

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April 29, 2020

We continue in lockdown—*Thank you, Andrew Cuomo (and I never thought I'd ever write that)*—and so we continue to e-publish *Weekly (maybe) PIQUE*. Not much on the Orange Occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania herein; even on a weekly (maybe) frequency, it's impossible to keep up with his lunacy. So we turn to Walton, KY, Palermo, Italy, and our neighborhood liquor store for comfort, wisdom and, I hope, amusement. A special Thanks to 34 of you who told us, with wit, what you miss. —JR

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Jonathan Engel

I live in an apartment in Manhattan with my wife and two sons. Our apartment has a small terrace, and during the pandemic we have been going out on our terrace every night at 7pm to join our fellow New Yorkers in cheering for medical workers and first responders who risk their own lives to care for others. It's the least we can do, and I think it's a good morale booster for the city. But there are others to honor as well, everyone from grocery and drugstore clerks to transit workers and more. All of these people are true heroes, demonstrating an incredible level of courage and selflessness. They have lives ahead of them and families at home and yet they risk everything for their fellow citizens. As a professional cynic I'm not sure I would have believed that there were this many good people in our country, but there they are. I am humbled by their decency and humanity.

Unfortunately, there is a yin for this yang in our country. We have United States senators who received early, confidential briefings on the coming threat, and used that knowledge to engage in insider stock trading in order to fatten their own bank accounts. We have clergymen who urge their congregants to pack the pews on Sundays in church because Jesus will protect them from Covid-19. (Here's a clue: he won't). And if they die anyway, they've died for Jesus so that's all good too. Nothing like a crisis to bring the con men and snake oil salesmen out from under their rocks.

And now we have the ranting protesters demanding that their respective governors cancel stay-at-home orders that were promulgated to protect knuckleheads like themselves. And of course they bring their Confederate flags and assault rifles with them to their protests because they're Republicans and these days violent white supremacy is

kind of their thing. As is physical intimidation of everyone who disagrees with them. Why else would people bring weapons to supposedly peaceful protests? But even worse is their callous disregard for the health and safety of others. So they go to their protest without a mask, where they mingle with other unmasked yahoos. After it's all over they ride the bus home, breathing on the bus driver and their fellow passengers. Remember, even if a person has no symptoms, they can still be carrying the virus and transmitting it to others. But they don't care; they think their right to vent their unhinged anger and nihilism at their governors trumps (pun intended) their fellow Americans' right to life and good health. (Apparently "right to life" applies only to fetuses; all post-birth humans are expendable). What bad people.

Which brings us to their ugly leader. And by ugly, I mean on the inside (I'll leave it to others to judge his glowering, orange-hued, 400 pound outside). Standing up there every day and grabbing credit that belongs to others and deflecting blame that belongs to himself. Trying to humiliate and intimidate reporters who have the courage to ask questions of and demand accountability from the man who is supposed to be the president of the United States.

And so there we have it. They say that a crisis brings out a person's true nature, for better or for worse. Here in the United States, circa 2020, we have seen our true natures, and they are good, they are bad, and they are ugly. Old westerns will tell you that the good guys always win, but in reality, only time will tell.

Organizational Update

At a Zoom virtual meeting April 15, the SHSNY Board voted unanimously to simply delay the triennial Board election until the covid-19 lockdown is over, we can again print this newsletter, and conduct a paper-ballot election.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

Jonathan Engel, *Pres.*; John Wagner, *V.P.*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secy/Treas.*; John Rafferty, *Editor/Pres. Emeritus*;
Nancy Adelman, Kiwi Callahan, Dorothy Kahn, Carl Marxer, David Orenstein

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SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

IN LOCKDOWN, READERS OF PIQUE, WHAT DO YOU MISS?

I miss my students. – *David Orenstein*

Walking around free in New York – *Eileen Regan*

I miss easy contact with people I live among.
I miss the close company of my family.
I miss my regular mah-jongg games.
I miss making plans for the future. – *Adrienne Karp*

I miss the company of my friends, the physical exercise, the walking, the theater, the restaurants, and the medical attention I had been scheduled for. – *Marvin Schissel*

Popcorn and diet coke at the movies. Eating at restaurants with wife and friends. Getting together with friends. Friends. Sanity. A president to be proud of. – *Phil Livingston*

Actually, I miss the monthly newsletter! – *Rebecca Kelly*

I miss the freedom to socialize closely for touching and hugging, but on the other hand I love the environmental improvements, in the air, water and land. – *Giles Kelly*

Baseball games. – *John O'Brien*

Truth be told, I miss the hustle and bustle, and even the noise. NYC is not supposed to be quiet; that's not who we are. We run around, we bump into each other, we yell, we swear, and we interact with each other in a million different ways. That's who we are, and I miss it. – *Jonathan Engel*

I miss my sanity.
I miss the ability to rid myself of anxiety, my usual means don't work as the Orange Baboon rushes us toward a dictatorship.

I miss reading, which is my salvation, since I'm writing fierce letters to the editor and doing FB activism until 2 am.
I miss savoring our daily lives because I'm consumed with following the terrifying news.

I miss my women's writing group.
I miss the life I had now that my husband is ill. I accept the reality and want to do what I'm doing but I miss the retirement I dreamed of for years: tending my garden (growing flowers, native plants), eating out, traveling, living a simpler life and having a slower pace.

I miss my equanimity.
I miss my Class 17 friends.
I miss keeping myself fit. – *Gretchen Robinson*

Taking a walk, breathing free, not in a mask. – *Cheryl Payer*

I think I'm having one of the easiest social distancing times. But I do miss restaurants, especially for food that: a) I can't make at home, and b) doesn't travel. – *Peter Flom*

I miss my friends, the warmth of hugs. – *Irene Christensen*

At the expense of revealing my limited horizons at age 90, I miss working at the college. Not only did it give variety to my days, but it forced me to engage in normal socializing. Even more, I miss shopping for the foods that I enjoy. Social distancing at supermarkets has crimped my style and I have to make do, rather than let my imagination for the food I prepare be inventive, varied, tempting to my wife's palate. One may say, "People are dying and all you care about is that you can't make an esoteric dish you see on 'Recipes from Calabria' on Facebook? Get a life!" – *Remo Cosentino*

Going outside. – *Beth Zucker*

The twice-weekly card games with friends. – *Pat Morris*

Human contact. – *Deeya Pavelle*

Dining out in local restaurants and taking in a movie at BAM, the Angelika, Film Forum, IFC Center or Quad Cinema. – *Dennis Middlebrooks*

All the people I couldn't stand to be with. – *H. Robert Miller*

Not having to go down to the front desk to pick up food deliveries. How lazy can you get? – *Dorothy Kahn*

The camaraderie of my fellow secularists. – *Dennis Kendrick*

My gym. – *Nancy Adelman*

I miss the feeling of cool air in my lungs as I bike through Central Park or around Randall's Island, though breathing through a red bandana does help me relive my childhood days of playing the cowboy bandit.

I miss having a beer and debating politics after our monthly Four Freedoms Democratic Party meetings.

The camaraderie of shaking hands and sitting next to fellow humanists at our (canceled) SHSNY Day of Reason Brunch.
I miss the excitement of sitting in a room listening to a brilliant scientist telling a roomful of colleagues about her discoveries about how the brain or immune system works.

– *John Wagner*

A modestly reasonable expectation of certainty, along with at least the illusion of being somewhat in control of the world around me. – *David Rafferty*

Right now I really miss being able to dine at my favorite diner while drinking lots of coffee (mostly decaf) and lingering over the NYTimes. Come May, what I miss most will change. – *Michael Weiss*

Spontaneity, going out to visit or shop. – *Craig Brashear*

Live music. Likely no concerts until Fall, 2021 – *Brian Rafferty*

Chatting with Sally at Ess-a-Bagel, discussing our Stein senior center's excellent Shakespeare class. (Happy birthday, today, Will, April 23.) – *Mary Orován*

I miss being in Greece. I missed by one day. I would have been better off there because they are doing much better there. Their PM has an excellent specialist (MD) speak to the population every day. Their virus rates are low and in general everyone there agrees that life is more important than money! – *Marjorie Vai*

Driving errands as needed. – *Harvey Offenhartz*

I miss seeing my students face to face, giving them a hug! I miss going to museums, the botanical gardens, concerts, and just walking around the city. I *don't* miss food shopping! I *don't* miss getting up at 5:10 a.m.! – *Karen Engel*

The Met museum and my grandson's hugs. – *Helen Roth*

Walking by the beach early mornings. – *Burt Waxler (CA)*

The theatre, the opera, the pub, cricket and ... shaking hands. – *John Adams (UK)*

WHEN IN ROME (OR PALERMO) ...

(*Transcribed from ABC's late-night "Jimmy Kimmel Live"*)

KIMMEL: Some Italians are still out and about, living their lives. But the difference between Italy and the United States is that the mayors of cities in Italy have no problem about going on camera and screaming at their citizens.

In videos with closed-caption translations:

ITALIAN MAYOR #1: I'm getting the news that some would like to throw graduation parties. We will send armed police over. With flamethrowers.

ITALIAN MAYOR #2: I'm the mayor. You won't "stroll" in my town. I can't ban you formally from leaving your house? Fine, I will ban you from walking on public soil, except for proven necessities. I'm gonna catch you tomorrow. Not in a year, TOMORROW!

ITALIAN MAYOR #3: I'm going to address you all. Where the f**k are you all going, you and your dogs, which must have an inflamed prostate?

ITALIAN MAYOR #4: Bringing in mobile hairdressers? What the f**k is that for? Do you understand that the casket will be closed? Who the f**k is even supposed to see you with your hair all done in the casket?

KIMMEL: In Italy there is a 3% chance the coronavirus will kill you, but a 100% chance that the Mayor of Palermo will.

OUR OWN WALTON, KY, HAS GABE BROWN

(*His official announcement of a town-wide lockdown*)

Listen up, dipshits and sensible people, I might not have the best bedside manner. I might not put you at ease like the governor does, but I don't care. You need to realize that this is a serious ordeal. In fact, it's a big fucking deal. Stay at home. – *Gabe Brown, Mayor, Walton, KY*

STUPID? NOT QUITE

Massimo Pigliucci

Right, we shouldn't say that protesters are stupid because they want to rush to "reopen" the country. For one, it's bad politics, playing straight into the hands of right-wing pundits harping on "liberal elites". It's also not quite true: yes, there is a bit of stupidity (just listen to some of the interviews, for crying out loud), mixed with a lot of ignorance (which is the primary cause of stupidity). But there is also a lot of legitimate concern for jobs lost, lack of health insurance, and people's inability to pay their bills.

Here is a thing, though: why aren't we seeing protests in European countries (or, at the very least, they are far more modest)? Because Europeans, more or less, can rely on the state's welfare net. Things are tough, but they are not going to be left in the streets. In the US, by contrast ...

THE RIGHT SENDS IN THE QUACKS

Paul Krugman

(*Excerpted from The New York Times OpEd, 4/20/2020*)

Why is there such a close alliance between modern conservatism and quackery? One answer is that a political movement that demands absolute loyalty considers quacks more reliable than genuine experts, even if those experts currently support the movement's policies. ...

Another answer is that the modern right is driven in large part by the grievances of white men who don't feel that they're getting the respect they believe they deserve, and Fox-fueled hostility to "elites" who claim to know more than guys in diners – which, on technical subjects like epidemiology, they do – is a key part of the movement.

Finally, there has historically been a strong association between right-wing extremism and grifting, including snake-oil and get-rich-quick schemes. ...

All of these factors making modern conservatism a happy hunting ground for fake experts have reached a kind of apotheosis under Donald Trump, a grifter president whose whole political strategy is based on catering to white male grievance, and who both disdains expertise and always values loyalty above competence.

IN NEWS FROM THE OTHER AMERICAN PANDEMIC

Because schools are closed, last month was the first calendar March without a school shooting since 2002.

NO, STOP THAT – IT'S NOT NICE TO LAUGH

On March 22, Bishop Gerald O. Glenn told his packed congregation at Richmond, VA's New Deliverance Evangelistic Church to stand, showing the world that "God is larger than this dreaded virus. You can quote me on that."

He died of covid-19 April 11, and now his wife is sick.

NYTimes Op-Ed column headline, 4/21/2020:

If Liquor Stores are Essential, Why Isn't Church?

Because one offers comfort, solace, and hope for a better day ... and the other is just, you know, church. – *JR*

GET READY FOR ULTIMATE GASLIGHTING

Part 2

Joseph Vincent Gambuto

(Excerpted from "Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting" at Forge.medium.com, 4/12/2020 and Forwarded by Barri Rafferty. Part 1 of this essay appeared in April 22 PIQUE.)

What the crisis has given us is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see ourselves and our country in the plainest of views. At no other time, ever in our lives, have we gotten the opportunity to see what would happen if the world simply stopped. Here it is. We're in it. Stores are closed. Restaurants are empty. Streets and six-lane highways are barren. Even the planet itself is rattling less (true story). And because it is rarer than rare, it has brought to light all of the beautiful and painful truths of how we live. And that feels weird. Really weird. Because it has ... never ... happened ... before. If we want to create a better country and a better world for our kids, and if we want to make sure we are even sustainable as a nation and as a democracy, we have to pay attention to how we feel right now. I cannot speak for you, but I imagine you feel like I do: devastated, depressed, and heartbroken.

And what a perfect time for Best Buy and H&M and Wal-Mart to help me feel normal again. If I could just have the new iPhone in my hand, if I could rest my feet on a pillow of new Nikes, if I could drink a venti blonde vanilla latte or sip a Diet Coke, then this very dark feeling would go away. You think I'm kidding, that I'm being cute, that I'm denying the very obvious benefits of having a roaring economy. You're right. Our way of life is not ruinous. The economy is not, at its core, evil. Brands and their products create millions of jobs. Like people — and most anything in life — there are brands that are responsible and ethical, and there are others that are not. They are all part of a system that keeps us living long and strong. We have lifted more humans out of poverty through the power of economics than any other civilization in history. Yes, without a doubt, Americanism is a force for good. It is not some villainous plot to wreak havoc and destroy the planet and all our souls along with it. I get it, and I agree. But its flaws have been laid bare for all to see. It doesn't work for everyone. It's responsible for great destruction. It is so unevenly distributed in its benefit that three men own more wealth than 150 million people. Its intentions have been perverted, and the protection it offers has disappeared. In fact, it's been brought to its knees by one pangolin.

And so the onslaught is coming. Get ready, my friends. What is about to be unleashed on American society will be the greatest campaign ever created to get you to feel normal again. It will come from brands, it will come from government, it will even come from each other, and it will come from the left and from the right. We will do anything, spend anything, believe anything, just so we can take away how horribly uncomfortable all of this feels. And on top of that, just to turn the screw that much more, will be the one effort that's even greater: the all-out blitz to make you believe you never saw what you saw. The air wasn't really

cleaner; those images were fake. The hospitals weren't really a war zone; those stories were hyperbole. The numbers were not that high; the press is lying. You didn't see people in masks standing in the rain risking their lives to vote. Not in America. You didn't see the leader of the free world push an unproven miracle drug like a late-night infomercial salesman. That was a crisis update. You didn't see homeless people dead on the street. You didn't see inequality. You didn't see indifference. You didn't see utter failure of leadership and systems.

But you did. You are not crazy, my friends. And so we are about to be gaslit in a truly unprecedented way. It starts with a check for \$1,200 (Don't say I never gave you anything) and then it will be so big that it will be bigly. And it will be a one-two punch from both big business and the big White House — inextricably intertwined now more than ever and being led by, as our luck would have it, a Marketer in Chief. Business and government are about to band together to knock us unconscious again. It will be funded like no other operation in our lifetimes. It will be fast. It will be furious. And it will be overwhelming. The Great American Return to Normal is coming.

From one citizen to another, I beg of you: Take a deep breath, ignore the deafening noise, and think deeply about what you want to put back into your life. This is our chance to define a new version of normal, a rare and truly sacred (yes, sacred) opportunity to get rid of the bullshit and to only bring back what works for us, what makes our lives richer, what makes our kids happier, what makes us truly proud. We get to Marie Kondo [a Japanese organizing expert — Ed.] the shit out of it all. We care deeply about one another. That is clear. That can be seen in every supportive Facebook post, in every meal dropped off for a neighbor, in every Zoom birthday party. We are a good people. And as a good people, we want to define — on our own terms — what this country looks like in five, 10, 50 years. This is our chance to do that, the biggest one we have ever gotten. And the best one we'll ever get.

We can do that on a personal scale in our homes, in how we choose to spend our family time on nights and weekends, what we watch, what we listen to, what we eat, and what we choose to spend our dollars on and where. We can do it locally in our communities, in what organizations we support, what truths we tell, and what events we attend. And we can do it nationally in our government, in which leaders we vote in and to whom we give power. If we want cleaner air, we can make it happen. If we want to protect our doctors and nurses from the next virus — and protect all Americans — we can make it happen. If we want our neighbors and friends to earn a dignified income, we can make that happen. If we want millions of kids to be able to eat if suddenly their school is closed, we can make that happen.

And, yes, if we just want to live a simpler life, we can make that happen, too. But only if we resist the massive gaslighting that is about to come. It's on its way. Look out.

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

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, MAY 3, 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!

Yes, we were going to do this April 26, but there was a covid-19 death in Jon Engel's extended family. Expect details on Zoom-ing May 3 from him via email.

AHA SPEAKER SERIES ONLINE

WED, MAY 20, 6:30-8:00 pm

HUMANISTS IN THE HOOD
Unapologetically Black,
Feminist, and Heretical
Dr. Sikivu Hutchinson

Watch an American Humanist Association talk by this author, playwright, educator, and activist on the anti-racist challenge to mainstream humanism, on Zoom, here:

<https://zoom.us/j/95825362663>

SHSNY BRUNCH & CONVERSATION and

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

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

Meanwhile ...

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