

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2020

Book Now (Save \$5) for the February 15 SHSNY 12th Annual Darwin Day Dinner - Page 7

So, it turns out that “You Are Here” poster of the Milky Way was wrong (see page 11). So too are our pareidolia fantasies and fundamentalists’ fears. We open the toolbox of truth, learn that amoebas may be aware they are amoebae, and that maybe everything ain’t so great. We end with advice for some “royals” and an ode to February 12, but first let’s play the Don’t-Blame-Us game. —JR

DON’T BLAME US Jonathan Engel

For those of us who follow what they used to call “current events” back when I was in grade school, these are indeed terrifying times. This applies to local, national, and international news stories, and the main point I want to make is: THIS IS NOT OUR FAULT.

The our/us that I am alluding to here are the world’s secular humanists. As I’ll show, we did not precipitate this state of affairs. Are secular humanists perfect, either individually or collectively? Of course not. But the world would be a different and better place if we were in charge instead of all those wonderful “people of faith” who have brought us to this point in America and around the world.

Trump: This manifestly unfit president, this malignant narcissist, this miserable excuse for a human being, is not our fault. While Trump himself has no beliefs other than his deranged certainty of his own greatness, his supporters are some of the most religious people in the country, almost all of them Christian. And Trump clearly isn’t a humanist; with 7.5 billion people sharing this planet, Trump cares about exactly one of them, i.e., himself. Not a humanist.

Iran: Trump’s decision to kill Iranian General Qassem Soleimani has, quite predictably, brought the situation in the Middle East to a high octane boil. This frightening volatility does not please secular humanists, but do you know who it does please? Fundamentalist Christians. Why? Because they have faith that conflagration in the Middle East will bring about “The Rapture”, wherein Christians will float up to heaven (I’m not making this up) while all others are tossed into the pits of hell by none other than Jesus himself. And do you know who subscribes to this lunacy? Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who both reportedly urged Trump to order the hit on Soleimani. Do

you know who doesn’t subscribe to this lunacy? Secular humanists, that’s who.

Climate Change: The country/continent of Australia is on fire. No only have at least 24 people been killed in the inferno so far, an estimated 1 billion (*with a B!*) non-human animals have lost their lives, putting whole species at risk of extinction. While most of our attention may be focused elsewhere right now, there is no greater risk to all of us than climate change. The most consequential factor inhibiting our country’s ability to confront this existential threat is the refusal of so many Americans to accept the science on this issue. Secular humanists, on the other hand, believe in the use of science and reason to address the world’s great challenges. We are also concerned with the well-being of all people, and so the suffering we see in Australia (and other places) moves us to advocate for immediate action on climate change. Not all science deniers are religious, but no secular humanists are science deniers.

So you can see what I’m getting at here, and it applies to many other issues as well. While Methodists are cleaving themselves in half over the issue of homosexual clergy, secular humanists figured out a long time ago how to deal with our gay brethren: treat them like everybody else. And while the nation holds its collective breath as to whether the Supreme Court will overturn *Roe v. Wade*, secular humanists have this all figured out: trust women to make their own choices about their health in consultation with their doctors.

These are indeed perilous times on planet Earth, and humans have inflicted much of the damage themselves through their own stupidity. So-called “people of faith” have been running things for a long time in the U.S., and look where that’s gotten us. So maybe it’s time to give “people of reason” (i.e., secular humanists) our shot.

I doubt we could do any worse.

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GETTING BETTER? REALLY? Marvin Schissel

The lead article in January PIQUE (“It’s All Getting Better ... Really”, by Arthur C. Brooks) maintains that, contrary to prevailing gloom and doom, things in the world are actually getting better. Brooks bases his argument on data showing that, in general, the economic situation is improving for most people in the world.

While this is probably true, mainly because of world-wide improvements in agriculture (GMOs and the Green Revolution), Brooks overlooks the many very real and horrifying threats that face the world’s population.

Climate Change: This could cause massive loss of habitable and arable land, leading to substantial losses of life, starvation, resettling of populations, and global wars for remaining land. We’ve known about climate change for years. What have we done about it?

Fossil fuels and rare earth elements: Fossil fuels provide heat, produce electricity, and enable transportation. Our reliance on these fossil fuels keeps increasing, bringing us closer to the day when this energy supply runs out. And we are using and need more and more rare earth elements for advanced electrical instruments, including methods of communication, record keeping, communication and computing devices, and the internet. We will run out of these rare earth elements; what then? Imagine our world if electricity is suddenly not available. We’ve known about this for years. What have we done about it?

Smothering life in the oceans: There is an area in the Pacific called the doldrums where all the currents converge. Almost a half-century ago this doldrums area was clogged with plastic that doesn’t decompose and that was smothering ocean life. Back then the affected area was almost the size of Texas. Today that area is now the size of the United States. If the ocean dies, so will humanity. We knew about this a half-century ago. What are we doing about it?

Antibiotic failure: Perhaps most pressing of these doomsday scenarios is the evolving of lethal bacteria into antibiotic resistant organisms. Some 70 years ago, as a student, I heard a lecture by a man who had co-developed the early antibiotic bacitracin. In those days antibiotics were discovered and recovered from plants. He said that we had only eight antibiotics (this was 70 years ago) and we may never find another one, and we must be careful lest the antibiotics be used unnecessarily and lethal disease organisms would develop resistance. In those days a single dose of an antibiotic would cure a previously lethal disease. Now massive antibiotic doses may not suffice. Humanity may suffer a plague that kills most of us off. We knew about this 70 years ago. What have we done about it?

Scientific illiteracy: What have we done about these problems? Nothing, and I’m afraid that we’ll continue to do nothing because of burgeoning scientific illiteracy, even among the educated. Examples: anti-fluoridation, anti-GMO’s, anti-vaccines, organic foods, alternative medicine, and useless food supplements, to mention a few.

So perhaps it’s not “All Getting Better”. Really.

DON’T FEAR US Paul A. Djupe

(Excerpted from “White evangelicals fear atheists and Democrats would strip away their rights. Why?”, in The Washington Post 12/23/2019)

As the House has moved through the impeachment of President Trump, voices on the extreme right have been arguing that it’s the first shot in a coming “civil war”. According to conservative evangelical conspiracy theorist Rick Wiles, “The Democrats are forcing me to stockpile ammunition, food, water, and medical supplies to defend my family, home, and church.” In a speech before the Values Voter Summit, Trump similarly said that Democrats were coming for the rights of Christians, which he said he would resist if he stayed in office. Franklin Graham claims that “demonic forces” are pressing for the impeachment of someone that a significant proportion of evangelicals believe is God’s anointed president.

But do white evangelical Protestants actually believe that Democrats will strip them of their rights? And is it true that Democrats and atheists want to strip evangelicals of their rights? A new survey has some answers.

Our research found that white evangelical Protestants believe atheists and Democrats would strip away their rights

Political scientist Ryan Burge and I ran a non-probability sample survey from May 17-18 of 1,010 U.S. Protestants, conducted online through Qualtrics Panels and weighted to resemble the diversity of Protestants in the country. White evangelical Protestants made up 60 percent of our sample.

Of those white evangelical Protestants, we found that 60 percent believed that atheists would not allow them First Amendment rights and liberties. More specifically, we asked whether they believed atheists would prevent them from being able to “hold rallies, teach, speak freely, and run for public office”. Similarly, 58 percent believed “Democrats in Congress” would not allow them to exercise these liberties if they were in power. By contrast, 23 percent think “Republicans in Congress” would not respect their rights; those were primarily the views of a small contingent of white evangelical Democrats in the sample.

These are extraordinary proportions for a core question in democratic societies: Are citizens willing to extend rights to groups they dislike? If not, the political process can no longer fairly resolve disputes and the nation may turn to violence — just as far-right commentators and public officials are predicting.

But that’s not true

Would Democrats and atheists strip away conservative Christians’ rights and liberties if they could? To find out, I turned to survey data I gathered with political scientists Amanda Friesen and Anand Sokhey from September 20-26, 2016, conducted with a large national sample of 2,517 Americans online through Qualtrics Panels and weighted to resemble the national adult population. This survey asked respondents about their feelings toward various groups and whether they would extend civil liberties to those groups.

**OF COURSE FUNDAMENTALISTS ARE
BRAIN-DAMAGED, WE KNEW THAT. UM, WAIT ...**

Bob Azarian

(Excerpted from Raw Story on alternet, 12/30/23019)

A study published in the journal *Neuropsychologia* has shown that religious fundamentalism is, in part, the result of a functional impairment in a brain region known as the prefrontal cortex. The findings suggest that damage to particular areas of the prefrontal cortex indirectly promotes religious fundamentalism by diminishing cognitive flexibility and openness—a psychology term that describes a personality trait which involves dimensions like curiosity, creativity, and open-mindedness.

Religious beliefs can be thought of as socially transmitted mental representations that consist of supernatural events and entities assumed to be real. Religious beliefs differ from empirical beliefs, which are based on how the world appears to be and are updated as new evidence accumulates or when new theories with better predictive power emerge. On the other hand, religious beliefs are not usually updated in response to new evidence or scientific explanations, and are therefore strongly associated with conservatism. They are fixed and rigid, which helps promote predictability and coherence to the rules of society among individuals within the group.

Religious fundamentalism refers to an ideology that emphasizes traditional religious texts and rituals and discourages progressive thinking about religion and social issues. Fundamentalist groups generally oppose anything that questions or challenges their beliefs or way of life. For this reason, they are often aggressive towards anyone who does not share their specific set of supernatural beliefs, and towards science, as these things are seen as existential threats to their entire worldview. ...

Cognitive flexibility and openness aren't the only things that make brains vulnerable to religious fundamentalism. ... Uncovering those additional causes, which could be anything from genetic predispositions to social influences, is a future research project that the researchers believe will occupy investigators for many decades to come, given how complex and widespread religious fundamentalism is and will likely continue to be for some time.

By investigating the cognitive and neural underpinnings of religious fundamentalism, we can better understand how the phenomenon is represented in the connectivity of the brain, which could allow us to someday inoculate against rigid or radical belief systems through various kinds of mental and cognitive exercises.

Comment: Gee, wasn't this interesting and fun for us non-fundamentalists ... right up until the last paragraph? "Inoculate" against "belief systems" that some authority – what, a governmental superagency, market forces, a social media stampede? – might consider "inappropriate", "subversive", or just "incorrect". Somewhere, Orwell is smiling. – JR

The way to see by Faith is to shut the eye of Reason.

– Benjamin Franklin

It is no secret that, in general, these groups do not like each other. On a “feeling thermometer” ranging from zero (cold, negative) to 100 (warm, positive), white evangelicals on average rated atheists a 25 – a level of dislike mirrored by how atheists and agnostics rated Christian fundamentalists at 24. That dislike didn't hold true by political party. Democrats rated Christian fundamentalists a 45, on average, while Republicans rated them a 53.

The same survey respondents were asked to choose the group they “liked the least” from a list that included atheists, Christian fundamentalists, immigrants, white supremacists, Muslims, Trump supporters, Hillary supporters and homosexuals. Almost a majority of the sample (49 percent) chose white supremacists as their least-liked group. Just 5 percent chose Christian fundamentalists; that included only 5 percent of Democrats and 10 percent of atheists.

Then respondents were asked whether their selected group should be allowed to give speeches in the community, teach in public schools, run for public office and other liberties. Americans are not particularly tolerant of groups they dislike. Only 30 percent are willing to allow their disliked group three or more such activities.

But 65 percent of atheists and 53 percent of Democrats who listed Christian fundamentalists as their least-liked group are willing to allow them to engage in three or more of these activities. That's a much higher proportion with tolerance than the sample overall.

Someone could argue that only the most politically active atheists would be intolerant. But the proportion who were tolerant didn't vary by whether atheists said they engaged in more or less political activity.

***Evangelical Christians would
strip away atheists' rights***

However, we found that a smaller proportion of white evangelicals would behave with tolerance toward atheists than the proportion of atheists who would behave with tolerance toward them. Thirteen percent of white evangelical Protestants selected atheists as their least-liked group. Of those, 32 percent are willing to extend three or more of these rights to atheists. In fact, when we looked at all religious groups, atheists and agnostics were the most likely to extend rights to the groups they least liked.

Conservative Christians believe their rights are in peril partly because that's what they're hearing, quite explicitly, from conservative media, religious elites, partisan commentators and some politicians, including the president. The survey evidence suggests another reason, too. Their fear comes from an inverted golden rule: Expect from others what you would do unto them. White evangelical Protestants express low levels of tolerance for atheists, which leads them to expect intolerance from atheists in return. That perception surely bolsters their support for Trump. They believe their freedom depends on keeping Trump in power.

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool.

– Richard Feynman

THE HUMAN MIND UNBOUND

Roland A. Duerksen

(Reprinted from "Humanism 101" in November / December 2019 Humanist Magazine)

Attempting to clarify Catholic doctrine back in the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote: "Insofar as human nature is concerned, there is nothing better than mind and reason." If he'd left it at that, we could applaud his insight at that early time. Unfortunately, he went on: "and yet the person who wants to live happily should not live in accordance with this. Our mind should not be self-contented but should be subjected to God."

The happiness St. Augustine prescribed is the contentment of not having to ask or answer questions. The belief that human beings should subdue their greatest asset to some outside power—that they should disown the quality that distinguishes them from other living things—is essentially a denial of humanity. If this belief had been rejected 1500 years ago, and humans had instead accepted the mind's potential for ultimate responsibility, we might by now have attained a happiness of quite another dimension.

Avoidance of responsibility, linked to a desire for dependent innocence, is core to the Christian tradition and is shared by the other Abrahamic religions—Judaism and Islam—both also based on belief in one all-powerful, controlling deity. The originators of the Adam and Eve myth posited a creator who condemned the attainment of critical knowledge—the knowledge of good and evil—as the worst of sins. In reality, the human capacity for moral judgment is the pinnacle of evolution. Knowledge of the concepts of "good" and "evil" changed humanity's relationship to nature. Continuing to exist as constituents of the natural world in which they had evolved, humans now took on a role not attained by any other beings: they became responsible for their actions. What was to happen to them and to the world was no longer completely up to nature.

This attainment of rational, decision-making thought was essentially the birth of human potentiality, of freedom. To label it "the Fall" may be one of the great mistakes in all of human history. Christianity has never accepted the existential fact that a return to irresponsible innocence is simply impossible, just as we cannot unlearn how to split the atom. Rather than responsibly facing the consequences of our choices between good and evil, Christianity and other religions focus on a need to somehow get right with an offended deity, which must provide salvation and restore innocence. This urge to escape responsibility has come to pervade what is accepted as normal in the United States. Even our monetary declaration that "In God We Trust" and the ubiquitous political call for God to bless America exemplify the desire for innocent dependency. They nudge us further toward irresponsibility, away from critical thinking, and away from acknowledgment that distinguishing between good and evil is up to us. Where Christianity undertakes social action, the action is based on supposed instructions from the supernatural rather than human judgment.

Almost two hundred years ago, Percy Bysshe Shelley's

dramatic poem "Prometheus Unbound" gave us a stellar literary treatment of the potential power of human thought. As personification of the human mind, Prometheus makes a momentous choice of empathy over vengeful self-interest, and thereby creates a radically rejuvenated social order based on love and community. Embodying the power of independent thought, Prometheus overcomes the oppressive constraints of religion—represented by the god Jupiter. The process in Shelley's poem is quite the opposite of the subjugation demanded by St. Augustine.

Religion's insistence that human beings cannot bear to be responsible has suppressed human potential, much as Jupiter kept Prometheus chained to a mountain through the ages. It's hard to imagine how many wars would have been avoided, how much narrower the gap between wealth and poverty would be, and how thoroughly racism and other prejudices might now be rejected if the challenge to the mind had not been thus blunted—if free, original, and uninhibited thinking had always been the essential aim of education and social policy.

There is an alarming worldwide trend (as exemplified by Trumpism in the US) toward repression, ignorance, and crudely capitalistic selfishness—which, whatever the present state of religion in the world, has been fostered by doctrine such as St. Augustine's disdain for free thought. The stakes are profound: democracy, human compassion, and our survival on the planet are at risk. Humanism provides our best hope for redemption by applying scientific, responsible methods combined with far-reaching empathy.

To be a true humanist is to take on the challenge and the responsibility of choosing good over evil, not just in our personal lives but in empathizing and identifying with all people. Humanists must now take the lead in moving humanity to responsible action.

WHY I'M AN ATHEIST

Ricky Gervais

(Reprinted from *Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society Humanist Monthly, January, 2020*)

Why don't you believe in God? I get that question all the time. I always try to give a sensitive, reasoned answer. This is usually awkward, time consuming and pointless. People who believe in God don't need proof of his existence, and they certainly don't want evidence to the contrary. They even say things like "it's true to me" and "it's faith". I still give my logical answer because I feel that not being honest would be patronizing and impolite. It is ironic therefore that "I don't believe in God because there is absolutely no scientific evidence for his existence and from what I've heard the very definition is a logical impossibility in this known universe," comes across as both patronizing and impolite.

Arrogance is another accusation. Which seems particularly unfair. Science seeks the truth. And it does not discriminate. For better or worse it finds things out. Science is humble. It knows what it knows and it knows what it doesn't know. It bases its conclusions and beliefs on hard

evidence — evidence that is constantly updated and upgraded. It doesn't get offended when new facts come along. It embraces the body of knowledge. It doesn't hold on to medieval practices because they are tradition. If it did, you wouldn't get a shot of penicillin, you'd pop a leech down your trousers and pray. Whatever you "believe", this is not as effective as medicine. Again you can say, "It works for me," but so do placebos. My point being I'm saying God doesn't exist. I'm not saying faith doesn't exist. I know faith exists. I see it all the time. But believing in something doesn't make it true. Hoping that something is true doesn't make it true. The existence of God is not subjective. He either exists or doesn't. It's not a matter of opinion. You can have your own opinions. But you can't have your own facts.

Why don't I believe in God? No, no no, why do YOU believe in God? Surely the burden of proof is on the believer. You started all this. If I came up to you and said, "Why don't you believe I can fly?" You'd say, "Why would I?" I'd reply, "Because it's a matter of faith." If I then said, "Prove I can't fly. Prove I can't. See, see, you can't prove it can you?" You'd probably either walk away, call security or throw me out of the window and shout, "F---ing fly then, you lunatic."

As an atheist, I see nothing "wrong" in believing in a god. I don't think there is a god, but belief in him does no harm. If it helps you in any way, then that's fine with me. It's when belief starts infringing on other people's rights is when it worries me. I would never deny your right to believe in a god. I would just rather you didn't kill people who believe in a different god, say. Or stone someone to death because your rulebook says their sexuality is immoral. It's strange that anyone who believes that an all-powerful all-knowing, omniscient power responsible for everything that happens, would also want to judge and punish people for what they are. From what I can gather, pretty much the worst type of person you can be is an atheist. The first four commandments hammer this point home. There is a god, I'm him, no one else is, you're not as good and don't forget it. (Don't murder doesn't get a mention till Number 6.)

To anyone who holds my lack of religious faith in such contempt, I say, "It's the way God made me."

DUNNO

Courtney Heard

(Excerpted from Godless Mom on patheos.com, 1/8/2020)

It's strange to me that some believers think that atheism is a position on the origins of the universe. That, because we don't believe a god made all of this, we must have some other explanation. It simply does not cross their mind that our answer might be "dunno."

It's the same way they approach everything. They have faith, so we must. They have religious beliefs, and so we must also have religious beliefs. Their position on god is a religion, and so our position on god must be a religion. They have a made-up story about where the universe came from, and so we must also have a tale we all believe about the origins of everything that ever was.

It's just not the case at all, and this question ends up

telling us a whole lot more about the asker than it does about the person answering. It tells us that the theist is so uncomfortable with the state of not knowing that he cannot fathom someone okay with it.

The thing is, though, we are okay with not knowing. There are plenty of things we don't understand at this stage in human knowledge, and the best thing about being able to admit we don't know is that it leaves room for investigation. Insisting you already know closes that door very quickly.

Dear Reader: What's your answer to "How can you believe something came from nothing?" Let me know at editor@shsnny.org.

THE SORT-OF-LOCAL GOOD NEWS:

John Rafferty

(Excerpted (and reworked) from posts by "Friendly Atheist" Hemant Mehta on patheos.com 1/7 and 1/14/2020)

In January, the Town of Enfield, New York (near Ithaca) held its first meeting of the year, and one of the new members helped get rid of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Stephanie Redmond initially proposed a resolution to remove "God" from the Pledge, saying the religious language violated the town's goal of being inclusive.

Then, rather than alter the Pledge, which might have created more drama than anyone wanted, Town Supervisor Beth McGee proposed to scrap the ritual completely. The final vote to eliminate the Pledge of Allegiance was 4-1. Total time for the revolution? Under 10 minutes.

Last November, four liberals won seats on the Manlius Town Board in New York (just east of Syracuse), flipping it to Democratic control and giving them a 5-1 advantage on the committee. Those new members showed just how different the new board would be when three of them chose not to take their oath on a Bible.

John Deer, Elaine Denton and Heather Waters each chose to put their hand on the town book of codes for the swearing in ceremony on December 30 in the town hall.

Why not use the Bible? Waters said separation of church and state is what motivated her. Deer said he decided not to use a Bible because he is an atheist, and also because he believes in the separation of church and state.

"I just thought it was the right thing to do."

AND THE LOCAL NOT-SO-GOOD NEWS

Amid raucous, even "frenzied" protest from hundreds of anti-vaxxers, state lawmakers in New Jersey abandoned legislation to ban vaccination exemptions based on religious beliefs.

The bill, S2173, which would have prohibited parents from using religious beliefs as an excuse to get out of providing standard, life-saving immunizations for their children, collapsed in the state Senate January 13 as lawmakers realized it was a single vote shy of passage.

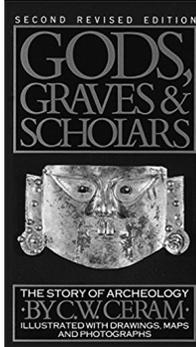
One day atheism will disappear as a concept. Instead there will be normal people and some weirdo believers.

— Frank Zappa

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY – APRIL 2020

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, FEB 6, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
 We'll discuss
GODS, GRAVES, AND
SCHOLARS:
The Story of Archaeology
C.W. Ceram

C.W. Ceram visualized archeology as a wonderful combination of high adventure, romance, history and scholarship, and this book, a chronicle of man's search for his past, reads like a dramatic narrative.



We travel with Heinrich Schliemann as, defying the ridicule of the learned world, he actually unearths the remains of the ancient city of Troy. We share the excitement of Lord Carnarvon and Howard Carter as they first glimpse the riches of Tutankhamen's tomb, of George Smith when he found the ancient clay tablets that contained the records of the Biblical Flood. We rediscover the ruined splendors of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world; of Chichen Itza, the abandoned pyramids of the Maya; and the legendary Labyrinth of the Minotaur in Crete. Here is much of the history of civilization and the stories of the men who rediscovered it. Dorothy Kahn will lead.
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Join us even if you haven't finished reading.
The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, MAR 5, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THREE ROADS TO
QUANTUM GRAVITY
Lee Smolin

In this accessible overview of the attempts to build a final "theory of everything", Smolin explains in simple terms what scientists are talking about when they say the world is made of exotic entities such as loops, strings, and black holes, and tells the fascinating stories behind the discoveries.

"A mix of science, philosophy and science fiction at once entertaining, thought-provoking, fabulously ambitious and fabulously speculative." – *The New York Times*
 Earle Bowers will lead.
 – *Paperback(s) and Kindle available*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, APR 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
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 and so 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."
 – *Paperbacks available*

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BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, FEB 16, 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 \$16 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.



Come join 15 or 20 fellow free-thinkers for food, fun and lively conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:
Is America ready for a female president?

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
THURS, FEB 27, 7:00 pm
Nancy Adelman's apartment
205 Third Ave. (6H)
MISTAKES WERE MADE
(BUT NOT BY ME)
Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs,
Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts
Dr. Carol Tavris

Why do people dodge responsibility when things fall apart? Why can we see hypocrisy in others but not in ourselves? Why do we create fictions that absolve us of responsibility, restoring our belief that we are smart, moral, and right – a belief that often keeps us on a course that is dumb, immoral, and wrong.

Here is a compelling look into how the brain is wired for self-justification, calming the cognitive dissonance that jars our inflated feelings of self-worth when we screw up royally.

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY – APRIL 2020

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB
TUES, FEB 11, 7:00 pm
Nancy Adelman's apartment
205 Third Ave. (6H)

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

STAY WITH ME
Ayobami Adbayo

This celebrated, unforgettable first novel (“A bright, big-hearted demonstration of female spirit.” -*The Guardian*), shortlisted for the prestigious Women’s Prize for Fiction, selected as a Best Book of 2017 by NPR, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, and set in Nigeria, gives voice to both husband and wife as they tell the story of their marriage – and the forces that threaten to tear it apart.

– Paperback and Kindle available.

To reserve your seat on the sofa, contact: editor@shsny.org

Advance-Reading Notice:
Mar 10: Freaky Deaky
Elmore Leonard

Over-the-hill former counter-culture revolutionaries decide to turn bomb-making from political statement to a profitable enterprise, in an explosively funny thriller by “the world’s greatest cops ‘n’ robbers novelist”.

Apr 14: The King Must Die
Mary Renault

Exploring religious upheaval through myth, we’re in Ancient Greece, and a matriarchal society with an earth-based religion is in the process of changing to a patriarchal one that worships sky gods.

Renault uses this background to re-tell the Greek myth of Theseus – including the Minotaur, the Labyrinth and Ariadne, in what is perhaps the most inventive and exciting of all her novels.

Book Now for the:

12th Annual SHSNY Darwin Day Celebration
Saturday, February 15, 6:00 – 8:30 pm, at
Pete’s Tavern

(“The Tavern O. Henry Made Famous”)

129 East 18 Street

(in the upstairs Speakeasy Room), with

Dr. Isabel Behncke

“Primate Journeys:

Darwin’s influence in Understanding our Primate Origins”



Isabel Behncke is a primatologist, professor, member of the Leakey Foundation, a pioneer adventurer-scientist, and the first South American (originally from Chile) to follow great apes in the wild (trekking more than 3000km in the jungles of Congo to study bonobos). For our Darwin Day gathering, Professor Behncke will talk about her

work within the context of Darwin’s own writings regarding natural selection.

Just for fun, Google “Isabel Behncke”, then watch one or more of her insightful and entertaining videos; one’s a TED Talk.

Darwin Day Dinner is just \$65 per person (tax & tip included)
(or \$70pp after Saturday, February 8)
(There will be a full cash bar.)

Appetizers:

Penne a la Vodka or Fried Calamari

Salad:

House Mesclun Salad with Balsamic Vinaigrette

Entrees:

Chicken Breast du Jour with Potato Puree & Vegetables

Seared Shell Steak with Wine Sauce with Potato Puree & Vegetables

Roast Filet of Salmon with Potato Puree & Vegetables

Eggplant Parmigiana with Pasta

Desserts:

Tortoni, Spumoni or Homemade Tiramisu

Coffee or Tea

Book Now! Save \$5 per person!

Space in Pete’s Speakeasy Room is limited, and both their staff and our volunteers need advance time to plan. So please book by Saturday, February 8 – preferably now, please! – to save \$5 and pay just \$65 per person. After Feb 8, Dinner will cost \$70 pp. Pay by credit card or PayPal at www.shsny.org, or by check made out and mailed to SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, New York, NY 10150-7661. Questions? Email editor@shsny.org.



DOES CONSCIOUSNESS PERVADE THE UNIVERSE?

Gareth Cook

(Excerpted from “Philosopher Philip Goff answers questions about “panpsychism” on *scientificamerican.com*, 1/14/2020)

One of science’s most challenging problems is a question that can be stated easily: Where does consciousness come from? In his new book, *Galileo’s Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness*, philosopher Philip Goff considers a radical perspective: What if consciousness is not something special that the brain does but is instead a quality inherent to all matter? It is a theory known as “panpsychism”, and Goff guides readers through the history of the idea, answers common objections (such as “That’s just crazy!”) and explains why he believes panpsychism represents the best path forward. He answered questions from Mind Matters editor Gareth Cook.

Can you explain, in simple terms, what you mean by panpsychism?

In our standard view of things, consciousness exists only in the brains of highly evolved organisms, and hence consciousness exists only in a tiny part of the universe and only in very recent history. According to panpsychism, in contrast, consciousness pervades the universe and is a fundamental feature of it. This doesn’t mean that literally everything is conscious. The basic commitment is that the fundamental constituents of reality – perhaps electrons and quarks – have incredibly simple forms of experience. And the very complex experience of the human or animal brain is somehow derived from the experience of the brain’s most basic parts.

It might be important to clarify what I mean by “consciousness”, as that word is actually quite ambiguous. Some people use it to mean something quite sophisticated, such as self-awareness or the capacity to reflect on one’s own existence. This is something we might be reluctant to ascribe to many nonhuman animals, never mind fundamental particles. But when I use the word consciousness, I simply mean experience: pleasure, pain, visual or auditory experience, et cetera.

Human beings have a very rich and complex experience; horses less so; mice less so again. As we move to simpler and simpler forms of life, we find simpler and simpler forms of experience. Perhaps, at some point, the light switches off, and consciousness disappears. But it’s at least coherent to suppose that this continuum of consciousness fading while never quite turning off carries on into inorganic matter, with fundamental particles having almost unimaginably simple forms of experience to reflect their incredibly simple nature. That’s what panpsychists believe. *You write that you come to this idea as a way of solving a problem in the way consciousness is studied. What, in your mind, is the problem?*

Despite great progress in our scientific understanding of the brain, we still don’t have even the beginnings of an explanation of how complex electrochemical signaling is

somehow able to give rise to the inner subjective world of colors, sounds, smells and tastes that each of us knows in our own case. There is a deep mystery in understanding how what we know about ourselves from the inside fits together with what science tells us about matter from the outside.

While the problem is broadly acknowledged, many people think we just need to plug away at our standard methods of investigating the brain, and we’ll eventually crack it. But in my new book, I argue that the problem of consciousness results from the way we designed science at the start of the scientific revolution.

A key moment in the scientific revolution was Galileo’s declaration that *mathematics* was to be the language of the new science, that the new science was to have a purely *quantitative* vocabulary. But Galileo realized that you can’t capture consciousness in these terms, as consciousness is an essentially *quality-involving* phenomenon. Think about the redness of a red experience or the smell of flowers or the taste of mint. You can’t capture these kinds of qualities in the purely quantitative vocabulary of physical science. So Galileo decided that we have to put consciousness outside of the domain of science; after we’d done that, everything else could be captured in mathematics.

This is really important, because although the problem of consciousness is taken seriously, most people assume our conventional scientific approach is capable of solving it. And they think this because they look at the great success of physical science in explaining more and more of our universe and conclude that this ought to give us confidence that physical science alone will one day explain consciousness. However, I believe that this reaction is rooted in a misunderstanding of the history of science. Yes, physical science has been incredibly successful. But it’s been successful precisely because it was designed to exclude consciousness. If Galileo were to time travel to the present day and hear about this problem of explaining consciousness in the terms of physical science, he’d say, “Of course, you can’t do that. I designed physical science to deal with *quantities*, not *qualities*.”

How does panpsychism allow you to approach the problem differently?

The starting point of the panpsychist is that physical science doesn’t actually tell us what matter is. That sounds like a bizarre claim at first; you read a physics textbook, you seem to learn all kinds of incredible things about the nature of space, time and matter. But what philosophers of science have realized is that physical science, for all its richness, is confined to telling us about the behavior of matter, what it does. Physics tells us, for example, that matter has mass and charge. These properties are completely defined in terms of behavior, things like attraction, repulsion, resistance to acceleration. Physics tells us absolutely nothing about what philosophers like to call the intrinsic nature of matter: what matter is, in and of itself.

So it turns out that there is a huge hole in our scientific story. The proposal of the panpsychist is to put conscious-

ness in that hole. Consciousness, for the panpsychist, is the intrinsic nature of matter. There's just matter, in this view, nothing supernatural or spiritual. But matter can be described from two perspectives. Physical science describes matter "from the outside", in terms of its behavior. But matter "from the inside" — i.e., in terms of its intrinsic nature — is constituted of forms of consciousness.

What this offers us is a beautifully simple, elegant way of integrating consciousness into our scientific worldview, of marrying what we know about ourselves from the inside and what science tells us about matter from the outside.

What are the objections to this idea that you hear most frequently? And how do you respond?

Of course, the most common one is "That's just crazy!" But many of our best scientific theories are wildly counter to common sense, too — for example, Albert Einstein's theory that time slows down when you travel very fast or Charles Darwin's theory that our ancestors were apes. At the end of the day, you should judge a view not by its cultural associations but by its explanatory power. Panpsychism gives us a way of resolving the mystery of consciousness, a way that avoids the deep difficulties that plague more conventional options.

Do you foresee a scenario in which panpsychism can be tested?

There is a profound difficulty at the heart of the science of consciousness: consciousness is unobservable. You can't look inside an electron to see whether or not it is conscious. But nor can you look inside someone's head and see their feelings and experiences. We know that consciousness exists not from observation and experiment but by being conscious. The only way we can find out about the consciousness of others is by asking them: I can't directly perceive your experience, but I can ask you what you're feeling. And if I'm a neuroscientist, I can do this while I'm scanning your brain to see which bits light up as you tell me what you're feeling and experiencing. In this way, scientists are able to correlate certain kinds of brain activity with certain kinds of experience. We now know which kinds of brain activity are associated with feelings of hunger, with visual experiences, with pleasure, pain, anxiety, et cetera.

This is really important information, but it's not itself a theory of consciousness. That's because what we ultimately want from a science of consciousness is an explanation of those correlations. Why is it that, say, a certain kind of activity in the hypothalamus is associated with the feeling of hunger? Why should that be so? As soon as you start to answer this question, you move beyond what can be, strictly speaking, tested, simply because consciousness is unobservable. We have to turn to philosophy.

The moral of the story is that we need both the science and the philosophy to get a theory of consciousness. The science gives us correlations between brain activity and experience. We then have to work out the best philosophical theory that explains those correlations. In my view, the only theory that holds up to scrutiny is panpsychism.

How did you become interested in this topic?

When I studied philosophy, we were taught that there were only two approaches to consciousness: either you think consciousness can be explained in conventional scientific terms, or you think consciousness is something magical and mysterious that science will never understand. I came to think that both of these views were pretty hopeless. I think we can have hope that we will one day have a science of consciousness, but we need to rethink what science is. Panpsychism offers us a way of doing this.

PAREIDOLIA

Michio Kaku

(Transcribed, lightly edited, from bigthink.com, 12/26/2019)

We still have Flat Earthers, we have people who don't believe in vaccinations, and what do we do about it? Well, first of all, I think there's a gene. I think there's a gene for superstition, a gene for hearsay, a gene for magic, a gene for magical thinking. And I think that when we were in the forest that gene actually helped us. Because 9 times out of 10, that gene was wrong. Superstition didn't work. But 1 time out of 10, it saved your butt. That's why the gene is still here, the gene for superstition and magic.

Now, there's no gene for science. Science is based on things that are reproducible, testable — it's a long process, the scientific method. It's not part of our natural thinking. It's an acquired taste, just like broccoli. ... So I think 1,000 years from now we will still have Flat Earthers. A thousand years from now, we will have people who do not want to be vaccinated. OK? So what do we do about it?

Well, it's a struggle. It's a struggle that's eternal, because I think it's part of our genetic makeup. And there's even a name for some of this superstition. It's called pareidolia. What is pareidolia? It's the idea that when you look in the sky you see things that are not there.

Look at the clouds and try not to see something there. It's very difficult. You look at the clouds. You can't help it. You see Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse. You see snakes, animals, you see all sorts of stuff. You can't help it. Recently, the Notre Dame Cathedral partially burned down. And sure enough, somebody said, "I see Jesus Christ there." I saw the picture. Maybe you did, too. It really did look like Jesus Christ, but it was the ashes of Notre Dame. And how many times do people see the Virgin Mary in a glass of tea? We are hardwired to see things that are not there, because for the most part they're harmless, for the most part, they do nothing. And once in a while, they save our butts.

That's why I think we will always have Flat Earthers, we will have the people who don't like vaccination, because hearsay throughout human history was the dominant form of information-sharing. You know, the internet is very new. Newspapers are very new. Science and technology are very new. But gossip, hearsay, slander, rumors — there's a gene for that.

OK? So how do you combat it? Slowly, carefully — it's a painful process, but in some sense, we're going up against our genetic predisposition to believe in nonsense.

IS SCIENCE REALLY REPLACING RELIGION?

Sarah K. Burns

(Excerpted from “Here’s how Christian fundamentalism is turning people away from religion — and toward science”, at Raw Story on alternet.com, 12/29/2019)

Christianity is on the way out, according to surveys. Americans who identify as Christian have dropped by 12 percent in the last decade, and those who identify as having no religion have increased 9 percent.

The Daily Beast cited multiple researchers who have examined the evolution of religion and the turn toward science. Christian fundamentalism is adding to the problem as some sects devolve back to the 1600s when science and religion were mutually exclusive.

“Those who have remained faithful are more fundamentalist than ever,” said the Beast. “Moderate Protestantism has declined, while conservative evangelical religion has increased as a percentage of America’s religious, with immediate political consequences: Donald Trump would not be president had conservative evangelicals and Catholics not rallied to his side, despite his many personal transgressions and evident lack of faith.”

Science, by contrast, has provided answers for those who hear “voices of the Devil” or who say they literally hear “the voice of God”. As neurology advances, doctors can pinpoint the source of delusion and use medication to aid in mental and emotional healing. Still, the well-known Bible stories persist in culture, which Pascal Boyer explained in his 1994 book is due to their simplicity.

“Religious stories, in another irony, have survived human history’s version of natural selection. They are the ones that have stuck around, and they’ve done so not because of their truth or value, but because they are the kinds of stories that human brains understand, and want to repeat,” The Beast paraphrased.

Robert McCauley argued in his 2011 book that religion is “cognitively natural” and reflects how humans think after millions of years of evolution. The brain processes things “fast, (mostly) unconscious, automatic, effortless, intuitive thought”. It makes sense for the early years of human life when those who couldn’t think fast were often killed by larger animals.

“Science, McCauley shows, is actually very unnatural and counterintuitive. For example, we ‘naturally’ look for agents who take actions in the world; we look for quasi-people, not impersonal forces. But science has shown that impersonal forces—the laws of physics and natural selection, for example—actually are responsible for most of the world around us,” explained The Beast.

Essentially, the big questions humans have always asked, like “where did we come from?” and “are we alone?” are questions our brains want to find easy explanations to.

For fundamentalists, whose brains are not accustomed to thinking critically, rational arguments don’t make a dent with entrenched belief systems. McCauley explains, “people are rarely argued out of beliefs that they were not argued into in the first place.”

When confronted with evidence that conflicts their worldviews, fundamentalists blame the sciences.

The Beast went on to cite Antony Alumkal’s 2017 book, *Paranoid Science: The Christian Right’s War on Reality*, which explains how conservative Christians not only don’t trust science, they then create conspiracy theories about scientists to justify their beliefs.

“Alumkal’s examples are familiar: climate denial, intelligent design, ‘gay conversion therapy’, and opposition to stem cell research. In each case, drawing on Richard Hofstadter’s classic *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Alumkal shows how rather than simply state that their faith disagrees with the scientific evidence, Christian Right figures have created a fake scientific discourse to compete with the real one, which they allege to be a conspiracy.”

The example they used was the evangelical group, the “Cornwall Alliance”, which takes a large portion of its funds from oil companies and oil executives. Naturally, the group doesn’t believe that climate change is real. It’s akin to a corrupt politician taking funds from an industry lobbyist and voting to support that industry. The main difference, however, is that religion uses God to justify their corruption and emotionally manipulate followers to believe the same.

Cornwall has resorted to creating conspiracy theories about the 97 percent of climate scientists who believe in the science.

The Beast compared it to atheists, whose militancy isn’t exactly comparable to fundamentalist Christianity. Atheists don’t burn people at the stake for being a witch, put scientists under house arrest for believing the Earth is round or perform exercises to remove demons. There are atheist activists like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens, The Beast recalled, [who] want to rid the world of religion, but most non-believers just want to be left alone. None are taking up a flaming sword to crusade against religious leaders.

According to Jerome Baggett’s 2019 book, *The Varieties of Nonreligious Experience: Atheism in American Culture*, Atheists have positive values based on the goodness of humanity. They value integrity, “open-mindedness, and the importance of progress”.

Comment: Damn right! – JR

JESUS, MO, SCIENCE, RELIGION AND THE TOOLKIT OF TRUTH

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/comic/kit)

Barmaid: Science provides us with a toolkit that helps us find the truth: falsifiability, blind testing, peer review, replication.

Mo: Religion’s got tools, too, Barmaid.

Jesus: Faith.

Mo: Appeals to mystery.

Jesus: Peer reinforcement.

Mo: Vilification of apostates and unbelievers.

Barmaid: How do these tools help you find the truth?

Mo: They don’t have to.

Jesus: We already *know* the truth.

SCIENCE USES THE TOOLKIT

John Rafferty

A new discovery by Harvard astronomers shows the map of the Milky Way galaxy doesn't look the way we've thought for the past hundred years. A paper, published January 7 in *Nature*, reveals the discovery of the largest continuous gas structure known in the galaxy: a massive, wave-shaped gas structure extending for trillions of miles and about 9,000 light-years long.

This monolith, called the "Radcliffe Wave", looks like an oscillating wave when viewed "sideways" from the Earth but appears straight when observed from above, leading scientists to realize that the Radcliffe Wave is actually the previously-described "Local Arm of the Milky Way".

"So we kind of redefined what the local neighborhood of the sun looks like in the galaxy," explained Applied Astronomy Professor Alyssa Goodman.

"There was just this mishmash of information about where we really were in the Milky Way. And these super-accurate distances make it clear. What does this mean for people? You know where you live now in the Milky Way."

And we can rely on science to self-correct and get ever-closer to the truth about our universe and our lives.

ETERNAL VIGILANCE

Jonathan Engel

No one really knows who was the first to say "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." This quote has been incorrectly attributed to Thomas Jefferson, among others, but its actual provenance remains a bit of a mystery. No matter; there's truth to this aphorism regardless. The people who would deny us our basic rights rarely accept a setback to their nefarious plans with equanimity. They just reload and try to attack again at a more propitious time. And one of their favorite targets is the ban against organized prayers in public schools.

The 1962 Supreme Court decision in *Engel v. Vitale* outlawed organized prayers in public schools as an impermissible establishment of religion. (*Full disclosure: my father was one of the plaintiffs in the suit*). Ever since the Engel decision became the law of the land, extremist Christians have tried to chip away at it. Most recently, the Trump administration announced that the Department of Education will now compel states to inform the federal government if there are complaints regarding students' rights to pray, even though this requirement does not apply to any other discrimination accusations. A spokesperson for the White House said "President Trump is committed to making sure that people of faith, especially children, are not subjected to illegal punishment or pressure for exercising their constitutionally protected rights." No word yet from the White House on the constitutionally protected rights of people who don't want to pray. I'll keep an eye open for that, but I won't hold my breath.

Make no mistake about it; we are the ones who are fighting for religious freedom. Extreme right-wing

Christians, on the other hand, are fighting for religious dominance. The persecution complex that causes them to believe that somehow it is Christians who are discriminated against is laughable. They think that the law and institutions in this country that prevent them from forcing their religion on non-Christians somehow constitute oppression of themselves.

So let's remember a few things. Public school students are allowed to pray in school. They can form a prayer group and pray together during their off hours. And of course, anyone can pray silently to themselves at any time. There's no way to prevent that. Not to mention the fact that people can always pray in their homes, their cars, and their religious institutions. So why are they so concerned with their so-called right to pray as a group, out loud, and in secular spaces such as public schools and official government functions? Here's a hint: it's not about their religion, it's about their power. Praying just isn't enough fun for them if they can't do it in everyone else's faces. It's their way of informing everyone who isn't an Evangelical Christian that this is their country, and the rest of us live in it only to the extent that they "tolerate" us Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, non-believers, et al. I will therefore take the opportunity to remind our ultra-Christian brethren of a man they might just remember named George Washington, who said:

"All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

We all must be vigilant to protect our rights under our Constitution, or we will lose them. As Washington said, we don't need "tolerance" from Evangelical Christians or anyone else to enjoy our rights as completely equal citizens, including our right to be free from Evangelical Christianity and all other religious beliefs. All we need is to remember the words of Washington, and to remain eternally vigilant.

TRUMP TELLS THE TRUTH

In the July, 2017 meeting (after which then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called Trump a "fucking moron"), President Donald J. Trump shouted to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other medals-bedecked military brass:

"You're a bunch of dopes and babies. ...

I wouldn't go to war with you people."

Which, to tell the truth, he did not do, when they were serving in Viet Nam.

JUST ASKING

John Rafferty

When and how did it become acceptable for America to kill a leader of a country we aren't even at war with?

YOUR NOT-SO-HIGHNESS

Bill Maher

(Excerpted from "Real Time With Bill Maher", 1/18/2020)

I give [soon-to-be ex-"royals"] Megan and Harry some credit, but not a lot. Because they want to be seen as this modern couple way hipper than the other stuffy ones in the family. Okay, then go all the way and say it – say, We're not just taking a step back from royalty, we're renouncing the whole outdated, racist, anachronistic lot of it. We're saying, what is this bullshit that some people are "royal"?

You want to be modern and woke and all that? You want to get rid of politically incorrect words? How about "Your Highness"? What could be more antithetical to liberalism than calling another human "Your Highness"?

Megan and Harry, you want to be remembered for greatness? Then burn your boats completely, and say, It's 2020, and I hereby decree that this birthright nonsense from the Middle Ages is stupid.

And the next time someone curtsies or bows and scrapes before you, or calls you "Your Highness", *stop them!* And say, We feel ridiculous being called that. I'm an actress, and he's a nice guy. We're not "highnesses", no human beings are "higher" by birth.

FEBRUARY 12, 1809

Helen Bennet

Long ago, in 1809,

Two men were born who set men free,
One, from the shackles of the mind,
One from the chains of slavery.

The one who was known as Honest Abe
Was revered as the Great Emancipator,
The other described how we evolved
Without an intervening Creator.

Darwin described how man descended
From other life forms, by evolution,
And science has ever since confirmed
The truth of his startling supposition.

And Lincoln, hated by Southern planters,
Stripped their workers and made of them

No longer lower forms of animals,
But living, breathing, and human men.

Both Darwin and Lincoln were reviled

And many still hold them in contempt,

But those with brains and hearts adore them,

And those without are still exempt.

HAPPY LINCOLN'S BIRTHDAY! HAPPY DARWIN DAY!

Parapsychism
and Pareidolia
Pages 8 and 9

Why Ricky Gervais
is an atheist
Page 4

Are Fundamentalists
Brain Damaged?
Page 3

Don't Blame Us
Page 1

Darwin Day Dinner
Pete's – Feb 15 – Book now!
Page 7

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