

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April 22, 2020

Our lockdown continues, and we cope as best we can, with virtual and online events (see page 5) and this online weekly (maybe) version of the best little newsletter in the freethought universe (Third-Rock-from-the-Sun Sector). Old, fat, out of shape, unloved by Jesus, and with a heart history, I have not been out of this building on East 56 Street since March 17, and you know what I miss? The annoyance of other people. What do you miss? Tell me at [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

## IF GOD IS SO GOOD, WHY ARE THINGS SO BAD?

Jonathan Engel

On April 12, we were treated in the *New York Times Sunday Review* section to all sorts of religious gobbledegook. One of my favorites was from Ross Douthat (“The Pandemic and the Will of God”), in which he said “The purpose of suffering may be mysterious, but we must search for meaning.” What bull. Pain is an evolutionary response; it’s nature’s way of telling us something’s wrong. Pain is often the first warning that something’s gone haywire, requiring us to modify our behavior, such as taking our hand off a hot frying pan or calling the paramedics.

But belief in a benevolent god is hard to reconcile with all the pain in the world. And so believers in the supernatural who also fancy themselves intellectuals (including Mr. Douthat) tie themselves in knots trying to make sense of something that is essentially nonsense. It reminds me of something I read in the *Times* several years ago: a well-known liberal Christian evangelical had written an essay in which he said that Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian humanitarian and political leader, was in heaven. This received a response from conservative evangelicals that Gandhi couldn’t possibly be in heaven because he wasn’t baptized. And so on they went, citing both the Bible itself and ancient Christian theologians to bolster their respective arguments about whether a non-baptized person could enter the Christian heaven.

So as the so-called religious intellectuals argue fantasy, let us rationalists keep our heads here. The Gandhi argument is ridiculous because there is no heaven. And the argument about why some god or other is allowing us to suffer is just as ridiculous, because there are no gods. Let us work to alleviate pain whenever we can.

That’s humanism.

## TO UNDERSTAND TRUMP, LOOK TO AGAMEMNON

Joel Christensen

(Excerpted from “Plagues follow bad leadership in ancient Greek tales” in *The Conversation*, [altnet.org](http://altnet.org), 3/14/2020)

In the fifth century B.C., the playwright Sophocles begins *Oedipus Tyrannos* with the title character struggling to identify the cause of a plague striking his city, Thebes. (Spoiler alert: It’s his own bad leadership.)

As someone who writes about early Greek poetry, I spend a lot of time thinking about why its performance was so crucial to ancient life. One answer is that epic and tragedy helped ancient storytellers and audiences try to make sense of human suffering.

From this perspective, plagues functioned as a setup for an even more crucial theme in ancient myth: a leader’s intelligence. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, for instance, the prophet Calchas—who knows the cause of a nine-day plague—is praised as someone “who knows what is, what will be and what happened before”.

This language anticipates a chief criticism of Homer’s legendary King Agamemnon: He does not know “the before and the after.” The epics remind their audiences that leaders need to be able to plan for the future based on the past. They need to understand cause and effect. What caused the plague? Could it have been prevented?

“When somebody’s the President of the United States, the authority is total, and that’s the way it’s gotta be.”

– Donald J. Trump



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## BERNIE DOES THE RIGHT THING

I'm asking every Democrat, I'm asking every independent, I'm asking a lot of Republicans, to come together in this campaign to support your [Joe Biden's] candidacy, which I endorse. We've got to make Trump a one-term president."  
– Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.)

## BERNIE DIDN'T FAIL Noam Chomsky

It's common to say now that the Sanders campaign failed. I think that's a mistake. I think it was an extraordinary success, completely shifted the arena of debate and discussion. Issues that were unthinkable a couple years ago are now right in the middle of attention.

The worst crime he committed, in the eyes of the establishment, is not the policy he's proposing; it's the fact that he was able to inspire popular movements, which had already been developing – Occupy, Black Lives Matter, many others – and turn them into an activist movement, which doesn't just show up every couple years to push a leader and then go home, but applies constant pressure, constant activism. That could affect a Biden administration.

## VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY SANDERS

I'm not remotely curious about what anyone thinks about Biden. If his personality, or voting history, or position on X or Y is of interest to anyone, they have a fundamental misunderstanding of where we are in history. Pondering anything related to Biden at this point is like asking what shade of white the lifeboat is painted as you're hauled out of the frozen North Atlantic, the bubbles of the Titanic still visible and the screams of the near dead echoing in your ears."  
– Brian Colker, shared on Facebook by John Spiro

If after all this time you're still sitting in your Fox bubble of ignorance thinking the current occupant in the White House is the right man for the job ... if after all the criminality, stupidity, vindictiveness, narcissism, lying, disregard for facts, disregard for humanity ... disregard for anything that does not profit him, his horrible family or the weaseling incompetent brownnoses he surrounds himself with ... if after all that you are still on Team Trump, well then its a good thing this newspaper comes with a soothing comics section.  
– David Rafferty in the Greenwich (CT) Time

To put them in perspective, I think of being on an airplane. The flight attendant comes down the aisle with her food cart and, eventually, parks it beside my seat. "Can I interest you in the chicken?" she asks. "Or would you prefer this platter of shit with bits of broken glass in it?"

To be undecided in this election is to pause for a moment and then ask how the chicken is cooked.  
– David Sedaris in *The New Yorker*

"Are the widespread toilet paper shortages a response to the proliferation of bullshit?" – Harriet Hall, *Skeptical Inquirer*

## TWO CHEERS FOR ANDREW CUOMO

Our behavior has stopped the spread of the virus. God did not stop the spread of the virus. And what we do, how we act, will dictate how that virus spreads.  
– NY Gov. Andrew Cuomo, April 14

## WAIT ... UM ... HOLD THE APPLAUSE John Rafferty

It seems the Era of We're All In This Together is over. For one brief, shining moment (was it really a whole week?), Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio put aside their political and very personal differences and, worked together in a terrible time of trouble to protect their fellow New Yorkers from the idiocy and criminal negligence of Donald Trump and his Band of Bumpers.

That was then.

"I'm going to keep the city's schools closed for the rest of the academic year," said the politically witless mayor out of the blue a couple of weeks ago, without first telling or even checking in with the governor.

"No, you're not," said the notoriously hard-ass and thin-skinned governor, "that's my call, and you can't."

"Can too."

"Can not."

"Doody head."

"I'm rubber, you're glue, everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you."

"Doody head, Doody head, Doody head!"

Welcome back to New York politics as usual.

## AND IN WISCONSIN POLITICS ... John Rafferty

Remember those four Wisconsin state Supreme Court justices who blocked Gov. Tony Evers' effort to delay the April 7 election, thereby helping a reactionary conservative get reelected to the court by depressing turnout?

All four voted by absentee ballot.

But progressive Judge Jill Karofsky – and Wisconsin citizens who braved the virus – won anyway. *Nyah-nyah!*

## REOPEN THE ECONOMY? YOU GO FIRST. Jennifer Rubin

(Excerpted from *washingtonpost.com*, 4/12/2020)

Let me suggest a simple test for those arguing for a quick return to business as normal absent a robust testing, contact tracing and quarantine program: *You go first.*

Trump himself should cease requiring everyone who comes into his orbit to submit to a covid-19 test.

Fox hosts who tout hydroxychloroquine should line up to participate in clinical tests. Business leaders and Trump sycophants like Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin who push for a May reopening of the economy should be the first on the factory floors (shake every returning worker's hand), the first to ride public transportation to and from work, and the first to pay social calls at nursing homes.

Do not advocate for others what you won't do yourself.

## **“NO, THIS WAS NOT THE WORST-EVER EASTER,” SAYS JESUS**

*(Based on TheDailyMash.uk, 4/10/2020)*

Jesus has rejected claims that this was the worst-ever Easter, stating that his original Easter featured a much more savage lockdown. The son of God said he was disgusted to overhear people complaining that this year’s celebrations were “rubbish” and “not even like a real bank holiday”.

Jesus said: “Cancelling an Easter egg hunt is not a tragedy. You think I had Lindt chocolate bunnies hidden around my tomb? Or Netflix? Or the chance to speak to Mary Magdalene on Zoom?

“Stop moaning and turn the other cheek. I absolved my mate Judas, and he did a lot more than just clogging up a WhatsApp group with crappy coronavirus memes.

“Find it in your heart to forgive these sinners, just as I have forgiven all you f\*\*kers who said you had given up booze for Lent and then cracked the second the lockdown was announced.”

However, Christian Tom Logan, from his Coronavirus lockdown at home with his wife and children, disagreed with Jesus’s analysis: “He was only in that tomb for three days, the pussy. And he didn’t even have any squally kids in there with him.

“Right now, crucifixion is an option I would seriously consider.”

## **STAYING POSITIVE Stephen Pastis**

*(From the comic strip “Pearls Before Swine”, 4/11/2020)*

*Pig:* I think life right now is bad.

*Goat:* Maybe, but it helps to be positive.

*Pig:* I’m positive life right now is bad. How does that help?

## **JESUS AND MO EXPLAIN IT ALL**

*Mohammed:* First the Americans said it was a biological weapon genetically engineered in a Chinese lab – then the Chinese said it was made in the USA.

*Jesus:* Ha! Don’t forget those clowns who think it’s a population control scheme created by Bill Gates.

*Mo:* Ha-ha! We laugh, but it’s a serious business. If we’re going to get this thing under control and ensure that it doesn’t happen again, it’s imperative that we know what caused it.

*Jesus:* Gay marriage.

*Mo:* We *told* them God wasn’t going to like that.

## **EX-SHSNY PRESIDENT ISSUES A CHALLENGE**

NY Daily News “*Voice of the People*”, April 15:

*Brooklyn:* I would like to see every newspaper in the nation print the predictions leading “psychics” made for 2020 to see how many foresaw this coronavirus pandemic. I am willing to bet none did. – *Dennis Middlebrooks*

## **“IT’S WHAT WE DO.” REALLY? Harvey Wachtel**

I’m too cynical to find much light in Dennis Overbye’s interpretation of Brian Green’s *Until the End of Time* (“Plague? Consider the End of Everything”, PIQUE, April 15)

*“For going on is what we do, building bridges, spaceships and families, composing great symphonies and other works of art, directing movies, and waging wars and presidential campaigns, even though not only are we going to die, but so is all life everywhere in the fullness of eternity ... .”*

It reminds me of nothing so much as the most poignant passage in *Tom Sawyer*, describing the scene when the door to McDougal’s Cave was unlocked to reveal the body of Injun Joe:

*“Injun Joe lay stretched upon the ground, dead, with his face close to the crack of the door... . [His] bowie-knife lay close by, its blade broken in two. The great foundation-beam of the door had been chipped and hacked through, with tedious labor; useless labor, too, it was, for the native rock formed a sill outside it, and upon that stubborn material the knife had wrought no effect; the only damage done was to the knife itself. But if there had been no stony obstruction there the labor would have been useless still, for if the beam had been wholly cut away Injun Joe could not have squeezed his body under the door, and he knew it. So he had only hacked that place in order to be doing something – in order to pass the weary time – in order to employ his tortured faculties.”*

That’s us, killing time. Might as well make the most of it. I guess the absurdity of the current situation is turning me into an absurdist.

## **IN THE WORLD’S FIRST GREAT DEMOCRACY**

*(Excerpted from Religion and Public Life, at the Pew Research Center, 4/15/2020)*

Today, about half of Americans (49 percent) say the Bible should have at least “some” influence on U.S. laws, including nearly a quarter (23 percent) who say it should have “a great deal” of influence, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey.

About two-thirds of white evangelical Protestants (68 percent) and half of black Protestants (50 percent) say the Bible should take precedence over the will of the people.

## **CAN WE ALL AGREE TO JUST FORGET THIS HAPPENED? Alexandra Petri**

*(Excerpted from washingtonpost.com, 4/10/2020)*

*“Once we OPEN UP OUR GREAT COUNTRY, and it will be sooner rather than later, the horror of the Invisible Enemy, except for those that sadly lost a family member or friend, must be quickly forgotten.”*

– *President Trump, on Twitter*

*Continued ...*

American people, your president has a message: Can we all agree to forget this happened?

Except, of course, for the deaths, which he guesses you may not be able to instantly forget. Except for that small detail, it would be much nicer for the country if we could forget that all of this happened. As we have always said after tragedies in this country's past: Never Remember.

Think about the future, when we will be able to forget all the nastiness, and how much more nicer it will be. The president is starting to live there now! ... Because (except, of course, for the deaths, which may take some time) this will all soon be forgotten. The president is forgetting already.

## GET READY FOR ULTIMATE GASLIGHTING

### Part 1

Joseph Vincent Gambuto

(From "Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting" at *Forge.medium.com*, 4/12/2020 and Forwarded by Barri Rafferty)

Gaslighting, if you don't know the word, is defined as manipulation into doubting your own sanity, as in, "Carl made Mary think she was crazy, even though she clearly caught him cheating. He gaslit her."

Pretty soon, as the country begins to figure out how we "open back up" and move forward, very powerful forces will try to convince us all to get back to normal. ("That never happened. What are you talking about?") Billions of dollars will be spent on advertising, messaging, and television and media content to make you feel comfortable again. It will come in the traditional forms — a billboard here, a hundred commercials there — and in new-media forms: a 2020–2021 generation of memes to remind you that what you want again is normalcy. In truth, you want the *feeling* of normalcy, and we all want it. We want desperately to feel good again, to get back to the routines of life, to not lie in bed at night wondering how we're going to afford our rent and bills, to not wake to an endless scroll of human tragedy on our phones, to have a cup of perfectly brewed coffee, and simply leave the house for work. The need for comfort will be real, and it will be strong. And every brand in America will come to your rescue, dear consumer, to help take away that darkness and get life back to the way it was before the crisis. I urge you to be well aware of what is coming.

For the last hundred years, the multibillion-dollar advertising business has operated based on this cardinal principle: Find the consumer's problem and fix it with your product. When the problem is practical and tactical, the solution is "as seen on TV" and available at Home Depot. Command strips will save me from having to repaint. So will Mr. Clean's Magic Eraser. Elfa shelving will get rid of the mess in my closet. The Ring doorbell will let me see who's on the porch if I can't take my eyes off Netflix. But when the problem is emotional, the fix becomes a new staple in your life, and you become a lifelong loyalist. Coca-Cola makes you: *happy*. A Mercedes makes you: *successful*. Taking your kids to Disneyland makes you: *proud*. Smart marketers know how to highlight what brands can do for you to make

your life easier. But brilliant marketers know how to rewire your heart. And, make no mistake, the heart is what has been most traumatized this last month. We are, as a society, now vulnerable in a whole new way.

What the trauma has shown us, though, cannot be unseen. A carless Los Angeles has clear blue skies as pollution has simply stopped. In a quiet New York, you can hear the birds chirp in the middle of Madison Avenue. Coyotes have been spotted on the Golden Gate Bridge. These are the postcard images of what the world might be like if we could find a way to have a less deadly daily effect on the planet. What's not fit for a postcard are the other scenes we have witnessed: a health care system that cannot provide basic protective equipment for its frontline; small businesses—and very large ones—that do not have enough cash to pay their rent or workers, sending over 16 million people to seek unemployment benefits; a government that has so severely damaged the credibility of our media that 300 million people don't know who to listen to for basic facts that can save their lives.

The cat is out of the bag. We, as a nation, have deeply disturbing problems. You're right. That's not news. They are problems we ignore every day, not because we're terrible people or because we don't care about fixing them, but because we don't have time. Sorry, we have other shit to do. The plain truth is that no matter our ethnicity, religion, gender, political party (the list goes on), nor even our socioeconomic status, as Americans we share this: We are busy. We're out and about hustling to make our own lives work. We have goals to meet and meetings to attend and mortgages to pay — all while the phone is ringing and the laptop is pinging. And when we get home, Crate and Barrel and Louis Vuitton and Andy Cohen make us feel just good enough to get up the next day and do it all over again. It is very easy to close your eyes to a problem when you barely have enough time to close them to sleep. The greatest misconception among us, which causes deep and painful social and political tension every day in this country, is that we somehow don't care about each other. White people don't care about the problems of black America. Men don't care about women's rights. Cops don't care about the communities they serve. Humans don't care about the environment. These couldn't be further from the truth. We do care. We just don't have the time to do anything about it. Maybe that's just me. But maybe it's you, too.

Well, the treadmill you've been on for decades just stopped. Bam! And that feeling you have right now is the same as if you'd been thrown off your Peloton bike and onto the ground: What in the holy fuck just happened? I hope you might consider this: What happened is inexplicably incredible. It's the greatest gift ever unwrapped. Not the deaths, not the virus, but The Great Pause. It is, in a word, profound. Please don't recoil from the bright light beaming through the window. I know it hurts your eyes. It hurts mine, too. But the curtain is wide open.

(The conclusion of this essay will appear in the next issue of *Weekly (maybe) PIQUE*. — JR)

## SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY – JULY 2020

### SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club meets online via Zoom, and will continue so for the duration of our enforced isolation.

To be included and notified of each meeting's link and password, email your address to Sharon Krutzel at [sharonkrutzel@rcn.com](mailto:sharonkrutzel@rcn.com)

**TUES, MAY 12, 7:00 PM**

**PURPLE HIBISCUS**

**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

From the bestselling author of *Americanah*, *Purple Hibiscus* is an exquisite novel about the emotional turmoil of adolescence, the powerful bonds of family, and the bright promise of freedom, all seen through the eyes of fifteen-year-old Kambali as her family's privileged life in Nigeria is disrupted by military coup and revolution.

"One of the most vital and original novelists of her generation."

**TUES, JUNE 9, 7:00 pm**

**LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE**  
**Celeste Ng**

The #1 *NYTimes* bestseller, *Little Fires Everywhere* explores the weight of secrets, the nature of art and identity, and the ferocious pull of motherhood – and the danger of believing that following the rules can avert disaster.

**TUES, JULY 14, 7:00 pm**

**THE SHADOW KING**

**Maaza Mengiste**

Set during Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, *The Shadow King* takes us back to the first real conflict of World War II, casting light on the women soldiers who were left out of the historical record.

### SHSNY BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We're working on creating a Zoom meeting schedule for the Book Club – watch this space in future issues for sign-in info.

Meanwhile, do the reading ...

**THURS, MAY 7, 7:00 pm**  
**CULTURE AND COMMITMENT**  
**A Study of the Generation Gap**  
**Margaret Mead**

In this classic 1969 study, Mead foretold how the younger vs. the elder generations would become the human agents of change in our society and culture; our grandchildren will teach us, if we can choose to accept change.

Earle Bowers will lead, and thinks that, "in our current polarized era this book seems to me perhaps particularly topical again."

– *Paperback available*

**THURS, JUNE 4, 7:00 pm**

**MIND FIXERS:**

**Psychiatry's Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness**  
**Anne Harrington**

A clear-eyed, evenhanded, and yet passionate tour de force, *Mind Fixers* recounts the past and present struggle to make mental illness a biological question.

*Mind Fixers* makes clear that psychiatry's waxing and waning biological enthusiasms have been shaped not just by developments in the clinic and lab, but also by a surprising range of social factors, including immigration, warfare, grassroots activism, and assumptions about race and gender.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

**THURS, JULY 2, 7:00 pm**

*To Be Announced*

### HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

**Premiere Meeting:**

**SUN, APRIL 26, 4:00 PM**

Let's get together even when we can't get together – in a virtual Humanist Happy Hour, via Zoom. Get comfortable at your computer with your beverage of choice, or Cheetos, or cookies, or M&Ms – whatever makes you happy – and join (we have no idea how many) fellow humanists in our Humanist Happy Hour!

Expect details on Zoom-ing next Sunday via an email from SHSNY President Jon Engel in the next couple of days.

It'll be fun – *come!*

### AHA SPEAKER SERIES ONLINE

**THURS, APR 23, 6:30-8:00 pm**

**NONEDECISION 2020**

**How the Secular Vote will Impact the Election**

**Dr. Juhem Navarro-Rivera**

Watch this American Humanist Association talk by a leading political scientist on the burgeoning "None" vote (*that's us!*) in the past, in 2020, and beyond, on Zoom, here:

<https://zoom.us/j/463858819>

### SHSNY BRUNCH & CONVERSATION and

**GREAT LECTURES ON DVD**

... will not be offered while we all maintain our social distancing.

Meanwhile ...

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