. Musicians write hymns of praise to it. Proud parents name their baby girls after it. It's entered the popular lexicon in phrases like "Keep the faith, baby!" and "Ya gotta have faith" (though nobody ever explains exactly *why*).

Perhaps the most widely quoted such phrase is "Faith can move mountains." This cliché is always intoned with great solemnity, and everyone in the vicinity is expected, as a matter of social convention, to nod knowingly, as if some great and profound truth has just been uttered. It's considered unutterably rude to do what I always do, namely ask, "Oh yeah? Name one example!" Having hard reality intrude into the socially approved delusional circle jerk of mountain-moving faith is something that is Not Done in polite society.

Oh, please. Get over it. Look, let's put it this way. If you and I were to sit down on opposite sides of a table, and I were to point out a speck of dust on that table, and you mustered all the faith at your disposal—maybe even called in old markers of faith that you'd lent out to your friends—do you think you could get that grain of dust to so much as twitch? Of course not. You know better. Faith can't do squat. If it can't move a speck of dust, whence cometh this grandiose claim about mountains?

Well, here's my unresearched take on it. I think it's a classic example of what stage magicians call "misdirection" and what street hustlers call "the old switcheroo". It's akin to advertising puffery, which no thinking person takes seriously. "Cleaner than clean"? Say what? But mindless ideas like that are evidently effective on the *un*thinking, which is why they continue to get used.

Same deal with references to faith. Preachers bundle it together with truly admirable virtues, such as hope and charity, expecting their favorite scam to benefit from good associations. And, as George Orwell warned in his essay on *NewSpeak* at the end of 1984, they also use "faith" where the proper term is "trust" or "confidence", trying to trick the gullible into thinking of them as synonyms.

But war is not peace. Slavery is not freedom. Ignorance is not strength. Faith is not trust, nor confidence, nor even hope. Faith is the decision-making technique of last resort, the bottom of the barrel when it comes to reliability, the "F" on the report card of worldly wisdom.

As I said, nobody ever uses faith for anything that actually matters—and *certainly* not for anything that can be tested, let alone measured. It's the pernicious basis of not only religion, with all its attendant evils, but also homeopathy, astrology, objectivism, ufology, conspiracy theories, climate-change denial, false accusations of ritual satanic child abuse, anti-vax movements, a host of superstitions, personality cults, jingoism, imperialism, racism, quackery, Chinese traditional "medicine", feng shui, and the insidious brain parasite that leads people to endlessly obsess over anyone named Kardashian.

Frankly, you have to be an idiot to take anything on faith. As it happens, billions qualify.

## THE FANTASY OF THE DEATHBED CONVERSION Lawrence M. Krauss

(From *TheNewYorkerOnline Culture Desk*, 6/6/2016)

(Note: December 15 is the fifth anniversary of Christopher Hitchens's death in 2011. – JR)

Earlier this spring, a prominent evangelical Christian named Larry Taunton published a book alleging that Christopher Hitchens, an outspoken atheist, had been, during the last years of his life, "teetering on the edge of belief". Taunton, who claims to have been one of Hitchens's friends, cites as evidence two conversations he had with Hitchens during car trips on the way to debates about religion and atheism—debates, it must be said, that Hitchens was paid to attend.

Hitchens's family and actual friends—people who didn't pay to spend time with him—know that this claim is absurd. (I was honored to be one of Hitchens's friends during the last five years of his life.) Hitchens saw Christianity as little more than a social virus with interesting literary overtones. That view never changed during his final year of life—a period during which Taunton didn't even meet with him. Hitchens loved to engage in generous intellectual repartee, even with those with whom he unequivocally disagreed. His civility, it seems, has been misinterpreted.

This most recent claim, of course, is just the latest in a long line of similar claims about famous atheist conversions. It raises a worthwhile question: Why do evangelical Christians so often seek to claim converts among the dead?

In relatively recent history, the most well-known postmortem Christian evangelist is probably Elizabeth Cotton. In 1915, she declared that, thirty-three years earlier, Charles Darwin himself had revealed to her, on his deathbed, his wish to recant the doctrine of evolution in exchange for Christian salvation. This claim was shown to be false by none other than Darwin's daughter, Henrietta Litchfield, who was with him at the end. She pointed out that Cotton—like Taunton, in Hitchens's case—hadn't actually visited him during his final days.

And evangelical Protestants aren't the only Christians addicted to the narrative of the deathbed conversion. Catholics have made claims about the "long conversion" of Oscar Wilde; the Mormon Church has gone so far as to baptize dead people who haven't asked for it—pro-bono conversion, as it were.

There are charitable ways of understanding this proclivity. Perhaps postmortem evangelists hate to think of the people they admire, and in whom they have detected goodness and integrity, being permanently exiled to Hell for lack of faith. And yet that idea doesn't fully account for the phenomenon. A 2011 survey of declared Christians in the U.K., conducted by the Richard Dawkins Foundation, found that the majority of self-identified Christians either aren't aware of or don't accept many fundamental aspects of Christianity; for example, only a third of British Christians believe in Christ's resurrection, and nearly half don't think

Jesus was the son of God. Evangelicals don't seem to care what these ordinary Christians think; no one tells stories about their achieving a proper understanding of Christianity on their deathbeds. Attention is focused, instead, on atheists who are also luminaries, like Hitchens.

In a conversation we had a few years ago, Hugh Downs, the television anchor, suggested why this might be so. One of the reasons people go to church, he said, is intellectual validation. People attend church for spiritual and social reasons, of course: to pray and to see friends. But they also want to hear their religious convictions affirmed — convictions that may seem a little dubious during the rest of the week. Could it be that evangelicals seek to convert the famous dead because they're insecure about their own beliefs? If they can claim that people they admire as intellectuals — Darwin, Wilde, Hitchens — ultimately agreed with them, it validates their own faith.

In the end, what evangelists don't recognize is that atheism is not a belief system like Christianity, from which one might defect after hearing some arguments or having a few somber conversations. It is, instead, simply a rational decision not to accept the existence of God without evidence. As wise thinkers, including Laplace, Hume, Sagan, and Hitchens, have often said, "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". It's hard to imagine a more extraordinary claim than that some hidden intelligence created a universe of more than a hundred billion galaxies, each containing more than a hundred billion stars, and then waited more than 13.7 billion years until a planet in a remote corner of a single galaxy evolved ... to support life, only to then reveal his existence to an assortment of violent tribal groups before disappearing again.

The idea of the deathbed conversion raises another question: even if an atheist were to accept a theistic worldview, why should he choose to adopt Christianity, rather than any of the world's many other religions? Evangelical Christians assume, rather presumptuously, that the natural choice is Christianity. Hitchens was unlikely to share that view. As he emphasized in his own writing, no one talks about Hell in the New Testament more than Jesus; the New Testament, he wrote, is worse than the Old. Hitchens described the New Testament as envisioning a "Celestial Dictatorship, a kind of divine North Korea".

In this regard, the saddest thing about these imagined deathbed conversions is that, even if they were real, they could hardly be seen as victories for Christ. They are stories in which the final pain of a fatal disease, or the fear of imminent death and eternal punishment, is identified as the factor necessary for otherwise rational people to believe in the supernatural.

If mental torture is required to effect a conversion, what does that say about the reliability of the fundamental premises of Christianity to begin with? Evangelicals would be better advised to concentrate on converting the living. Converting the deceased suggests only that they can't convince those who can argue back. They should let the dead rest in peace.

**TRIGGER WARNING:** Some PIQUE readers may raise an eyebrow or even harumph an objection upon seeing editorial space — *following below* — in a secular humanist newsletter given over to a religious leader, even one who has recently said ...

*"The reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I am increasingly convinced that the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics beyond religion altogether."*

... but I believe the message here is important, especially to humanists. —JR

## **BEHIND OUR ANXIETY, THE FEAR OF BEING UNNEEDED**

**The Dalai Lama and Arthur C. Brooks**

*(Reprinted from The New York Times OpEd, 11/4/2016)*

**I**n many ways, there has never been a better time to be alive. Violence plagues some corners of the world, and too many still live under the grip of tyrannical regimes. And although all the world's major faiths teach love, compassion and tolerance, unthinkable violence is being perpetrated in the name of religion.

And yet, fewer among us are poor, fewer are hungry, fewer children are dying, and more men and women can read than ever before. In many countries, recognition of women's and minority rights is now the norm. There is still much work to do, of course, but there is hope and there is progress.

How strange, then, to see such anger and great discontent in some of the world's richest nations. In the United States, Britain and across the European Continent, people are convulsed with political frustration and anxiety about the future. Refugees and migrants clamor for the chance to live in these safe, prosperous countries, but those who already live in those promised lands report great uneasiness about their own futures that seems to border on hopelessness.

Why?

A small hint comes from interesting research about how people thrive. In one shocking experiment, researchers found that senior citizens who didn't feel useful to others were nearly three times as likely to die prematurely as those who did feel useful. This speaks to a broader human truth: We all need to be needed.

Being "needed" does not entail selfish pride or unhealthy attachment to the worldly esteem of others. Rather, it consists of a natural human hunger to serve our fellow men and women. As the 13th-century Buddhist sages taught, "If one lights a fire for others, it will also brighten one's own way."

Virtually all the world's major religions teach that diligent work in the service of others is our highest nature and thus lies at the center of a happy life. Scientific surveys and studies confirm shared tenets of our faiths. Americans who prioritize doing good for others are almost twice as likely to say they are very happy about their lives. In Germany,

## HEY LIBERALS: ANTI-MISOGYNY IS NOT ISLAMOPHOBIA

Carrie Sheffield

*(Excerpted from "Liberals' blind faith: The silence on the misogyny in the Muslim world is deafening. Speaking out against the oppression of women in the Muslim world is not Islamophobic — it's pro-human rights", on salon.com, 10/29/2016)*

*(Note: The writer, raised Mormon, is a convert to Islam — JR)*

Some liberal observers have argued that global misogyny is agnostic; it can exist in any country dominated by any religion. For them, the Muslim world's misogyny is not inherently Muslim, but rather a twisted interpretation of Islamic law. And for this I am proud of liberal, rational Muslims: for being powerful voices calling for a reformed, moderated and pro-woman interpretation of Islam. Their voices must be bolstered and amplified.

Yet the truth remains that substantial majorities of Muslims in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa believe that sharia should be the basis of law in their countries. These Muslim majorities do not believe in the separation of church and state. It boggles the mind how Western liberals can hyperventilate about a harmless Christmas tree or the phrase "In God We Trust" even as Muslim countries are explicitly using sharia to defend their misogyny.

I have many Muslim friends, including women who are like sisters to me. I've lived and traveled extensively throughout the Middle East — I speak from a position of respect, not one of denial. There is much to admire about Muslim faith and culture. I'm very proud of my Mormon friends for taking a principled moral stand against the bigotry of Donald Trump. ... As a fellow religious minority, Mormons join with Muslims in understanding that Trump's call for a ban on the followers of an entire faith is discriminatory and utterly un-American.

Even while speaking out and defending against the persecution of Muslims, non-Muslim observers should be able to point out that women receive subhuman treatment in many Muslim-majority countries without being accused of attacking Islam. We are simply saying that there are major problems in these countries and let's do something about it rather than defending Islam or attacking Islam. We are not anti-Muslim simply by being 100 percent pro-woman.

## ANOTHER REASON RELIGION IS SILLY

David Rafferty

Seventeenth century French Catholics who settled Quebec had a really hard time with the Church directive to not eat meat on Fridays when they discovered there weren't many fish around.

What to do? How about ask the church to declare the beaver to be a fish? Why not? It lives in water and its tail is kinda scaly.

You know what happened. And so, according to the Catholic Church, a beaver is a fish. I guess Reagan calling ketchup a vegetable was not so strange after all.

people who seek to serve society are five times likelier to say they are very happy than those who do not view service as important. Selflessness and joy are intertwined. The more we are one with the rest of humanity, the better we feel.

This helps explain why pain and indignation are sweeping through prosperous countries. The problem is not a lack of material riches. It is the growing number of people who feel they are no longer useful, no longer needed, no longer one with their societies.

In America today, compared with 50 years ago, three times as many working-age men are completely outside the work force. This pattern is occurring throughout the developed world — and the consequences are not merely economic. Feeling superfluous is a blow to the human spirit. It leads to social isolation and emotional pain, and creates the conditions for negative emotions to take root.

What can we do to help? The first answer is not systematic. It is personal. Everyone has something valuable to share. We should start each day by consciously asking ourselves, "What can I do today to appreciate the gifts that others offer me?" We need to make sure that global brotherhood and oneness with others are not just abstract ideas that we profess, but personal commitments that we mindfully put into practice.

Each of us has the responsibility to make this a habit. But those in positions of responsibility have a special opportunity to expand inclusion and build societies that truly need everyone.

Leaders need to recognize that a compassionate society must create a wealth of opportunities for meaningful work, so that everyone who is capable of contributing can do so. A compassionate society must provide children with education and training that enriches their lives, both with greater ethical understanding and with practical skills that can lead to economic security and inner peace. A compassionate society must protect the vulnerable while ensuring that these policies do not trap people in misery and dependence.

Building such a society is no easy task. No ideology or political party holds all the answers. Misguided thinking from all sides contributes to social exclusion, so overcoming it will take innovative solutions from all sides. Indeed, what unites the two of us in friendship and collaboration is not shared politics or the same religion. *[Note: Mr. Brooks is president of the conservative American Enterprise Institute.]* It is something simpler: a shared belief in compassion, in human dignity, in the intrinsic usefulness of every person to contribute positively for a better and more meaningful world. The problems we face cut across conventional categories; so must our dialogue, and our friendships.

Many are confused and frightened to see anger and frustration sweeping like wildfire across societies that enjoy historic safety and prosperity. But their refusal to be content with physical and material security actually reveals something beautiful: a universal human hunger to be *needed*.

Let us work together to build a society that feeds this hunger.

**ONE FINAL COMMENT ABOUT THE ELECTION**  
**Walter Balcerak**



– Walter as Bozo Donald

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