

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

November, 2016

“November is the bleakest month,” T.S. Eliot did not write, but maybe should have, so we turn to the circus called Election 2016 for entertainment, and continue that laff riot herein. We spread secularism, celebrate Carl Sagan and craft beer, are skeptical about the big Bang, crash “Kars4Kids”, offer tips on building a racist vocabulary, and (re)offer a “grace” for your Thanksgiving table. But first, we thank our great humanist Freethought Day speaker heartily, and welcome her to SHSNY. – JR

SUSAN JACOBY JOINS US FOR FREETHOUGHT DAY, THEN JOINS US.

John Rafferty

Author, activist, humanist Susan Jacoby drew a full house at Pete’s Tavern October 16, on the occasion of our eighth annual Freethought Day Brunch. And thanks to Susan’s cogent, witty talk on the need to (and on ways how-to) further humanism’s message to the growing number of Nones in America, one of our best.

The prolific author of twelve books, including *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*; *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought*; *The Age of American Unreason*, and her latest, *Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion*, Susan was fresh from her talk “Sick and Tired of ‘God Bless America’” at the Freedom From Religion Foundation convention in Pittsburgh October 8th.

Because she was rushing to visit a friend in hospital after her talk, I thanked her, instead, by email later and, encouraged by other Board members who attended the brunch, asked if she’d accept Honorary Membership in SHSNY. Her three-word reply was, “I’d be honored.” She then added this message to us all ...

It was my genuine pleasure to speak before old and new friends on Feethought Day at Pete’s Tavern (which, like humanism, has survived all of the rapacious attacks leveled at cherished institutions during the past 30 years) about the crucial need for secular Americans to attain a level of political influence commensurate with their growing numbers.

Not all atheists are humanists (as demonstrated by the followers of that goddess of selfishness Ayn Rand)



and not all humanists are atheists (as demonstrated by religious humanists, beginning with Erasmus). But I am proud to identify myself as both an atheist and a humanist. The number of Americans who do not identify with any religious institution – and who do not consider religion important in their daily lives – has risen from 21 million in 2008 to more than 36 million. But the rise in the secular population has not been accompanied by a rise in political influence, and I think the great task of the secular movement in

the next few years is to bring the message to the American public that secular values are American values. We must stop letting either the religious right or the religious left get away with what they have gotten away with for the past 30 years – the claim that religion is implicit in the phrase “American values” and that the only dispute is over what sort of religion is defining the values.

I am honored to accept your invitation to join the Secular Humanist Society of New York, and I intend to use my writing to uphold secular values. I do understand that, being humanists, you won’t agree with everything I write. – Susan Jacoby

Susan joins a pantheon of SHSNY Honoraries that over the years has included such as Isaac Asimov, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Arthur C. Clarke, and which now includes such distinguished members as Columbia University John Dewey Professor of Philosophy Philip Kitcher, CUNY-Lehman and CUNY-Graduate Center Professor of Philosophy Massimo Pigliucci, Poet/Historian Jennifer Michael Hecht, humanist filmmaker (and Darwin descendant) Matthew Chapman, and Darwin historian and editor/entertainer Richard Milner.

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THINGS I DON'T KNOW AND THINGS I DO KNOW

Giddian Beer

Here are two things I *don't* know: What Hillary said when she gave those speeches to Goldman Sachs; What was in those e-mails on her private server.

Here are some things I *do* know:

Throughout her career Hillary has been a strong advocate for and an effective supporter of the unprivileged and downtrodden. The fact that she made some private speeches to groups that have other objectives is eyebrow-raising, but not enough evidence to conclude that she would abandon her principles. She *can* be trusted to strive for the good of the country and its people. She would no more be an instrument of financial institutions than Bernie Sanders would. Initially she did support the Bush war in Iraq; so did lots of other good, smart people who were tricked by the GWB administration.

The Clinton Foundation is among the most highly rated and most effective charity-philanthropic organizations. Rather than swallowing the rhetorical crap of fanatical Republicans and D (for Dumb) Trump, one should look for facts. Check out the Wikipedia entry for "Clinton Foundation".

For a quarter century the Clintons have been hounded and vilified by the most effective slander machine in U.S. history. Owned and operated by fanatical Republicans, it mines the lives, writings and utterances of opposition candidates, seeking things that that can be used to destroy them. It is extremely successful at convincing the mindless masses that roses smell like shit. Howard Dean, John Kerry, President Obama, John McCain (in the South Carolina 2000 primary) and now Hillary especially, are among its more notable victims. Unfortunately, Hillary does not have good political intuition; she gives them ammunition. Hoping to maintain a modicum of privacy, Hillary set up a private e-mail server in her home.

Bernie Sanders campaigned on a platform that decried the growing inequality between the general populace and the few fabulously wealthy individuals. He was the only contender who *stressed* the importance of global warming; he promised to fix many of the problems that plague and depress the middle classes while rewarding the top few, and he moved Hillary to the left. Initially he denigrated the slander machine's focus on Hillary's e-mails. All that was very, very good.

Bernie also opposes "job killing" international trade agreements such as NAFTA and the proposed TPPA. That is not so good, because such agreements provide stability in international trade and avoid the chaos of dog-eat-dog competition. TPPA is more than that; it is also a necessary alliance to oppose the increasing aggressiveness of China. In the long run these agreements lead to increased employment, but in the process many workers do lose their jobs. For them a new WPA should be established, like the one established by FDR in the 1930s; that, along with an

effective social safety net, would ameliorate their problems. Anyway, increasingly these days, jobs are being lost to automation.

As the primary campaigns heated up, Bernie started saying that Hillary could not be trusted and was not qualified to be president. By doing that he allied himself with the fanatical Republican and Trump slander machines, greatly enhancing their believability for the multitude of easily-manipulated and confused voters.

Of course Bernie now supports Hillary; he had always said that he would do everything he could to prevent a Trump victory. However, he has not yet done enough to compensate for the damage he did. He should explicitly state that he *trusts* Hillary and that she *is qualified*.

An obnoxious, self-centered, bullshit-dependent, degenerate, ignoramus Trump as president would be catastrophic. But because of the plethora of gullible, uninformed supporters, it is a real possibility. Each failure to vote, each vote for a candidate other than Hillary, increases that likelihood. Beware: now is not a time for games!

Comment: Giddian, you (as an individual humanist) might very well think all that; I (as an officer of a tax-exempt humanist organization) couldn't possibly comment. – JR

Extra Credit: Just for fun, how many readers recognize where the basic question (not the stuff in parentheses) in the above Comment comes from? Tell me at editor@shsny.org – JR)

OBSERVATIONS OF AN OLD FEMINIST

Donna Marxer

Midnight musings on the eve of electing the first woman president.

When Susan Jacoby spoke at the recent SHSNY Freethought Day brunch, she mentioned meeting young women on college campuses and how little they are aware of feminist issues, old and new. One young woman said to her, "You are the first feminist atheist I have ever met."

Well, here is another. I well remember from the 70s how being a woman seeking recognition and power was hit by a big propaganda effort. It was widely opined that women were unfit to hold high office because of the estrogen problem: PMS would make them "unstable".

A few months ago, when candidate Trump released his health records via Dr. Oz, the good doctor praised him for his high testosterone level, and my heart sank. Because I have come to the conclusion that men are less fit for high office because of that rampant hormone. Testosterone can cause men to demean half the population, distract them from the important issues, and generate scandal and even impeachment,

Oh, and also, I have noticed that men have been in charge of the world for thousands of years and that the planet is in jeopardy. It is past time for America to try a woman president.

In the past, women could never run for president because they couldn't raise the necessary money and could not easily earn the qualifications leading up to it. Then we got Hillary Clinton, who spent a lifetime obtaining both.

And now we have chosen as her competition an ignorant man who is just tall, loud and abrasive but, above all, is so masculine. Well, we all see where this has gotten us.

Let me get this straight: I do not think women are finer than men. As a humanist, I believe all of us are some combination of good, bad and indifferent. But women and men are different on a very general level. Men tend to go to war and women tend to protect families. This seems a good start for giving women equal time. A little PMS (a highly exaggerated state) is less threatening than overblown machismo. And, as Margaret Mead suggested, women can reach a new state called "PMZ" (Post Menopausal Zest), following what used to be called "The Change". Of course, that rules out ever being called a 10, but also clearly describes our energetic new President-elect (I hope) with all that stamina.

And that's another thing. Trump has continually criticized Clinton for her lack of "stamina". Oh? who was left spent and wilted after the debates? Not Hillary. I have observed that men are sprinters and women distance runners. And a distance-runner coach/expert has noted that when "extreme marathons" get up to 65 miles or so, women win them all.

Let's hear it for the distance runner.

DEFINING TRUMP ... 525 YEARS AGO

(From AWordADay.com, 10/20/2016)

trumpery

PRONUNCIATION:

(TRUM-puh-ree)

MEANING:

noun:

1. Something showy but worthless.
2. Nonsense or rubbish.
3. Deceit; fraud; trickery.

ETYMOLOGY:

French *tromper* (to deceive). Earliest documented use: 1481.

DEFINING TRUMP ... 2016

I like money. I'm very greedy. I'm a greedy person. I shouldn't tell you that, I'm a greedy - I've always been greedy. I love money, right?" - Donald Trump, 1/9/2016

"For the love of money is the root of all evil ... "

- from Donald Trump's "favorite book", 1 Timothy 6:10

At least 60 lawsuits, along with hundreds of liens, judgments, and other government filings reviewed by the USA Today Network, document people who have accused Trump and his businesses of failing to pay them for their work.

Among them: a dishwasher in Florida. A glass company in New Jersey. A carpet company. A plumber. Painters. Forty-eight waiters. Dozens of bartenders and other hourly workers at his resorts and clubs, coast to coast. Real estate brokers who sold his properties.

And, ironically, several law firms that once represented him in these suits and others.

- Steve Reilly; USA Today, 1/9/2016.

THE ASTROPHYSICIST AND THE FANTASY NOVELIST Q&A TRUMP

On October 14 on Twitter, Neil deGrasse Tyson posed a cosmic question about the serial groper.

@neiltyson

If a Space Alien landed in the USA & requested: "Take me to your leader", I wonder how Pres Trump would react vs Pres Clinton - 11:49 AM - 14 Oct 2016

Seven minutes later "Harry Potter" creator J. K. Rowling offered the definitive answer.

@jk_rowling

Afraid we need to know whether the alien has breasts before we can answer. 11:56 AM - 14 Oct 2016

"BLACKS FOR TRUMP"?

John Rafferty

Have you, like me, wondered who those guys are who have become ubiquitous at Trump rallies, waving "Blacks for Trump" signs?

Of course I suspected they were plants put there by the Trump campaign to suggest that there were actually, you know, black people who support the orange person.

But no, the truth is even weirder. They are followers of a conspiracy cultist named Michael or Maurice Symonette, aka on his various blogs and podcasts as "Maurice Woodside", "Mikael Israel" and "Michael the Black Man", and who believes that "Obama is the beast 666, given power by the dragon (serpent), Oprah Winfrey".

And whose sign-waving acolytes are given stage-center on-camera placement at Donald Trump rallies.

GREEN AND LIBERTARIAN POLITICS 2016

Chic Schissel

Excerpts from the Green Party Platform in October EPIQUE showed a measure of agreeable and inspirational prose, but were short on specifics. Example: "We support a sustainable society that utilizes resources in such a way that future generations will benefit and not suffer."

I would have been happier if this platform strongly urged that such actions be based on science, not on the political dogma that steers too many political organizations.

And from the Libertarian platform: "People should not be forced to sacrifice their lives and property for the benefit of others."

A humane society should extend its hand to the less fortunate. Picture a poverty-stricken family, perhaps from illness or poor luck, seeking help from the government. It hurts to imagine a Libertarian, from his position of comfort, snarling at them, "I got mine, f**k you."

NOT THE GREEN PARTY

To The Editor: I appreciate your giving space to the platforms of the Green Party and the Libertarian Party, but I should like you to make clear that the official Green Party is not Jill Stein's platform. Jill is running on The Power To The People platform*. - Charlotte Marzani

*Go to www.jill2016.com/plan

ABOUT THAT THIRD DEBATE: A MORNING-AFTER CONVERSATION

To: John Rafferty
From: Giddian Beer

I was very disappointed by last night's debate.

First, too often Trump was allowed longer replies and had the last word. I don't think it was deliberate on the part of the moderator, it was just hard to shut Trump up. Also, almost everything he says is utter bullshit or wild exaggeration, and little of it was challenged.

Second, the environment was not a topic! This is about the future of humanity and the lack of interest is the reason that that future will be really short. The end is much, much closer than most people think.

Finally, several times Trump complained about the corrupt media, each of which was an opportunity Hillary missed. She could have said something like, "No Donald, you're not losing because of the media; you're losing because, more and more, you're showing the people what you really are, an obnoxious, degenerate ignoramus."

To: Giddian Beer
From: John Rafferty

I completely agree with you about points 1 and 2.

About number 3, I think Hillary was being smart. She knows a huge segment of the American populace distrusts the media, so she just let him rant. Instead of defending the media, she pivoted to citing instances of him always complaining about "rigging" when he loses, even when his show didn't win an Emmy. Nobody—even his fans—likes a sore loser. She baited him, and he fell for it, even grumbling "should have won it" about the Emmy.

He really came off last night like that sore loser and like everybody's image of the mean old man who chases kids off his lawn, snarls at everyone ("*Such a nasty woman*"), and complains that the whole world has gone to hell.

I didn't think he could lose any more voters, but I'm sure he did, and I think we're looking at a landslide.

THE LESSON OF 1801, UNLEARNED John Rafferty

"... the way Trump has always spun his greatest defeats, from his failures in Atlantic City to his loss in the Iowa caucus. He either denies that he failed or he argues that he was cheated. Trump is either victorious or victimized, but never a loser." — Ryan Lizza on TheNewYorkerToday.com 10/13/2016

One of the most important—yet overlooked—dates in American history is March 4, 1801. At noon on that cold Wednesday Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated as the third President of the United States. Important, yes, but the overlooked story is that the second President, John Adams, had quietly departed the White House early that morning by public coach. As historian Gordon S. Wood has written, "It was one of the first popular elections in modern history that resulted in the peaceful transfer of power from one 'party' to another."

Peaceful.

Adams, who had lost his re-election bid to Jefferson in a particularly vicious, vituperative campaign that estranged the two men for years afterward, did not cry "foul", did not charge "voter fraud" or "rigging", and certainly did not threaten or even consider the use of the legal or military powers at his presidential command to overturn the electoral results. He accepted the will of the 67,000 U.S. citizens who voted (all white men, of course, most of them propertied), served out the rest of his term, packed his bags, and went home. And the fledgling United States of America passed a critical early test of its right to call itself a representative democracy and a nation of law.

Today, in the last moments of a two-year-long presidential campaign that has sunk to lows of vulgarity and mendacity unthinkable to most Americans even just a few years ago, we are faced with the near certainty that the candidate who will almost certainly lose—perhaps by a landslide margin—has threatened to reject the election results as "rigged", denounce the new president as illegitimate and "crooked"*, and call on his 30-40 million hard-core supporters to stage a "revolution" (his word) against that duly-elected president. And, indeed, against the entire government establishment and democracy itself.

(**In the unlikely event he is elected, he has also promised to ignore the Constitution and, in an homage to all the dictators and strongmen with whom he is enamored, to immediately start proceedings to imprison his opponent.*)

Has every American presidential election since Jefferson's win over Adams in 1800 been clean-cut and honest? Hardly. Political wheeling and dealing, even outright chicanery, have swung the elections of 1824, 1876, 1960 and, infamously in our time, 2000. But none of the "losers" in those contests called for "revolution". Al Gore "disagreed with" but "accepted" the Supreme Court's obviously partisan 2000 decision, and even "Tricky Dick" Nixon halted a 1960 investigation into (almost certain) voter fraud in Illinois and Texas to "spare the country a constitutional crisis".

There has been, however, one election in our history in which the losers refused to accept the results, rejected all offers of compromise, and called for immediate separation from the "illegitimate" government. Just one.

1860.

Donald Trump, who has no more understanding of American history than he has of 21st century geopolitics (and no more respect for Constitutional law than he has for women), would rain down an 1860s *gotterdammerung* on us all rather than admit what is to him impossible:

He's a loser.

OKAY, ENOUGH

Here ends our 2016 pre-election fixation, except for an urgent plea for you all to vote — it is important.

Then let's all look forward to that delicious moment, say sometime next spring, when He calls a press conference ... and two intern reporters show up.

STAY SKEPTICAL

Flash Light

Regarding the excerpt from *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, by Bill Bryson (“So, From Nothing, Our Universe Begins”, PIQUE, October), trying to explain how the universe came about, the ancients devised creation stories, such as the two in Genesis. Today many scientists favor variations on the Big Bang story, such as the two Bill Bryson presented as science.

Skeptics should be aware that these are just new creation stories. They have some evidence supporting them, such as the red shift of stars indicating the universe is expanding. However, recent evidence seems to indicate the expansion is accelerating, which the Big Bang story can't explain, so a new story was invented: a mysterious “dark energy” is causing the acceleration, although why that is can't be explained. Nor can science explain why everything exploded from nothing in a big bang, but if they call it a singularity, it sounds more scientific than calling it a miracle.

The “inflationary universe” model Bill Bryson describes sounds like a variation on Guth's inflation theory, but doesn't do any better, because first you have to explain where that ounce of matter came from, and then how it became all the matter in the universe.

I am writing this to urge skeptics to remain skeptical of Big Bang and Dark Energy stories, and to offer skeptics an alternative. In hard sci-fi, artists attempt to take ideas from science and make them seem real, so readers can decide how they feel about those ideas actually becoming realized if the science theories are acted upon. In a new genre we're calling art-sci fiction, artists suggest alternative ideas about science, so readers can decide how they feel about logically argued art-sci theories which don't require belief in singularities, as alternatives to orthodox science theories which do.

In www.Rabinart.com we argue that the standard model of physics is flawed, and we present the science evidence for a new model. You don't have to believe our story, but we suggest you consider the science evidence we present, which is notated in our footnotes [on the website], and if it seems as valid as variations on the Big Bang story, consider remaining skeptical of all such creation stories.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SECULARS

Ricardo Sibilla

“Only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen. ... Fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively.”

From Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, by Yuval Noah Harari, quoted by Walter Balcerak in “Why We Humans Believe in Nonsense” (PIQUE, September).

Yuval Noah Harari is right, and his insight offers the secular movement an opportunity to expand thoughtful criticism – and our numbers.

Elements deep in the Homo sapiens subconscious have manifestations in personal life as well as in cooperative activities. The combination of emotional intelligence and language in our minds permits the creation of elaborate yet

simple emotional stories, which emerge collectively as fable-elucidation, legends-molding and myth-making, giving emotional sense to tales that rationally are non-sense.

Additionally, the pressures on a personality created by circumstances in everyday reality in a hunter-gatherer tribe are different from those experienced in, say, the industrial revolution. And our 21st century daily style of life, with its associated tensions, has little in common with personal experiences in any older civilization.

Consequently, the subconscious of a person living in our century cannot give meaningful emotional sense to an archaic “sacred place” or “sky god”, because the ground reality where the myth develops is extremely unlike that of the past, and the emotive symbols so very different. Therefore, for many modern readers, ancient mythology looks logically ridiculous, which is helping them to move away from supernaturalism.

In our culture, such emotional disconnection from ancient symbols of the subconscious is making it easier for a theist observer to abandon mythical thinking, and to slowly accept reason and science for interpreting reality. Hence, for secular humanism there is a great opportunity to increase our numbers.

In my opinion, Mr. Balcerak – through Mr. Harari – has made a compelling argument to bolster our efforts to achieve a secular society.

NOVEMBER 15 IS “OPENLY SECULAR DAY”. COME OUT, COME OUT, WHOEVER YOU ARE!

John Rafferty

Here's a fun idea: On November 15, tell someone you know, someone who doesn't know much about you – say a co-worker, doorman, bartender, friend-of-a-friend – “I'm a humanist” (or “atheist”, “agnostic”, “freethinker”, “rationalist”, “skeptic”, or the all-inclusive “secular”).

Openly Secular Day, brainchild of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, is a celebration of secular people opening up and coming out about their secular worldview, and an opportunity for theistic allies to show their support for secular friends and family. It's a day to help others understand who we are, what our values are, and how we think.

The Openly Secular movement—including the American Humanist Association, the Secular Student Alliance, the Center for Inquiry, the Secular Coalition for America, the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, the Richard Dawkins Foundation and American Atheists—is dedicated to overcoming real and perceived anti-atheist prejudice.

Therefore, Openly Secular Day will help people realize they already know good and compassionate atheist, agnostic, humanist and nonreligious people. So celebrate Openly Secular Day by sharing your secularism with someone else in your life.

Who knows? Their reaction may surprise you.

Find out more at <https://openlysecular.org/about/>

SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER - JANUARY

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, NOV 3, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

(1998 edition)

Stephen Hawking

A landmark volume in science writing by one of the great minds of our time: How did the universe begin – and what made its start possible? Does



time always flow forward? Is the universe unending? Are there other dimensions in space? What will happen when it all ends?

Hawking discusses time travel and wormholes and explores the possibility of a universe without a quantum singularity at the beginning of time.

Told in language we all can understand, *A Brief History of Time* is written for the non-specialist reader (why it has sold over 10 million copies), and plunges into the exotic realms of black holes and quarks, of antimatter and “arrows of time”, of the big bang and a bigger God – where the possibilities are wondrous and unexpected.

– Paperback & Kindle available

Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

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MEET US ON MEETUP

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SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC 1, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE FUTURE OF THE BRAIN:

**Essays by the World's
Leading Neuroscientists**

Gary Marcus and

Jeremy Freeman, Editors

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 that lie ahead in understanding the anticipated deluge of data and the prospects for building working simulations of the human brain.

A must-read to understand the breathtaking implications of brain science for medicine, psychiatry, even human consciousness itself.

– Paperback & Kindle available

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 MOVIE NIGHT

MON, NOV 14, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

IDIOCRACY

Private Joe Bauers, the definition of “average American”,



is selected by the Pentagon as the guinea pig for a top-secret hibernation program. Forgotten, he awakens five centuries in the future. He discovers a society so incredibly dumbed down that he's easily the most intelligent person alive.

Ignored in 2006, this hilarious send-up with Luke Wilson and Maya Rudolph is having a 10th-anniversary renaissance.

After-Film Discussion:

The dumbing-down of America.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

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

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, NOV 20, 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 an \$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:

Who do humanists “thank”?

SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER - JANUARY

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, NOV 16, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
DO ZOMBIES DREAM OF UNDEAD SHEEP?

A Neuroscientific View of the Zombie Brain
Dr. Bradley Voytek



With their endless wandering, lumbering gait, insatiable hunger, antisocial behavior, and apparently memory-loss existence, zombies are the walking nightmare

of our deepest fears. What do these behaviors reveal about the inner workings of the zombie mind? Could we diagnose zombism as a neurological condition by studying their behavior?

Dr. Voytek, a professor of computational cognitive science and neuroscience applies neuro-knowledge to dissect the puzzle of what has happened to the zombie brain to make the undead act differently than their human prey.

Combining tongue-in-cheek analysis with modern neuroscience principles, Voytek draws on zombie popular culture and identifies a characteristic zombie behavior that can be explained using neuro-anatomy, neurophysiology, and brain-behavior relationships.

Through this exploration he sheds light on fundamental neuroscientific questions such as: How does the brain function during sleeping and waking? What neural systems control movement? What is sensory perception?

Great Lectures on DVD is FREE
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

A VERY SPECIAL STUDYING HUMANISM MEETING
MON, NOV 28, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
28 East 35 St (Gallery)
2016-17 Meeting/Discussion #3
END-OF-LIFE CHOICE and MEDICAL AID IN DYING
A presentation & discussion by Barbara Mancini

Is this the next great civil rights battle? A major 21st century humanist concern? Come discuss it all with Barbara Mancini, who was an ER nurse for more than 20 years, and is now a consultant for *Compassion & Choices*, the nation's largest end-of-life choice advocacy organization. In her own words:



"I was catapulted from a life of relative obscurity to national and global news in 2013 after I was arrested in Pennsylvania on the charge of aiding the attempted suicide of my dying 93 year-old father. My prosecution by the PA Attorney General's office lasted a year, until a county judge dismissed the case due to lack of evidence. My case was the subject of an episode of 60 Minutes, and has been a topic on NPR. I have since become an advocate for improved end-of-life care and for medical aid-in-dying as an end-of-life option."

New York is currently considering aid-in-dying legislation, so this matters *now*. Don't miss the chance to hear this remarkable woman who has already addressed the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Freethought Society, and is now coming to SHSNY.

SHSNY MEMBERS ALSO ...

- Nov 1-26, artist Irene Christensen will exhibit *Tango*, "paintings and small box sculptures of a surreal world" at Atlantic Gallery, 528 West 28 St. (5th floor). Opening Reception Nov 3, 5-8 pm.
- Save the date: Dec 21, 6:30-10:00 for the *Reasonable New York Solstice Party*, at Whitman and Bloom, 384 3rd Ave. (27-28 Sts.)

TO LIST YOUR EVENT:

- You must be a dues-paid SHSNY member *personally* involved in an event (performing, exhibiting, speaking, etc.) open to the public.
- Send your info (no pdfs I have to retype, please) to editor@shsny.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.shsny.org and/or 646-922-7389 (leave a call-back number)



ATHEISM 2.0 Alain de Botton

(Excerpted from an interview of philosopher/author/School of Life founder de Botton by Sean Illing, updated by Sean Illing @seanilling sean.illing@vox.com 10/6/2016, and Forwarded to PIQUE by Martine Reed)

For me, and I think for many other people as well, the issue of religion actually goes way beyond belief in the supernatural, and yet a lot of the debate around religion started by people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins reduces to familiar questions: Does God exist or not? Do angels exist or not? Is it stupid to believe in angels?

While I understand the kind of emotional resonance around that, I think the real issue is why did people get drawn to religion? Why did we invent religions? What need did they serve? And also what are the aspects around religious life that may be disconnected from belief that nevertheless have great validity and resonance for people outside of faith today?

Religions are not just a set of claims about the supernatural; they are also machines for living. They aim to guide you from birth to death and to teach you a whole range of things: to create a community, to create codes of behavior, to generate aesthetic experiences. And all of this seems to me incredibly important and, frankly, much more interesting than the question of whether Jesus was or wasn't the son of God. ...

The underlying ambition of religions is impressive to me. They are trying to locate the tenets of a good life, of a wise life, of a kind life. They are interrogating the greatest themes, and so I'm attracted to the aspects of religion that know that human life is quite difficult and that we are going to need a lot of assistance, a lot of guidance. And what religious life is trying to do is to provide us with tools for how to keep being the best version of ourselves. As I often say, I disagree with almost every vision of what the best self is, according to religions, but I admire the ambition and the structure that religions place upon this ambition. ...

[I use the term "Atheism 2.0"] to distinguish it from the modern incarnation of atheism, which was promulgated by people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens that really made the central aspect of atheism the question of whether one did or didn't believe. And I suppose I'm interested in the kind of atheism that starts with the assumption that of course God doesn't exist, we made him up, that's fine.

Now let's move the conversation forward and look at questions like: What can religions teach us and provoke us with today? This is an atheism that knows how to engage with some of the ambitions of religion but has nothing to do with the supernatural. ...

I want to look at the way religions go about things as an inspiring starting point for thinking about what secular culture is lacking and still needs. Because let's remember that when religion started to decline in the 19th century, in Western Europe, there was a lot of thinking that was done.

People asked how would we fill the gap, the God-shaped hole. And there were lots of theories, and the leading answer, I suppose, was culture.

And we know that this is the case because you only have to look at the architecture of libraries and theaters and universities that were built in the age of declining religion to understand that our ancestors sought to fill the gap by creating temples of art, temples of culture, temples of learning, where we would congregate as we had previously done in the temples of religion.

I think it's a very interesting ambition. It's also an ambition that has failed. If you showed up at Harvard or the Museum of Modern Art and you fell on your knees and you questioned the meaning of life and you looked for direction, you would quickly be ushered into a mental asylum. This is simply not what culture nowadays sees itself as doing. ...

I'm targeting a sort of person who thinks believing in religion has never really been an option and who isn't particularly interested in attacking religion, declaring it stupid, seeing its errors and flaws and cruelties. All of which, to my mind, clearly exist, but this person isn't exercised by this.

They are more interested in saying, where might I turn in order to look at questions of higher meaning and higher purpose? In terms of ethics, they're asking, what does a good life look like? What are my responsibilities to others? What is the community? The sorts of questions you don't find discussed on late-night TV and that are not really part of the kind of general atmosphere of secular culture.

WHAT'S OUR BEST SHOT TO GROW HUMANISM?

Merrill Miller

(Reprinted from "PRRI Confirms What Humanists Already Knew: The Religiously Unaffiliated Are Rising", on TheHumanist.com, 10/4/2016)

Much attention has been paid to the increasing number of Americans who identify as nonreligious. But what does their disaffiliation with religion mean and how does it affect their attitudes toward religion? A new study from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) takes a look at these questions to examine just what the perspectives of nonreligious people are regarding religion, politics, and the existence of a god. Some of the findings will leave longtime activists in the humanist community shaking their heads and saying, "I could have told you that!" Other results of the study may be more surprising to humanists, and provide clues about ways we could organize these individuals and bring them into our movement.

One of the first key findings from the PRRI study upholds similar understandings from the Pew Research Center that the religious "nones" are more likely to be younger. According to PRRI, of those Americans who were raised with a particular religion but no longer identify with any religion, 62 percent left that religion before they were

eighteen years old.

Many humanists would likely expect that the force driving many people, both millennials and older individuals, away from religion is their disbelief in its tenets and their disgust with many religious institutions' bigotry toward the LGBTQ community. Those humanists would be correct! PRRI also found that the most common reason people gave for their lack of religious affiliation was a disbelief in religion's teachings. Twenty-nine percent of individuals also mentioned their religion's treatment of LGBTQ people as a reason for growing disillusioned with the faith.

PRRI's report that 66 percent of unaffiliated Americans feel "religion causes more problems in society than it solves" is also understandable given people's increasing skepticism. The same percentage of unaffiliated Americans also believe that children do not need to be brought up with religion to learn values and morals. As the trend toward religious unaffiliation continues, the humanist movement may instead see more parents reaching out to local humanist groups and other secular organizations, like Sunday Assembly, rather than churches to create community for their children.

In its study, PRRI also broke down the religiously unaffiliated into three groups: "rejectionists" (58 percent of nonreligious Americans who feel that religion does more harm than good), "apathists" (22 percent of nonreligious Americans who feel that religion is not personally important to them but still feel it is more helpful than harmful), and "unattached believers" (18 percent of nonreligious Americans who do not identify with any religion but who say that religion is important to them personally).

Rejectionists seem more likely than the other two groups to have had unfavorable encounters with religious institutions, as 27 percent of them told researchers that their previous experience at a worship service was mostly negative. Rejectionists are also more likely than the other two groups to be younger and to have a college education. Unsurprisingly, they are also more likely to say they don't believe in a god [and], compared to unattached believers, to think that belief in a god is necessary to live a moral life.

Given this information, the humanist movement may want to focus its efforts on the rejectionists. With their skepticism or outright disbelief in a god and in religious institutions, along with their values and morals unattached to a deity, many of them seem to already be living out humanist principles, even if they are unaware of it. However, seeing that rejectionists only make up a portion of nonreligious Americans, the humanist movement should also realize that we still have a ways to go before religiously unaffiliated Americans have truly detached themselves from the religious influences of our culture. They may not identify with any religion, but many "nones" still hold religious ideas, such as believing in a higher power or feeling that religion is a societal good. Our movement is growing with the increasing religious unaffiliation in the United States, but we must continue to make people aware that humanism is a viable, reasonable alternative to religion in order to strengthen our movement.

WE ARE THE BRAVE ONES

Martine Reed

I am struck, while reading the editor's introduction to the November/December issue of *SIERRA* magazine, by the many ways in which "blind faith" works to destroy everyone's lives. For this introduction, the editor chose the title "Climate Change Heretics". He honors two individuals who had the courage to go against the current of "groupthink" when it comes to the environmental damages caused by unbridled development.

As you know, many people in politics assert that "climate change" does not really exist, that it is a conspiracy constructed by left-leaning intellectuals.

A human trait, at times of disagreement around an important issue, is to go along with the majority, even in the face of scientific evidence. If most people you know deny the existence of climate change, it is so much more comfortable to go along. I see an obvious parallel between the climate change deniers and the complacent, unthinking adherents of popular religions. Why express doubts or even rejection of creeds which so many people say are true? Why risk being ostracized? Showing faith, blind faith, gains you acceptance into the group.

So, let's congratulate ourselves — at least a little, fellow freethinkers and nonbeliever friends. We show a lot of courage, day in and day out, when we refuse to go along with whatever religious dogma is presented to us. We say No! even when so many around us say Yes or just keep their mouths shut. We assert our disbelief even when it makes us unpopular. We are the brave ones!

Comment: While I agree with all of the above, I would add that it takes far more bravery to come out as a freethinker, a humanist, an atheist, in Mississippi or Oklahoma (or "God" forbid, Bangladesh or Uganda) than it does in New York. — JR

NOW TELL US SOMETHING WE DON'T KNOW

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Study Links Religious Belief to Poor Understanding Of Physical World", at Progressive Secular Humanist on Patheos.com 10/10/2016)

A poor understanding of the physical world is linked to religious and paranormal beliefs in a new study. A recent study published June 2016 in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* connects belief in the supernatural (religious and paranormal beliefs) with poor reasoning skills, low information about basic physics and biology, and a propensity to assign intention and mentality to non-mental phenomena (magical thinking).

PsyPost reports the study shows that religious and paranormal (supernatural) beliefs are correlated with "poor intuitive physics skills, poor mechanical ability, poor mental rotation, low school grades in mathematics and physics, poor common knowledge about physical and biological phenomena, intuitive and analytical thinking styles, and in particular, with assigning mentality to non-mental phenomena."

PsyPost reports that researchers conclude that “Nonscientific ways of thinking are resistant to formal instruction ...” adding that this can “affect individuals’ ability to act as informed citizens to make reasoned judgments in a world that is increasingly governed by technology and scientific knowledge.” In other words, low information coupled with defective thinking styles and limited cognitive abilities can not only lead to religious and supernatural beliefs but can also hinder the ability of individuals to “make reasoned judgments”.

Bottom line: The study results are not particularly surprising, and merely confirm what many others have long suspected: Religious and supernatural beliefs are often associated with poor reasoning skills and low information about the natural world.

Comment: Really? Ignorant, stupid? Who’d have thought? – JR

And speaking of stupid ...

EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES IN AMERICA, 2016

(Excerpted from ThisIsTrue.com, 9/25/2016)

Robert Morin was the cataloguer at the University of New Hampshire library for his entire career: nearly 50 years. He drove to work in an old car, rarely bought new clothes, ate cheaply, and loved to read. When he died last year at 77, the university was shocked to learn that he left his entire estate to the school – \$4 million. “His whole life was the library,” says Edward Mullen, Morin’s financial adviser.

Morin’s gift “allows us to address a number of university priorities,” says UNH President Mark Huddleston. Such as? Just \$100,000 for the library, and \$1 million for a video scoreboard for the school’s football stadium.

THE DEVIL’S A CRAFTY ONE

(Reprinted from ThisIsTrue.com, 10/21/2016)

The Anchor of Hope Baptist Church in Canyon, Texas, placed an ad in the local newspaper calling craft beer “the Devil’s Craft”, citing Bible verses warning against the evils of drinking and insisting “JESUS never drank booze.”

The Imperial Taproom, a bar in Canyon, called the ad a coupon: “We’ll give you a dollar off per beer for each one you bring in, so feel free to bring multiple,” they said on Facebook. “Come enjoy some devilishly tasty craft beer.”

Some comments praised the taproom’s marketing technique, others commented on the church’s ad, including one who thought, “These folks seriously need a drink.”

“Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.” – Proverbs 31:6-7 (NIV)

THIS GOES WAY BEYOND IRONY

(Excerpted from Thisistrue.com 10/8/16)

Severe storms led to flooding in Connellsville, Pa. A wall shield the waters back from the Connellsville Church of God – until it collapsed and mud and water filled the church’s basement. “The devastation on our whole church is unreal,” lamented the Rev. Nelson Confer.

The good news is, the building is insured by Church Mutual Insurance. The bad news is, the insurance company told Confer that the flooding damage isn’t covered because it was ... *yes!* ... “an act of God”.

YOU KNOW THAT COMMERCIAL YOU HATE MORE THAN ANY OTHER? IT’S A RELIGIOUS SCAM

David Colon

(Excerpted from “Kars4Kids Accused of Hiding Kash In Staten Island Synagogue” in News on gothamist.com, 10/16/2016)

A h yes, “Kars4Kids”, the earworm jingle that probably popped into your head the moment you read that headline. Beyond providing a delivery device for the world’s most irritating jingle, Kars4Kids is supposed to be a charity that does, um, something.

The commercials are never really clear what happens after you “donate your car today”. And consistent with its somewhat mysterious message of charity, members of a Staten Island synagogue are accusing Kars4Kids of using their temple to hide assets from the IRS.

According to the *New York Post*, members of the Young Israel of Eltingville synagogue on Staten Island filed court papers accusing the religious organization associated with the charity, Congregation Oorah, of trying to operate out of Young Israel in order to hide their “more questionable financial dealings”. ...

Kars4Kids has also been found to use a suspicious amount of their assets on failed real estate deals, including two high-rises in New Jersey, a Staten Island outlet mall and a mixed-use project in Jerusalem.

As for the jingle itself, what exactly makes it so irritating has actually been studied by science. It turns out the song’s reliance on repetition and simple melodic lines mean that if you’re older than 4 or 5-years-old, you’re going to be driven crazy by it.

Comment: Or driven to lunge for the Mute button while wishing biblical horrors on those kids. – JR



NOVEMBER 9 IS CARL SAGAN’S BIRTHDAY

- The world is so exquisite, with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive ourselves with pretty stories for which there’s little good evidence. Far better, it seems to me, in our vulnerability, is to look Death in the eye and to be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides.

- For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love.

- A religion that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by traditional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.

YOUR GUIDE TO A MORE POWERFUL VOCABULARY – THE ALT-RIGHT RACIST WAY

Alex Kantrowitz

(Excerpted from “Racist Social Media Users Have a New Code to Avoid Censorship”, on Buzzfeed, 10/1/2016)

Racist online communities have developed a new code for racial, homophobic and bigoted slurs in an attempt avoid censorship. The code, which uses terms like “Google”, “Skittle”, and “Yahoo” as substitutes for offensive words describing black people, Muslims, and Mexicans, appears to be in use by various accounts on Twitter and elsewhere.

Many tweets using the code are doing so in support of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, e.g.:

“USA Today not wanting people to vote trump is as shocking as a Skypes loving shekels”

Need a translation? Here’s your starter vocabulary list:

Jew/kike = skype

Spic/Mexican = yahoo

Gook/chink = bing

Muslim/ Arab = skittle

Gay (men) = butterfly

Lesbian = fishbucket

Tranny = durden

Liberals/dems = car salesmen

Now you can translate these:

Deplorable HMR:

“I don’t know why all the skypes think all the googles, yahoos and skittles they control won’t turn on them.”

Or :

AnonymousID: HEpk/YR4:

“I’m hate google! Gas the skypes.”

The code appears to have originated in response to Google’s Jigsaw program, a new AI-powered approach to combating harassment and abuse online. The program seems to have inspired members of the online message board 4chan to start “Operation Google”, using “Google” as a derogatory term for a black person in an attempt to get Google to filter out its own name. The code developed from there.

This isn’t the first time a bigoted social media code has emerged. Placing a name in triple parenthesis (((Name))) is meant to identify Jews and target them for harassment.

RESPECTABLE AND SENSIBLE BIGOTRY

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Racism tends to attract attention when it’s flagrant and filled with invective. But like all bigotry, the most potent component of racism is frame-flipping – positioning the bigot as the actual victim. So the gay do not simply want to marry; they want to convert our children into sin. The Jews do not merely want to be left in peace; they actually are plotting world take-over. And the blacks are not actually victims of American power, but beneficiaries of the war against hard-working whites. This is a respectable, more sensible bigotry, one that does not seek to name-call, preferring instead to change the subject and straw man.

OUR PICTURE OF THE UNIVERSE

Stephen Hawking

(Excerpted from Chapter 1 of our November Book Club offering, A Brief History of Time)

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: “What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.”

The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, “What is the tortoise standing on?” “You’re very clever, young man, very clever,” said the old lady. “But it’s turtles all the way down!”

Most people would find the picture of our universe as an infinite tower of tortoises rather ridiculous, but why do we think we know better? What do we know about the universe, and how do we know it? Where did the universe come from, and where is it going? Did the universe have a beginning, and if so, what happened before then? What is the nature of time? Will it ever come to an end? Can we go back in time? Recent breakthroughs in physics, made possible in part by fantastic new technologies, suggest answers to some of these longstanding questions.

Someday these answers may seem as obvious to us as the earth orbiting the sun, or perhaps as ridiculous as a tower of tortoises. Only time (whatever that may be) will tell.

DOUGLAS ADAMS’ PICTURE OF THE UNIVERSE

There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.

The fact that we live at the bottom of a deep gravity well, on the surface of a gas covered planet going around a nuclear fireball 90 million miles away and think this to be normal is obviously some indication of how skewed our perspective tends to be.

A THANKSGIVING DINNER MEDITATION

Edd Doerr

On this special day we have much to be thankful for: the abundant food we enjoy from far and wide ... the technology and organization that bring us our food and make our lives comfortable ... the countless generations before us whose labor and ingenuity have provided us with so much ... the effort and sacrifice of so many who have made it possible for us to be here today to enjoy this food and company.

May we always remember those to whom we owe so much and be mindful of the great many who are less fortunate than we.

THANKS TO ... WHOM?

John Rafferty

(Reprinted from PIQUE, November, 2003 – because this year we need to remember what binds us as Americans.)

This month most American families will gather on the fourth Thursday to join in the uniquely American ritual of setting aside a whole day to eat themselves silly, watch football, and fight with their relatives. Tens of millions of those Americans will also, just before the eating-silly part, join in the only prayer they'll mutter all year, something (thankfully) short that usually begins, "Lord, we thank you for all ..."

Okay for them. But those of us who don't talk to imaginary friends have to ask, to whom do we talk? Most of us feel thankful, but whom do we thank?

This year at my family's table I think I'll thank Abe Lincoln for instituting the holiday in the first place. The 1621 Pilgrims-and-Indians affair was a one-day one-timer, as was Washington's in 1789, which was actually about our new nation's success in the late unpleasantness with England. Lincoln's Day of Thanksgiving, too, had more to do with politics and battlefield victories in the Civil War than about bountiful harvests and roasted turkeys. But then so did the Emancipation document, his other big Proclamation of 1863. I'll thank Lincoln for Thanksgiving.

While I'm at it, I'm going to thank those same god-obsessed Pilgrims, who would have created a theocracy

here if they could, but who nonetheless conceived the idea of a country based not on geography, ethnicity or ancient hates, but on an ideal, a "city on a hill".

I'll thank the Founders, who risked their lives and fortunes to win a country for me, and made the Pilgrims' ideal a possibility. And I'll thank the tens of millions of Americans who have since served and defended my country – and me and mine.

I'll thank the generations of slaves on whose scarred black backs so much of my country's wealth and power were built. Then I'll thank the hundred million or more of the "wretched refuse" – micks and dagoes, beaners and hebes and chinks—who have since stood in courtrooms to announce that they wanted to be Americans, swore allegiance to my country, and contributed their talents and their sweat to the building of our city on a hill.

No, it's not perfect, it's not "undimmed by human tears", but we're still building our city, all of us.

That's who I'm going to thank: all of us. I'm thankful not just that I'm an American – which is an accident of birth, and there's no one but my parents, who are gone, to thank for that – but that I live in this country with so many other Americans, millions of whom I disagree with about dozens of issues, but nearly all of whom share my ideals, nearly all of whom I can count on to return to me the respect I give them, and who count me their fellow-American. For which I thank them. This Thanksgiving, I thank us.

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Susan Jacoby
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