

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

November, 2018

We start with essays on why we (and free will) matter in a meaningless universe. But nothing matters as much right now, Dear Reader, as you voting on November 6. Need reasons? See page 12.

Meanwhile, we hear Stephen Hawking (finally) on God, James Michener (surprise) on secular humanism, and Bill Maher (outrageously) on Donald Trump *as* God. We consider more mooches, nine questions *not* to ask atheists, and whether we godless are, after all, immortal. — JR

## WHY WE MATTER, EVEN WHEN THE UNIVERSE DOESN'T

Daniel Lev Shkolnik

(Reprinted from *patheos.com*, 9/19/2018)

If the universe is so mind-wreakingly vast, what possible significance could we have in it? The religious have an easy time answering that: we matter because God/the gods care about us. Great. We can move on with our lives.

But if you don't believe in a God or some divine order that looks at us with adoring eyes or has assigned a cosmic mission to humanity, then what are we doing here? What could we possibly ever do to justify our being here? In short: do we matter?

There's a recurring solution to this problem I've heard particularly in trans-humanist circles (or wherever sci-fi lovers abound): humanity will eventually, by virtue of scientific advancement, colonize the stars and spread throughout the universe. Then, supposedly, we'll matter. Because how could we not?

But what if size had nothing to do with value? What if becoming the dominant life form in the universe made us no more valuable than when we were a primitive race of great apes crawling on the surface of a cosmic dust speck?

What if a human intergalactic empire—while more significant—was just as inherently valuable as that summer crush you just had?

That's part of what professor of philosopher Guy

Kahane implies. And I'm wont to agree.

In his paper "Our Cosmic Insignificance", published by the journal of philosophy *Noûs* in 2013, Kahane makes the argument that size, despite popular belief, does not matter. Valuing something based on its size is absurd, argues Kahane. He quotes Bertrand Russell who wrote: "There is no reason to worship mere size ... Sir Isaac Newton was very much smaller than a hippopotamus."

Hippo or Newton? While both are known for their similarly nasty temperaments, I still value Newton more.

Now to understand where value actually comes from, I want to make a distinction here between two words: significance and value.

*Significance* I'll define as having an effect on the world around it.

*Value* I'll define as having meaning regardless of its effect on the world around it.

These two qualities are linked, but they're not the same thing. Meaning, and therefore value, can only exist in relation to a sentient being

that understands meaning. So value needs some sort of sentient valuator (a human for example) in order to exist.

Significance however is independent of observers. (If a tree falls in the forest with no one around to hear it, it's still significant ... it's just meaningless.)

Nothing is valuable on its own. Gold is just a metal. Diamonds are just a form of carbon. Neither of them are particularly rare in the universe, but human culture has built

## TICK ... TICK ... TICK

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the top scientific body studying the phenomenon, released a report written and edited by 91 scientists concluding that Earth has 12 years to get climate change under control through initiatives such as increasing renewable electricity production, phasing out coal entirely, and cutting greenhouse gas emissions by "more than 1 billion tons per year, larger than the current emissions of all but a few of the very largest emitting countries", or else make life in many parts of the world unbearable.

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Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only: \$30.

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massive mining systems to extract them from the bowls of the earth.

Why? Because if you can afford gold on your wrists and diamonds on your crown, it means something. It has social value. And because it has such immense value for us it's been immensely significant in shaping human society. But their significance in shaping the planets, stars, and features of the rest of the universe? Some. Not much.

So hippo loses to Newton. But you might argue that was a rigged match. So what about a galaxy vs Sir Isaac Newton? Or for graphic effect: a black hole vs Isaac Newton?

The instinct is to say a galaxy or a black hole by virtue of their size, longevity and (arguably) complexity would beat out Newton easily.

But consider: how much value does the Messier 81 galaxy have to you? Or Messier 82? The HLX-1 black hole? Now consider, how about Newton's laws, which helped propel physics, industrialization, and so create many of the tools, cars, planes we use today?

Suddenly Newton's odds aren't looking too bad.

Compared to us gaseous giants, black holes, and galaxies are immense, long-lived, powerful, and therefore significant to all the matter around them. But they are not valuable on their own. Only things that can value (that can recognize value) are sources of value.

A star doesn't value the world around itself. It's a chemical reaction in space. It just happens. A star only has value to a valuator. And more specifically: in measure to how much it effects/concerns that valuator.

The sun is highly significant to all the planets which orbit it, but has value only on Earth where there exist many valuers highly interested in its continued existence. (Namely: us.)

We are awed by size. We are also awed by age.

And while larger, older things tend to have more significant effects on the world around them, linking scale and longevity with value is a fallacy of intuition.

If we can agree that something large and old should not be pumped up in value, then by the same logic something small and short-lived should not be devalued.

Even a subatomic particle, however small, can have enormous human value. Especially if that particle happens to be the first neutron in the fission cascade of the atomic bomb dropping over Nagasaki.

Things typically only have value in regard to how they relate and effect us. What we get angry about isn't our lack of value, but our lack of significance.

Returning to Kahane, he points out that "a tragic incident that deserves many pages in the *Didcot Gazette* may merit only a footnote in the *History of Oxfordshire*, and not a single word of the *Annals of England* ... But then, how much of what makes up the *Annals of England* would make it to the *Final History of the World*?"

We are currently not particularly significant on a cosmic scale. And if we're honest, we may never be. But we have immense value. To whom? To the only ones for whom value makes any sense: to us.

If the question is: are we worthwhile to anyone but ourselves? Will we be remembered? Does the universe really not care about us? The answers seem to be: No we're not. No we won't be. And no it doesn't.

These things matter to us because we are social creatures wrapped up in social structures where it's important to be significant, to win renown, to have lasting impact and effect on our communities and our species. There's nothing wrong about this. This is simply how our species has survived and continues surviving.

Wanting to matter on a cosmic scale comes from an egotistic self-aggrandizement. An instinct for territorial power struggle based on size, power, longevity that we misdirect at the universe.

The scale of the universe disheartens us because it crushes our misguided sense of significance, and by association we think it also crushes our value.

But Kahane makes a startling counter to this perspective: "... it may still turn out that we are the most important thing in the cosmos." Why? Because we are sources of all value that we know of. And (if there is no other sentient, valuating life form in the universe) then we may actually be the most valuable things in the universe.

While we may be totally insignificant to the course of the universe, we are yet supremely valuable in it.

We don't need to be significant to alter the course of the universe, to be valuable in it. All we need to do is find another valuator that values us.

This is why people sing the praises of love, family, and friendship—to have meaning in the eyes of other valuers. This is why we champion the importance of self-esteem (to be meaningful and valuable in our own eyes). But we find value not just in people; value can be found in art, music, symbols, ideas, places and objects.

Imagine the Louvre: value abounds around every corner, on every wall. Now imagine the Louvre were to catch fire and burn down tomorrow. The rest of the universe wouldn't flinch.

Value does not come from things like the Mona Lisa. Value comes from us and is reflected back at us from objects like the Mona Lisa.

We are the sources of value. Our brains are golden nuggets that throw the light of value on an otherwise valueless world. To think we have no value because we are small and brief is an illusion. On the contrary, we are the only source of value we can be sure of.

In the words of the psychologist William James:

*"The world's materials lend their surface passively to all [our meaning-making] gifts alike, as the stage-setting receives indifferently whatever alternating colored lights may be shed upon it from the optical apparatus in the gallery. Meanwhile the practically real world for each one of us, the effective world of the individual, is the compound world, the physical facts and emotional values in indistinguishable combination."*

Yes, the universe is barren of meaning. And yet everywhere we go, meaning blooms.

## DOES IT MATTER IF WE HAVE FREE WILL?

Abraham Loeb

(Reprinted from “The Fate of Free Will: When Science Crosses Swords with Philosophy”, at [blogs.scientific-american.com](http://blogs.scientific-american.com), 9/10/2018)

Scientific discoveries substantiate our awe when faced with the richness and universality of the laws of nature. But science falls short of explaining this natural order and why it exists in the first place.

This is where philosophy comes to the rescue. Science seeks to understand how the universe works, just as we might try to figure out the mechanics of a sophisticated engine. Philosophy, by contrast, addresses questions that transcend the functionality of nature, as we might pursue the complementary task of figuring out why the engine is constructed in a particular way.

As a scientist, I am surprised at the degree of organization the universe exhibits; the same laws that govern its earliest moments—something we know from observations of the most distant galaxies and most ancient radiation—also preside over what we find today in laboratories on Earth. This should not be taken for granted. We could have witnessed a fragmented reality, one in which different regions of spacetime obey different sets of laws or even behave chaotically with no rational explanation.

By studying the physical constituents of an engine, one acquires a better understanding of how it works but not necessarily the purpose for its existence. Metaphysical thinking can supplement science in territories not accessible to empirical inquiry. Within these domains, philosophy can build on scientific knowledge rather than yield to it.

But there are domains in which the two might be headed toward an irreconcilable conflict. Consider the notion of free will, which seems to play an indispensable role in guiding our actions. Science is founded on the premise that nothing is better than knowing the truth. But in real life is it always best to be guided by the scientific truth? The answer might depend on circumstances.

For example, even if medical science could forecast the time and cause of one’s death, it might be better to go through life without knowing because this very knowledge might take away the will to live.

Could the same reasoning extend to scientific research? In particular, are we better off knowing whether or not free will exists? For now this question is moot because we do not have the means for answering the question. But it is conceivable that in the future we will find out it doesn’t. That could be one result of the development of self-learning machines equipped with artificial intelligence whose behavior could be shaped by modifying the details of their underlying algorithms, just as you can tune the power of an engine by artificially changing its constituents.

In case the emergent phenomenon of free will is reproduced artificially, would such knowledge tear apart the fabric of society? Without the notion of “free will” there would be neither ethical responsibility nor the fundamental freedom to shape the future through our decisions. Would

human life lose its purpose? The realization our actions are a product of circumstances might shut down social consciousness and the engine of our most ambitious aspirations.

This would be a case where understanding an engine’s mechanics could automatically shut it off. It might trigger a loss of interest in making a difference, in contrast to a path where the illusion of “free will” could ultimately lead humans to modify the future on cosmic scales—from artificially creating megastructures on planets to spreading throughout the cosmos, or by devising nuclear power plants that would outlast the longest-lived stars. The conceptual damage from the loss of the belief in “free will” could be as devastating to human culture as the physical damage from a nuclear winter would be.

There is no doubt philosophy plays an essential role for society because scientific knowledge is inherently incomplete. For example, we know our documented history started at a point in time we call the big bang, but we do not have a clear sense of what was there before. Without knowing what happened before the big bang, our existential perspective is incomplete. Similarly, we have no clue as to whether we are alone in the universe. Knowing that fact would determine the significance we assign to human actions on the global stage.

Fortunately, we currently have the technology to search for both primitive and intelligent life elsewhere. And the knowledge we will acquire over the next millennium may shape the way we view our place in the universe in an unexpected fashion—whether we have “free will” or not.

## BUILD A LIGHTHOUSE, NOT A CHURCH

Jonathan Engel

There was an article in the October 8 *New York Times* by Rick Rojas called “Australia’s Drought Threatens the Flock”. It was about a pastor, the Rev. Bernard Gabbott, and the small farming town he lives in, Wee Waa Australia. (No jokes about the name please; this is a serious essay.) This town is in a rural, agrarian part of Australia, and the massive drought now occurring down under is crippling the town and its population.

It certainly appears from the article that Rev. Gabbott is a kindly man who sincerely wants to help the town and its people. But I don’t think he’s what the town needs. Australia’s Prime Minister recently urged the nation to pray for rain. From the article: “There has been a flood of entreaties for divine help – at dinner tables, at schools and gatherings of friends. ‘We pray for your mercy in sending soaking rain,’ Mr. Gabbott said, praying at a regular Bible study at home, ‘that really replenishes the land and restores the country.’” But still the rain does not come, at least to Australia. But in North Carolina, it doesn’t stop. Which is pretty much what climate scientists have told us would be the effect of global warming.

Here’s the thing. The article also states: “Scientists have shown that climate change makes Australia’s droughts more severe, but many farmers said the cause matters less

than their immediate needs." And there's the rub. It's like a man who walks out of his house every day and trips over the same broken sidewalk. Every day he has an immediate need for bandages, antiseptic ointment, and painkillers, but if he remains unconcerned about fixing the damn sidewalk, he'll never get out of this mess. (Benjamin Franklin reminded us that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.) And no matter how much he prays to some god or other, the sidewalk is never going to fix itself.

So while Rev. Gabbott sounds like a nice, caring man, I don't think that a pastor is what this town needs. He leads prayers for rain, and nothing happens. Perhaps what this town needs is a scientist, someone who can explain to the townspeople why the drought is so persistent and severe. The cause does matter. Their "immediate needs" will be perpetual if they don't deal with the cause. Instead of someone to lead them in prayer, they need someone to lead a march on Canberra to demand real action from government officials to address climate change.

Which brings us back to the title of this essay, as well as to Benjamin Franklin. After narrowly avoiding a shipwreck, Franklin wrote to his wife, "Were I a Roman Catholic, perhaps I should on this occasion build a chapel to some saint, but as I am not, if I were to vow at all, it should be to build a lighthouse." He knew that churches overflowing with people praying for safe sea voyages would not be nearly as effective in preventing shipwrecks as lighthouses that warn ships away from dangerous areas.

It is 2018. We know what is making our droughts and floods so severe. Churches won't solve the problem. Only lighthouses will.

### **USA! USA! USA!**

*(Excerpted from The Independent (UK), 10/3/2018)*

Last month eight countries—Belgium, Benin, Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia and Switzerland—introduced a resolution in the UN's Human Rights Council condemning the "imposition of the death penalty as a sanction for specific forms of conduct, such as apostasy, blasphemy, adultery and consensual same-sex relations".

The resolution also attacked the use of execution against persons with "mental or intellectual disabilities, persons below 18 years of age at the time of the commission of the crime, and pregnant women".

It also expressed "serious concern that the application of the death penalty for adultery is disproportionately imposed on women".

Thirteen countries voted against the resolution: Botswana, Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, China, India, Iraq, Japan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates ... and the United States of America.

But the US *did* support two failed amendments put forward by—guess who?—Russia, which stated that the death penalty was not necessarily "a human rights violation" and that it is not a form of torture, but can lead to it "in some cases".

## **ON TRUMP'S PLACE IN THE PROCESSION OF PRESIDENTS**

**Charles Pierce**

*(Reprinted from "Esquire Politics" in Esquire Magazine)*

In my life, I have watched John Kennedy talk on television about missiles in Cuba. I saw Lyndon Johnson look Richard Russell squarely in the eye and say, "And we shall overcome." I saw Richard Nixon resign and Gerald Ford tell the Congress that our long national nightmare was over. I saw Jimmy Carter talk about malaise and Ronald Reagan talk about a shining city on a hill. I saw George H.W. Bush deliver the eulogy for the Soviet bloc, and Bill Clinton comfort the survivors of Timothy McVeigh's madness in Oklahoma City. I saw George W. Bush struggle to make sense of it all on September 11, 2001, and I saw Barack Obama sing "Amazing Grace" in the wounded sanctuary of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

These were the presidents of my lifetime. These were not perfect men. They were not perfect presidents, god knows. Not one of them was that. But they approached the job, and they took to the podium, with all the gravitas they could muster as appropriate to the job. They tried, at least, to reach for something in the presidency that was beyond their grasp as ordinary human beings. They were not all ennobled by the attempt, but they tried nonetheless.

And comes now this hopeless, vicious buffoon, and the audience of equally hopeless and vicious buffoons who laughed and cheered when he made sport of a woman whose lasting memory of the trauma she suffered is the laughter of the perpetrators.

Now he comes, a man swathed in scandal, with no interest beyond what he can put in his pocket and what he can put over on a universe of suckers, and he does something like this while occupying an office that we gave him, and while endowed with a public trust that he dishonors every day he wakes up in the White House.

The scion of a multigenerational criminal enterprise, the parameters of which we are only now beginning to comprehend. A vessel for all the worst elements of the American condition. And a cheap, soulless bully besides. Watch him again, behind the seal of the President of the United States. Isn't he a funny man? Isn't what happened to that lady hilarious? Watch the assembled morons cheer.

This is the only story now.

## **YES, DONALD TRUMP IS GOD! THE COMMANDMENTS SAY IT'S SO.**

**Bill Maher**

*(Transcribed from "Real Time with Bill Maher", on HBO, 9/28/2018)*

The reason Trump has an easy sell with evangelicals is because they're hard-wired to put faith over reason. Plus Trump is the spitting image of the religious con men they grew up with on TV.

He's got Jim Bakker's hair and Tammy Faye's makeup. He's immune to sex scandals ... he had a sham university

... he doesn't pay taxes ... he personifies that "prosperity gospel" bullshit they all spin: "Yes, the more money I have, the happier you are."

That's Trump: the private planes ... the traveling salvation show ... the home that looks like the Sistine Chapel, including a crying statue, Melania.

And it's very possible Trump doesn't just remind his flock of their favorite preacher. There is a character in the Bible who is exactly like Trump ... God.

*[pic of soulful Jesus]*

No, no, not that one.

*[pic of wrathful Jehovah]*

Yes, that one, the Old Testament God. Trump loves "an eye for any eye" - guess who invented that. Old Testament God was all wrath and ego, a petty, vindictive rageaholic (who loved Israel) obsessed with loyalty, not morality. Look at the Ten Commandments - they're very Trumpian. The first four are all about him.

*[pic: I: Thou shalt have no other gods before me.]*

Commandment One: Thou shalt have no other gods, other gods are fake news. I am the greatest god in history, with the best brain.

*[pic: II: Thou shalt not make graven images.]*

Commandment Two: Only make statues of me. I am the only bronze-colored thing you should bow to. And don't make the hands small, because they're not - and neither is something else, I guarantee.

*[pic: III: Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain.]*

Commandment Three: When you say bad things about me, it's very unfair, very unfair. No other god has accomplished what I did in six days, that I will tell you.

*[pic: IV: Remember the Sabbath. Keep it holy.]*

Commandment Four: You must spend one day a week not doing anything but talking about how great I am. Let me help you out: God deserves an A+.

So, here we have the Ten Commandments, a list of the ten worst things you could possibly do.

And what's off the list? Torture, rape, child abuse, incest and slavery. But four spots on the list go to "Stroke my ego" and "Kiss my ass". There are only two people I can think of who would do that: God and Donald Trump.

### PIQUE READER-POETS ON THE KAVANAUGH HEARINGS

A prep school brat named Kavanaugh  
Would gulp down every beer he saw.  
He was known as a drunk  
Who behaved like a skunk  
With all the girls he would paw.

— Dennis Middlebrooks

There once was a judge named Kavanaugh  
Whose regressive view of the law  
Left Republicans in awe.  
But Democrats cried "Nah!"  
And the public shouted "Oh, pshaw!"

— Edd Doerr

Join Ellen Peckham in ...

### DRIVING OUT THE TRUMP/PENCE REGIME

Please join RefuseFascism.org at the home of long-time SHSNY member Ellen Peckham to learn about and support their mission.

It will be an afternoon of drinks, hors d'oeuvres and community with Sunarra Taylor, co-initiator of RefuseFascism.org.

**Sunday, November 18, 3-6 pm**  
**2727 Palisade Avenue, Apt 12HJ**  
**Riverdale, NY**

Kindly RSVP by November 8, to  
samantha.goldman@refusefascism.org • 917-407-1286

### FIRST AMENDMENT? THERE'S A FIRST AMENDMENT?

*(Excerpted from "Pay-to-protest: How Trump reportedly plans to crackdown on White House demonstrations", by Shira Tarlo, on salon.com, 10/12/2018)*

**P**resident Donald Trump and Republican lawmakers have repeatedly accused — without evidence — that some people who protest the GOP agenda are paid protesters. Most recently, Trump dismissed the countless number of sexual assault survivors and their advocates who converged on Capitol Hill ahead of Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court by baselessly accusing liberal billionaire George Soros of paying the demonstrators.

In an unprecedented turn of events, the Trump administration has proposed a policy change that would require citizens to pay to be able to protest. ...

According to a proposal introduced by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke on behalf of the National Park Service, the Trump administration is looking to restrict access to 80 percent of the sidewalks surrounding the White House and on the National Mall.

The proposed rule changes also suggest charging "event management" costs for protests and putting new restrictions on spontaneous demonstrations.

The policy change also requires that applicants submit permit applications at least 48 hours in advance of any demonstration or special event.

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

— The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America

### A THOUGHT TO KEEP YOU UP ALL NIGHT

**Y**ou can bet that at some part of his brain [Trump] connects the idea of possibly going to war and knowing that that can help you politically. I think that's dangerous.

— Presidential historian Michael Beschloss.

# SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2018 - JANUARY 2019

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

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

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)  
We'll discuss

### WHAT IS POPULISM?

Jan-Werner Müller

Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Marine Le Pen, Hugo Chávez — Who are these people who claim to represent “the people”? And who are “the people” anyway, and who can speak in their name?

In this groundbreaking volume, Jan-Werner Müller argues that at populism's core is a rejection of pluralism. Populists will always claim that they and they alone represent the people and their true interests. Contrary to conventional wisdom, populists can govern on the basis of their claim to exclusive moral representation of the people: if populists have enough power, they will end up creating an authoritarian state that excludes all those not considered part of the proper “people”. The book proposes concrete strategies for how liberal democrats should best deal with populists and, in particular, how to counter their claims to speak exclusively for “the silent majority” or “the real people”.

Tim Greene will lead.

– *Paperback and 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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[www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/](http://www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/)

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@SHS\_NewYork

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
THE RIGHTEOUS MIND:

*Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*

Jonathan Haidt

Drawing on his 25 years of groundbreaking research on moral psychology, Haidt shows how moral judgments arise not from reason but from gut feelings. He shows why liberals, conservatives, and libertarians have such different intuitions about right and wrong, and he shows why each side is actually right about many of its central concerns. Haidt gives us the key to understanding human cooperation, as well as our eternal divisions and conflicts.

Harry French will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 3, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
GRAND HOTEL ABYSS:

*The Lives of the Frankfurt School*  
Stuart Jeffries

In 1923, a group of young radical German thinkers and intellectuals came together to explain the workings of the modern world. Not only would they change the way we think, but also the subjects we deem worthy of intellectual investigation. Their lives, like their ideas, reflected and shaped the shattering events of the twentieth century.

*Grand Hotel Abyss* combines biography, philosophy, and storytelling to reveal how the Frankfurt thinkers gathered in hopes of understanding the politics of culture during the rise of fascism.

Tom Riggins will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

## BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, NOV 18, 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 \$15 breakfast



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

Come join 20 or more fellow freethinkers

for food, fun and convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

*After-Brunch Discussion: How well informed are Americans?*

DRINKING REASONABLY  
WED, NOV 21, 6-10:00 pm  
Vino Levantino Wine Bar  
210 West 94 Street

(Broadway - Amsterdam Ave)

The NYC Skeptics' Drinking Sceptically event has expanded to include all of the groups in the Reasonable New York Coalition.

Drinking Reasonably promotes fellowship and networking among skeptics, critical-thinkers, and like-minded individuals in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. We discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds. But most of all, we have fun!

Come anytime for any length of time 6-10, or come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

Don't drink alcohol? Don't let that stop you from joining in the conversation and the fun.



# SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2018 - JANUARY 2019

**GREAT LECTURES ON DVD**  
**WED, NOV 28, 7 pm**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**DEATH, SEX & EVOLUTION**  
**Dr. John Long**

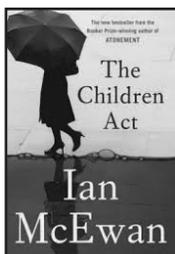
In this riveting story about his remarkable discoveries from the Gogo fossil site in the Kimberly district of Western Australia, the Australian paleontologist John Long takes us beyond just reconstructing animal morphology and into the realm of restoring ancient behavior. Long drills down deep on how we know what we know about the past, what the boundaries of knowledge are with respect to studying fossils, and how exceptional fossils contribute to reshaping our perspectives on evolution.

**SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB**  
**TUES, NOV 13, 7:00 - 8:30 pm**  
**Nancy Adelman's apartment**  
**205 Third Ave (6H)**  
**(Between 18-19 Streets)**

Come for Wine, Cheese, and sparkling conversation about  
**THE CHILDREN ACT**

**Ian McEwan**

Who owns a child's life? Parents? Society? God? Family Court judge Fiona Maye must decide whether almost-adult Adam, a Jehovah's Witness, can refuse



the transfusion that would save his life. Fiona visits Adam, and then it all gets brilliantly complicated.

For December 11, we're reading *Inside the O'Briens*, by Lisa Genova. To reserve your seat on the sofa, and/or to nominate the next book for us to read, contact: [editor@shsn.org](mailto:editor@shsn.org)

*A very special evening:*

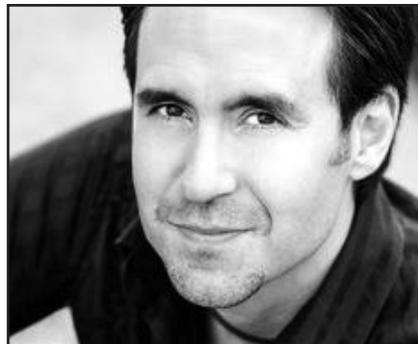
**Friday, November 2, 6:30 pm, at**  
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF NEW YORK**  
**28 East 35 St. (Rear Gallery)**  
**SECULAR HUMANIST SOCIETY OF NEW YORK**  
**presents**

**Hector Garcia, Psy.D.,**  
**author of**  
**ALPHA GOD:**

***The Psychology of Religious Violence and Oppression***

*Alpha God* focuses on the image of God as the dominant male in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This traditional God concept is seen as a reflection of the "dominant ape" paradigm so evident in the hierarchical social structures of primates, with whom we have a strong genetic connection.

Doctor Garcia, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, describes the main features of male-dominated primate social hierarchies – specifically, the role of the



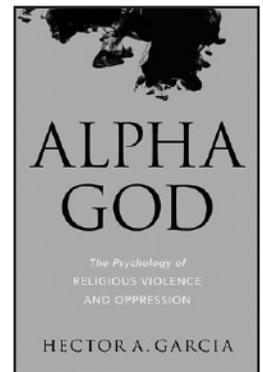
alpha male as the protector of the group; his sexual dominance and use of violence and oppression to attain food, females, and territory; in-group altruism vs. out-group hostility (us vs. them); and displays of dominance and submission to establish roles within the social hierarchy. The parallels between these features of primate society and human religious rituals and concepts

make it clear that religion, especially its oppressive and violent tendencies, is rooted in the deep evolutionary past.

This incisive analysis goes a long way toward explaining the historic and ongoing violence committed in the name of religion.

"Hector A. Garcia has written a brilliant, courageous, and vitally important book about the widespread belief in a single, all-powerful god. Given the fact that religious differences underlie almost all of the world's bloody conflicts, this might be one of the most important topics anyone could tackle."

—Sebastian Junger, author of the bestselling books *War* and *The Perfect Storm*



**Admission is Free!**

**Be there, and join the conversation!**

## NINE QUESTIONS NOT TO ASK ATHEISTS (Part 1)

Greta Christina

(Reprinted from “How Can You Be Moral?: Here Are 9 Questions You Don’t Need to Ask an Atheist — And Their Answers”, on Greta Christina’s Blog, 10/16/2018)

Asked of Hispanic-Americans: “Are you in this country legally?” Asked of gays and lesbians and bisexuals: “How do you have sex?” Asked of transgender people: “Have you had the surgery?” Asked of African Americans: “Can I touch your hair?”

Every marginalized group has some question, or questions, that are routinely asked of them — and that drive them up a tree; questions that have insult or bigotry or dehumanization woven into the very asking. Sometimes the questions are asked sincerely, with sincere ignorance of the offensive assumptions behind them. And sometimes they are asked in a hostile, passive-aggressive, “I’m just asking questions” manner. But it’s still not okay to ask them. They’re not questions that open up genuine inquiry and discourse, they’re questions that close minds, much more than they open them. Even if that’s not the intention. And most people who care about bigotry and marginalization and social justice — or who just care about good manners — don’t ask them.

Here are nine questions you shouldn’t ask atheists. I’m going to answer them, just this once, and then I’ll explain why you shouldn’t be asking them, and why so many atheists will get ticked off if you do.

### 1: “How can you be moral without believing in God?”

The answer: Atheists are moral for the same reasons believers are moral: because we have compassion, and a sense of justice. Humans are social animals, and like other social animals, we evolved with some core moral values wired into our brains: caring about fairness, caring about loyalty, caring when others are harmed.

If you’re a religious believer, and you don’t believe these are the same reasons that believers are moral, ask yourself this: If I could persuade you today, with 100 percent certainty, that there were no gods and no afterlife ... would you suddenly start stealing and murdering and setting fire to buildings? And if not — why not? If you wouldn’t ... whatever it is that would keep you from doing those things, that’s the same thing keeping atheists from doing them. (And if you would — remind me not to move in next door to you.)

And ask yourself this as well: If you accept some parts of your holy book and reject others — on what basis are you doing that? Whatever part of you says that stoning adulterers is wrong but helping poor people is good; that planting different crops in the same field is a non-issue but bearing false witness actually is pretty messed-up; that slavery is terrible but it’s a great idea to love your neighbor as yourself ... that’s the same thing telling atheists what’s right and wrong. People are good — even if we don’t articulate it this

way — because we have an innate grasp of the fundamental underpinnings of morality: the understanding that other people matter to themselves as much as we matter to ourselves, and that there is no objective reason to act as if any of us matters more than any other. And that’s true of atheists and believers alike.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: This is an unbelievably insulting question. Being moral, caring about others and having compassion for them, is a fundamental part of being human. To question whether atheists can be moral, to express bafflement at how we could possibly manage to care about others without believing in a supernatural creator, is to question whether we’re even fully human.

And you know what? This question is also hugely insulting to religious believers. It’s basically saying that the only reason believers are moral is fear of punishment and desire for reward. It’s saying that believers don’t act out of compassion, or a sense of justice. It’s saying that believers’ morality is childish at best, self-serving at worst. I wouldn’t say that about believers ... and you shouldn’t, either.

### 2: “How do you have any meaning in your life?”

Sometimes asked as, “Don’t you feel sad or hopeless?” Or even, “If you don’t believe in God or heaven, why don’t you just kill yourself?”

The answer: Atheists find meaning and joy in the same things everyone does. We find it in the big things: family, friendship, work, nature, art, learning, love. We find it in the small things: cookies, World of Warcraft, playing with kittens. The only difference is that (a) believers add “making my god or gods happy and getting a good deal in the afterlife” to those lists (often putting them at the top), and (b) believers think meaning is given to them by their god or gods, while atheists create our own meaning, and are willing and indeed happy to accept that responsibility.

In fact, for many atheists, the fact that life is finite invests it with more meaning — not less. When we drop “pleasing a god we have no good reason to think exists” from our “meaning” list, we have that much more attention to give the rest of it. When we accept that life will really end, we become that much more motivated to make every moment of it matter.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: What was it that we were just saying about “dehumanization”? Experiencing meaning and value in life is deeply ingrained in being human. When you treat atheists as if we were dead inside simply because we don’t believe in a supernatural creator or our own immortality ... you’re treating us as if we weren’t fully human. Please don’t.

### 3: “Doesn’t it take just as much/even more faith to be an atheist as it does to be a believer?”

The answer: No.

The somewhat longer answer: This question assumes that “atheism” means “100 percent certainty that God does not exist, with no willingness to question and no room for doubt”. For the overwhelming majority of people who call ourselves atheists, this is not what “atheism” means. For

most atheists, “atheism” means something along the lines of “being reasonably certain that there are no gods”, or, “having reached the provisional conclusion, based on the evidence we’ve seen and the arguments we’ve considered, that there are no gods.” No, we can’t be 100 percent certain that there are no gods. We can’t be 100 percent certain that there are no unicorns, either. But we’re certain enough. Not believing in unicorns doesn’t take “faith”. And neither does not believing in God.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: The assumption behind this question is that atheists haven’t actually bothered to think about our atheism. And this assumption is both ignorant and insulting. Most atheists have considered the question of God’s existence or non-existence very carefully. Most of us were brought up religious, and letting go of that religion took a great deal of searching of our hearts and our minds. Even those of us brought up as non-believers were (mostly) brought up in a society that’s steeped in religion. It takes a fair amount of questioning and thought to reject an idea that almost everyone else around you believes.

When you ask this question, you’re also revealing the narrowness of your own mind. You’re showing that you can’t conceive of the possibility that someone might come to a conclusion about religion based on evidence, reason, and ideas that seem most likely to be true, instead of on “faith.”

#### **4: “Isn’t atheism just a religion?”**

The answer: No.

The somewhat longer answer: Unless you’re defining “religion” as “any conclusion people come to about the world”, or as “any community organized around a shared idea”, then no. If your definition of “religion” includes atheism, it also has to include: Amnesty International, the Audubon Society, heliocentrism, the acceptance of the theory of evolution, the Justin Bieber Fan Club, and the Democratic Party. By any useful definition of the word “religion”, atheism is not a religion.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: Pretty much the same reason as the one for #3. Calling atheism a religion assumes that it’s an axiom accepted on faith, not a conclusion based on thinking and evidence. And it shows that you’re not willing or able to consider the possibility that someone not only has a different opinion about religion than you do, but has come to that opinion in a different way.

#### **5: “What’s the point of atheist groups?”**

##### ***How can you have a community and a movement for something you don’t believe in?”***

The answer: Atheists have groups and communities and movements for the same reasons anyone does. Remember what I said about atheists being human? Humans are social animals. We like to spend time with other people who share our interests and values. We like to work with other people on goals we have in common. What’s more, when atheists come out about our atheism, many of us lose our friends and families and communities, or have strained and painful relationships with them. Atheists create communities so we can be honest about who we are and what we think, and still not be alone.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: This is a total “damned if we do, damned if we don’t” conundrum. Atheists get told all the time that people need religion for the community it provides: that persuading people out of religion is cruel or futile or both, since so much social support happens in religious institutions. Then, when atheists do create communities to replace the ones people so often lose when they leave religion, we get told how ridiculous this is. (Or else, “See? Atheism is just another religion!” See #4 above.) (Part 2 – Questions 6-9 – will appear in December PIQUE)

## **“THERE IS NO GOD. NO ONE DIRECTS THE UNIVERSE.”**

**Stephen Hawking**

*(Reprinted from “Stephen Hawking Says, in Final Book, ‘There Is No God. No One Directs the Universe’” by Hemant Mehta, at [friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2018/10/16/](http://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2018/10/16/))*

**I**n a book completed by his family and colleagues after his death, physicist Stephen Hawking says in no uncertain terms, “There is no God. No one directs the universe.”

*Brief Answers to the Big Questions* is, as the title suggests, a series of responses to the ten questions Hawking heard most often during his life. Along with questions about time travel, black holes, and artificial intelligence, people wanted to know Hawking’s thoughts about God. That may be because he evaded the question for quite some time. He didn’t definitively say he was an atheist until 2014, and his books often alluded to knowing the mind of God, at least metaphorically speaking.

But he’s done with the ambiguity. Regarding a question about God’s existence, Hawking was crystal clear:

*“We are each free to believe what we want, and it’s my view that the simplest explanation is that there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization: there is probably no heaven and afterlife either. I think belief in the afterlife is just wishful thinking.*

*It flies in the face of everything we know in science. I think that when we die we return to dust.*

*But there is a sense we live on, in our influence, and in the genes we pass to our children.”*

That lines up with what many atheists and scientists have said. Note that Hawking isn’t saying he has conclusive proof of God’s non-existence; he knew as well as anyone that such proof is impossible. Rather, he’s just summarizing his own thoughts on the subject in simple terms.

Will it convince religious people to change their minds? Probably not. Reason isn’t always enough to sway people from an emotional belief. But his book isn’t meant to be an argument against God’s existence. The responses are his own. Take them or leave them. At the very least, if there was any speculation that Hawking converted in his final moments, let’s hope this book puts an end to that fiction.

In any case, stay tuned for hot takes from Christian apologists who insist they know more than one of the smartest people in history.

## AND BY THE WAY, WE ARE IMMORTAL

Jim Underdown

(Excerpted from “Godless Immortality At Last”, at Ask the Atheist at [centerforinquiry.org/](http://centerforinquiry.org/) 8/30/2018)

Dear Ask the Atheist: How do Atheists deal with the existential dread of dying with no hope of anywhere to go? – E Riley

This is the ultimate question, because wanting to stay alive is built into our DNA. Most creatures that actually have brains generally do their best to keep the clock ticking. Even atheists for some reason still care about living ... as long as we can ... somehow.

Religions deal with this dread by making up some stuff that people want to believe so badly that they'll overlook how wacky it sounds – especially the other guy's version of the afterlife.

We know all the afterlives are horse apples, but even though we don't believe in nirvana, Hades, Valhalla, or heaven (as if we could get in), that doesn't mean we wouldn't mind continuing on for a few millennia. Somebody's paying for human cryogenics.

So how do we deal with the inescapable understanding that when we die, our very existence (for all intents and purposes) comes to a screeching halt? It's a bit depressing to even write that.

The answer is that we—atheists, believers, Cubs fans, everyone—are all immortal in at least one of the following three ways. You will NOT cease to exist – at least as long as the universe is still around. (And without a universe, what's the point?) Here's how.

### *Atheist Immortality #1: Delight in your descendants*

If you have procreated, one half of your DNA—the blueprint of you—has been passed on. As long as your descendants keep on having kids, a little part of you gets to stick around for another generation. Sure, (barring any future hook-ups with family members) you lose half your DNA with every generation, but you'll still be out there!

You can take inspiration from Genghis Khan, who supposedly has 16 million descendants after being dead for almost 800 years. Ok, bad example. But you get the idea.

### *Atheist Immortality #2: Rejoice in your reverberations*

What you did with your life forever reverberates throughout world affairs. People like Gandhi, Lincoln, and Mandela, all are obvious examples of individuals who (positively) affected history. (The negative examples also count, but I don't want to give them any press.)

But let's not forget the dead teachers, merkin salesmen, bookies, postal workers, and the person who packed cigar boxes so the cellophane tab on one cigar faces up so you can pull the first one out without pouring them all out on the floor. They all had some effect on the world.

All these people made contributions to the state of the world as it is now and in the future. Remember that “Simpsons” episode where Homer kept transporting back in time and accidentally changing some detail that reverberated into the future? Everyone affects the present and future like that to some degree. For most of us, the effects

are impossible to track, but rest assured, the world would be at least a slightly different place had you not lived.

### *Atheist Immortality #3: Take pleasure in your permanence*

Ok, even if you spent your whole life watching “Andy Griffith Show” reruns and only left the couch to steal buds off your neighbor's pot plants, you still are immortal.

The unique (and ever changing) mass of cells that are you were, are, and will be, a part of the physical universe. Most of us are made from the atoms that are earthbound, and will remain on earth for as long as the earth is around and doesn't get clipped by a passing asteroid.

So the atoms in our bodies are in the system, and will continue to be so even after we die. In a larger sense, you don't really go anywhere.

Personally, I'd like to stay in the system by being drawn up the roots of General Sherman, a Giant Sequoia in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There's some poetry to becoming part of something so magnificent.

I can live with that.

## MOOCHES: A NEW ONE AND A REPEAT ONE

Brian Lemaire and John Rafferty

Readers may remember—we hope—the October PIQUE definition of a *scaramucci*. Or, more familiarly, a *mooch*: the length of time, just ten days, that Anthony Scaramucci lasted in his White House job.

Along with other mooches: *obamas* (eight years), *trumps* (times so terrible they seem longer), and *onoseconds* (those instants of regret after pressing “Enter”), we asked readers to submit their own temporal measurements.

Brian Lemaire did, giving us a new one:

A *kellyanne* is the length of time between Ms. Conway being asked a question and her giving an intentionally misleading answer. This unit of time is shorter than the time it takes to say “kellyanne”.

But our Secretary of State, who created the eponymous *pompeo* by flying to North Korea, achieving nothing except humiliation and jet-lag, and flying back to the U.S. in about half a mooch, has added another example.

He flew to Saudi Arabia, posed with a senile monarch, shook hands with a murderer for the cameras, assured the thug he had nothing to fear from the thug's business partner in Washington, and flew back home, still smiling.

All that was missing was a furled umbrella, a piece of paper to wave, and the promise of “peace in our time”.

## WHEN SOMEONE SAYS “LET'S SAY GRACE” THIS THANKSGIVING, OFFER THIS ...

Oh God in as much as without Thee  
We are not enabled to doubt Thee,  
Please, grant of Thy grace,  
That the whole human race,  
May forget all the preaching about Thee.  
Amen.

(Thanks to Tom Riggins for this. – JR)

## **“MODERN DAY CULTURAL FADS”, i.e.: TOLERANCE, EQUALITY, DECENCY**

*(Excerpted from “Member churches oppose “homosexuality, transgender behavior”, by Alyssa Goard, KXAN, Austin, Texas, 10/9/2018)*

A group representing a thousand member churches (they say) has sued the city of Austin, Texas, over the city’s employment anti-discrimination ordinance, saying the ordinance needs exceptions for religious groups who don’t support “homosexuality, transgender behavior, or the ordination of women”.

The lawsuit cites, but does not identify, 25 U.S. Pastor Council member churches in Austin who they believe are impacted by Austin’s ordinance. ...

“Because these member churches rely on the Bible rather than modern-day cultural fads for religious and moral guidance, they will not hire practicing homosexuals or transgendered people as clergy,” the lawsuit states.

The suit says these churches will not consider “practicing homosexuals or transgendered people” for any type of church employment. The lawsuit goes on to say many of the U.S. Pastor Council member churches believe the Bible forbids a woman from serving as clergy.

*Comment: Once the “practicing homosexuals” practice enough to get it right, can they then be hired? – JR*

## **A GIRL IS SHUNNED AND SHAMED BY BIGOTRY AND IGNORANCE LIKE THE ABOVE**

**David G. McAfee**

*(Excerpted from “Trans Girl Barred from Both Locker Rooms During Middle School Lockdown Drill” on friendlyatheist.patheos.com, 10/9/2018)*

A middle school in Stafford, Virginia proved it wasn’t ready for a potential shooting when it prevented a transgender student from seeking shelter in either of the locker rooms during a lockdown drill last month. ...

When the drill began, a particular class of children took shelter in the bathroom/locker room nearest them as they were in PE. One student was prevented from entering either the boys or girls locker room while the teachers discussed where she should go. That happened despite the fact that the kids weren’t even changing their clothes in the locker rooms.

Would it even have mattered if everyone ended up in one locker room?

Asked if the girl should have been allowed into the girls’ locker room because she identifies as a girl, a spokeswoman for the school district would only reiterate that all the policies, practices and safety procedures are under review.

The correct answer was “Yes”.

*Comment: This is where bigoted ignorance and the right-wing politics of fear of the other lead.*

*Remember the incident in Saudi Arabia a decade ago where dozens of girls died in a school fire because firemen were not allowed to enter a girl’s school? How different is this? – JR*

## **CHURCH CHILD-ABUSE SCANDAL? IT WAS A COMMIE PLOT!**

How did the child-abuse scandal that has rocked the Church and disgraced its supposedly celibate clergy happen? Long-time loony Bill Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights has sherlocked it.

“In the last century,” he writes, “the Communist party in the United States sought to infiltrate the Church with apostate homosexual priests. In more recent times, wealthy left-wing activists and foundations have attempted to derail the Church by promoting propaganda campaigns against Church teachings, typically centered on sexuality issues. For instance, the pro-abortion movement was launched by Catholic Church-hating activists who sought to destroy its moral authority.”

Ah, yes, the Commies. Of course. In Wild Bill’s world it’s still 1950-something, and Stalin is still working hellishly to destroy the Catholic Church and the United States of America – which are one and the same thing.

*Comment: Thanks for this Forward by Dennis Middlebrooks, who adds, “I always had my suspicions about the ‘Red Mass’.”*

## **THE POPE’S BOLD ACTION ON ABUSE REALLY IMPRESSES JESUS AND MO**

*(Transcribed from <http://www.jesusandmo.net/comic/laic/>)*

*(The boys are watching TV)*

*Jesus: I’m so pleased the Pope is finally taking the church child abuse scandal seriously.*

*Mohammed: Wow – that is good news. Is he commissioning an independent laic body to supervise ordained officials at every level of the church hierarchy?*

*Jesus: No.*

*Mo: Is he introducing a mandatory requirement to report knowledge or suspicion of abuse to the statutory authorities?*

*Jesus: No.*

*Mo: What’s he doing?*

*Jesus: Urging everyone to pray to the Archangel Michael for help.*

*Mo: Wow – that is serious.*

I decided (after listening to a “talk radio” commentator who abused, vilified, and scorned every noble cause to which I had devoted my entire life) that I was both a humanist and a liberal, each of the most dangerous and vilified type. I am a humanist because I think humanity can, with constant moral guidance, create a reasonably decent society. I am terrified of restrictive religious doctrine, having learned from history that when men who adhere to any form of it are in control, common men like me are in peril. I do not believe that pure reason can solve the perceptual problems unless it is modified by poetry and art and social vision.

So I am a humanist. And if you want to charge me with being the most virulent kind – a secular humanist – I accept the accusation.

– James Michener, author

**GO. VOTE.  
VOTE EARLY, THEN DRAG YOUR LAZY FRIENDS  
AND IN-LAWS AND NEIGHBORS TO THE POLLS.  
GO. VOTE.  
BLUE WAVE? HELL NO, WE WANT A TSUNAMI.**

**John Rafferty**

**N**ovember 6 is the most important day of this year—of *any* recent year—by far. It's the day we get to right a great wrong in American society and history. Screw you, Christmas, our holiday comes early this year.

Go to the polls—early—and remember every outrage of the past two years. Every. Single. One.

Remember family separations

Remember children in cages

Remember DACA

Remember Puerto Rico

Remember Parkland

Remember Charlottesville

Remember “good people on both sides”

Remember Obamacare sabotage

Remember killing the Paris Climate Accord

Remember climate change as a “Chinese hoax”

Remember the Iran Nuclear Deal

Remember “shithole countries”

Remember the travel ban

Remember tax breaks for the filthy rich

Remember the coming trillion-dollar deficit

Remember Roy Moore  
Remember Joe Arpaio  
Remember Brett Kavanaugh  
Remember fawning on murderers Kim Jong Un,  
Vladimir Putin and Muhammad bin Salman  
Remember insulting Justin Trudeau  
Remember insulting Angela Merkle  
Remember shoving aside the PM of Montenegro  
Remember the erosion of our best alliances  
Remember the stolen 2016 election  
Remember kissing Putin's ass in Helsinki  
Remember the “enemy of the people” free press  
Remember Stormy Daniels  
Remember “horse face” and “fat slob” and  
“grab 'em by the pussy”  
Remember the Keystone Pipeline  
Remember “clean coal”  
Remember Scott Pruitt  
Remember Betsy DeVos  
Remember our transgender soldiers  
Remember the national anthem protests and our  
shitgibbon-in-chief's shameful response to the same  
Remember every outrage, every idiocy, and  
every one of the more than 4,000 documented lies.  
*No excuses!* Many of us live in safe Democratic districts,  
inside the Northeast liberal bubble. Don't use the excuse  
that your vote isn't needed. Vote anyway; we have to send  
a clear message. We want a tsunami, not a ripple.

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**Why we matter**  
(and so does free will)  
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