

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May 12, 2020

Happy Mothers Day! Happy Day of Reason! Happy Whateverthehell! Let's celebrate them all – and enjoy just being alive, if locked in – at the debut of our Sunday Happy Hour (page 5). Meanwhile herein, we consider evidence carefully, and ponder the legacy of Galileo and the future of Joe Biden. We out a humanist we suspected of our heresy all along, applaud ourselves for not becoming Old Farts, get both our book clubs up and running (also page 5), and weigh chicken, um, poop in Sweden. – JR

CASUAL DEATH

Jonathan Engel

My tongue-in-cheek definition of “minor surgery” is surgery that’s performed on somebody else. I’m reminded of this every time a Republican talks about the need for us, as a society, to “sacrifice” some people as a way to save the American economy. For them death’s okay, so long as it happens to someone else. Lest anyone think that this type of sentiment is only prevalent among the farthest of far-right lunatics, just the other day Chris Christie compared the Covid-19 crisis to World War II in terms of people needing to sacrifice their lives for our freedom. As if freeing the world from Nazi domination is the same as freeing the world from staying home and watching television, even if we do all need haircuts. This is the former governor of New Jersey. And he’s far from alone. These people want to make sure that the cure for Covid-19 (stay-at-home mandates that damage the economy) isn’t worse than the effects of the disease itself (dead bodies stacked like firewood). Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick has suggested that senior citizens should be willing to die to save the economy. He added “there are more important things than living” – that’s a direct quote from a Christian “pro-life” Republican. Rep. Trey Hollingsworth (R-Ind) said that compared to a failing economy, Covid-19 deaths are “the lesser of two evils”. He’s got the evil part right anyway.

Meanwhile, Trump keeps revising the estimated death toll upwards. He started with 15 cases that would all “go away soon”. A month later he had upped the ante to 50,000 dead, and he just keeps raising the estimates as he lowers the bar for what he considers to be a “tremendous success”. He’s just increasing the death estimate so he can keep ahead of the actual death numbers, allowing himself to claim that he exceeded expectations. Zeus forbid that we should reach

10 million deaths, but you can surely bet that if we do get to that unthinkable milestone, the day before Trump will say: “All the experts predicted 20 million deaths, but thanks to my greatness it’s only 10 million. Now where’s my parade?”

As for the 10 million who would die under this scenario, who cares, apart from a bunch of bleeding heart humanists like us. The only thing that matters to the Trump regime is re-election, and they see as their path to victory opening up the country to full-scale commerce. And it doesn’t matter to them if that path is paved with dead bodies. Pro-life indeed.

And what of the medical workers and first responders? These heroic men and women have been stretched almost beyond human endurance caring for our sick and dying. Opening up the country prematurely will result in a new wave of cases, and will subject our doctors, nurses, medical technicians, police officers, EMTs, etc., to a fresh wave of hell that they may not be able to handle. To do so just so Trump can continue his corrupt ways in the oval office is beyond obscene. And as for all of those Republican politicians who think that tens of thousands of deaths are a reasonable price to pay to get Trump re-elected, I’m sure I’ll be grievously disappointed if I expect them to walk the walk as much as they talk the talk. I don’t expect to see Dan Patrick, or Trey Hollingsworth, or Donald Trump and his thieving family putting on their homemade PPE and volunteering in a hard-hit hospital or nursing home. That’s for the little people. You know, the ones who are expendable.

WE KNEW IT, DIDN’T WE?

Broadly and generically, I am not a regular church-attender. I have evolved into less a Roman Catholic religion person to someone who tries to keep a degree of spirituality about them. I look upon myself as a humanist. I have faith in the goodness of mankind. – Dr. Anthony Fauci

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SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / www.shsny.org

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WHAT WE LEARNED FROM GALILEO

salon.com

(Excerpted from "Here's what Galileo's scientific revolution can teach us about our anti-science leaders of today" by salon, on altnet.org, 5/4/2020)

Since the Renaissance, the fundament of Western civilization has been an embrace of rationalism, which has become foundational to governance, economics and technology. Trump and his ilk reject this. Four centuries after the scientific revolution initiated by Galileo Galilei, how is it possible that we are still be witnessing such rampant science denial?

At the heart of Galileo's scientific revolution was the crucial notion that we cannot say that we believe in anything until we can show *why* we believe it, and *how* we reached that belief. In Galileo's case, the Earth revolved around the Sun because the observational facts he uncovered with his telescope made the Copernican model of the solar system more plausible than the geocentric one. ...

Put bluntly, what Galileo established as separating science from other types of "revealed" truths was this: *facts and the ability to make testable predictions mattered*. There weren't any more your facts and my facts, neither were there facts and "alternative facts". There weren't revealed facts or aspirational facts. Facts came in only one flavor – observable. Observations, experiments, and reasoning based on reliable data became the only acceptable methods for discovering facts about the world. ...

Galileo was severely punished for his obstinate defense of intellectual freedom. He was put on house arrest – effectively quarantined – for eight and a half years (until his death). Giordano Bruno before him had been burned at the stake.

But these fights planted the seeds of the freedom of speech we enjoy today.

President Trump's motivation in dismissing for the longest time the severity of the virus was not [like Galileo's] religiosity, it was political – wanting to be re-elected. But his denial of scientific facts was even more shocking. ...

Given his own experience, Galileo might not be that surprised to hear that political considerations would make grim predictions about the spread of the coronavirus targets for science deniers at high places. He would be far more surprised – in fact probably perplexed – by the anti-vaccine science deniers, because those are putting their own children at risk. He would be besides himself over the science deniers of climate change.

What would no doubt terrify him the most is the reality where we find ourselves today: in a world where we are witnessing the death of facts.

We have been there before. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, philosopher Hannah Arendt prophetically wrote, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist."

WE NEED EVIDENCE

Len Niehoff

University of Michigan Law School

(Excerpted from Detroit Free Press, 5/5/2020)

Numerous public officials and individuals have made dreadful decisions about how to assess and respond to the threat posed by COVID-19. Those errors reveal a fundamental flaw in our K-12 and collegiate education systems. We have failed to teach a subject of critical importance, and as a result have imperiled our health, our economy, and our republic.

We teach it in law school. We call it Evidence.

COVID-19 has revealed our societal failure to understand what evidence is and to respect how it works. National and local political leaders have made decisions that ignored the evidence. Members of the general public have proved slow to accept the evidence. Measures adopted to help flatten the curve have been met with virulent protests, despite the evidence that they are working.

COVID-19 has no monopoly here. We've done little to address global warming, despite the evidence. We pretend the wild escalation of the national debt has no consequences, despite the evidence.

And so on.

We have become a nation of magical thinkers, making decisions based on what we hope is the case and whom we want to believe. When confronted with opposing evidence, we do not engage with it. We dismiss it and stick a label on it: "fake", "phony", "biased", etc. And then we mistake that label for evidence.

A partial solution to this problem would be to require every high school and college student to take a course in evidence. I do not mean one that focuses on legal doctrine, although concepts like relevance and reliability would have a place in it. I mean a class that helps all of us understand what does – and does not – count as proof of something else.

Without such training, we will continue to make decisions based not on what is true but on what we wish were true. Things like pandemics don't care about our preferences. They have a ruthless commitment to reality. We need one, too.

We cannot wait. We all need to becomes students of evidence right here, right now. If we don't, we will not just repeat the errors of the past. We will blunder into fresh ones that were avoidable, but that our disregard of truth has made apocalyptic.

There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that "my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge". – Isaac Asimov

If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers. – Thomas Pynchon

JENNIFER RUBIN ON BIDEN

(Excerpted from "What Joe Biden did right in rebutting Tara Reade's claims", Washington Post, 5/1/2020)

The lines "If you believe Christine Blasey Ford, you have to believe Reade" or "You didn't believe President Trump, so you cannot believe Biden" (or variations) are the worst examples of mindless "balance" and faux objectivity. It takes a minute to identify fundamental differences between situations that bear little resemblance to one another.

Trump never sat for a grueling interview to go through the facts of more than a dozen claims. Biden sat for an interrogation of a single claim of sexual assault. (And his penchant to ignore personal space and excessive hugginess were not sexual, although they were inappropriate.) ...

And let's get real: Reade and Ford are not similar accusers. Ford's story was consistent for years. Reade's has not been. Ford did not claim to have complained contemporaneously; Reade did and was rebutted by Biden staff to whom she would have complained. In Kavanaugh's case, there was another witness. In Reade's case, no one else has accused Biden of anything like Reade's claim.

Biden's statements in writing and in the interview are hard to dispute: Women should be heard and believed, but facts and the truth matter like in every other crime. (In his written statement enumerating the fundamental concerns in these cases, Biden said, "One is that women deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and when they step forward they should be heard, not silenced. The second is that their stories should be subject to appropriate inquiry and scrutiny.") If a witness changes her story ("Responsible news organizations should examine and evaluate the full and growing record of inconsistencies in her story, which has changed repeatedly in both small and big ways"), her credibility is seriously compromised.

Several points deserve emphasis.

First, the media do not question Trump about the serial allegations against him at his endless daily appearances. They've shrugged their shoulders and given up trying to pin him down on the numerous complaints of harassment and/or assault. They should continue to scrutinize his claims and ask questions whether he answers or not.

Second, people are entitled to believe Reade despite her inconsistencies, the denials from Biden and his staff and the (so far) dearth of written evidence of her complaint. The question is whether the American people decide the evidence is credible. Unless more evidence surfaces, I would wager they do not.

Third, Democrats perpetually worried that the Biden team is "blowing it" (*Biden is hidden away! Not in the news!*) might want to chill. This was a textbook example of effective campaign communication. The candidate is leading in the polls, and Trump is melting down (in the latest ABC/Ipsos poll, "his disapproval rating among Americans reached a numeric high of 57 percent, with only 42 percent approving".)

Maybe these people do know what they are doing.

MAUREEN DOWD ON BIDEN

(Excerpted from "Joe Says It Ain't So", NYTimes, 5/2/2020)

To suggest that every woman who alleges a sexual assault is as credible as the next is absurd. The idea that no woman can ever be wrong just hurts women. Half the human race is female. Who has never been lied to by people of both genders? Who has never seen the mesmerizing female psychopaths of film noir? ...

Biden, Democrats and the liberal media have been late in addressing Reade's allegations that when she worked in Biden's Senate office in 1993, he assaulted her in a corridor, because it was inconvenient for them to do so. ...

[But] Biden finally stopped ducking and talked to Mika Brzezinski on Friday from his basement bunker. He denied it "unequivocally", noting five times that this was said to have happened 27 years ago.

It was a strange acid flashback, seeing Biden having to defend himself three decades after he was the one who shut down the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearing without allowing the appearance of the three women waiting to come forward as corroborating witnesses for Hill.

There are some unanswered questions about Reade. She said there's a complaint, so let's see it. On Friday, Biden wrote a letter to the secretary of the Senate to see if a record of it was there. But he should also agree to let someone search his papers at the University of Delaware.

It's injurious to look like you're hiding something. As one Democratic strategist told me about Biden's effort to stonewall, these kind of charges are like Covid-19: You have to jump on it early and contain it, or you're left with mitigation. The 77-year-old did not understand that in the age of social media, you don't assume people won't believe stuff if it's left unchallenged. ...

Why should the Democrats hold themselves to some higher standard when Trump, a serial assaulter of women according to his accusers and own "Access Hollywood" confession, is wallowing in amorality and refusing to release a scrap of paper about personal finances or conduct?

But moral relativism is not the answer. Joe Biden is running — or for the moment, sitting — on compassion and decency, the antithesis of Trump. If he throws that away, he's going along with Trump's worldview: We live in a corrupt jungle. Everybody's down here in the muck. So you might as well go with me, because I'm stronger.

From the day Trump was elected, it has always been a race between the damage he could do and the day his term was up. Let's hope that damage doesn't include the Democrats sinking to his cynical, miserable level.

THE NY TIMES' EDITORIAL BOARD ON BIDEN

Mr. Biden has set higher standards for himself. That has been central to his appeal. His campaign is founded on the promise of restoring sanity, civility and decency to the presidency. Even if certainty isn't possible in this matter, the American people deserve at least the confidence that he, and the Democratic Party, have made every effort to bring the truth to light.

STILL HERE, STILL LIBERAL

Hemant Mehta

(From "Unlike Christians, Older Non-Religious Voters Aren't Becoming More Republican" at friendlyatheist on patheos.com, 4/27/2020)

If there's one thing we've all heard about people's politics, it's that we tend to become much more conservative as we get older. No doubt the Republican Party skews older while Democrats typically attract younger voters.

But a new analysis by Ryan P. Burge of Eastern Illinois University finds that's not the case for Secular Americans.

Christians still follow the historical trend: Only about 37 percent of younger Christians identify as Republican, but that number rises to 64 percent as they hit 75 and older.

But "Nones" aren't anywhere near that curve.

Only about 15 percent of non-religious Americans ages 18-35 identify as Republicans. No shock there. But even as we grow older, the percentage never gets that much higher.

Share Identifying as Republicans by Age Group

	Christians	Nones
18-35	37%	15%
36-44	41	18
45-54	48	23
55-64	50	24
65-74	54	26
75+	64	27

There is no statistically significant difference between the share of Nones who identify as Republicans among 45-54 year olds and those who are 75 and older. The gap for Christians is sixteen points, but for the Nones it's just four points and inside the margin of error. ...

Older Christians care much more about immigration and less about gun safety compared to younger Christians. Older Nones care more about gun safety and the environment. And if those issues matter to you, then you're going to stay the hell away from the GOP.

Says Burge: "Clearly, older Nones are just more to the left of the political spectrum."

All of this speaks to long-term trends that favor Democrats. There are just as many non-religious voters as evangelical ones, but we're the ones who have more space to grow as a percentage of the voting population. That's good for Democrats. In years to come, we're not about to switch parties as Christians do. That's also good for Democrats.

After nearly three decades of incompetent Republicans in public office, if not the White House itself, the reckoning will soon arrive for the Party that has long embraced ignorance and irresponsibility.

NO CHICKENSH*T MEASURES IN SWEDEN

Think the screaming Italians mayors were tough? To discourage thousands of citizens from gathering in the city's central park, the elders of the Swedish city of Lund carpeted the park with a ton of chicken manure.

WE'RE SORRY, THE AMERICA YOU ORDERED IS CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE

Stacey Brook

(Excerpted from newyorker.com, 5/5/2020)

Dear Environment: We sincerely apologize for the mixed messages. We know your air has been uncharacteristically light on pollution lately, but, please, don't get used to it.

Dear Small Business: Your P.P.P. loan application cannot be processed, as the fund is already depleted. Please accept this coupon for twenty-five per cent off your next meal at Ruth's Chris Steak House, along with our apologies.

Hello, Sen. McConnell: Regrettably, the 256 rolls of toilet paper you ordered are temporarily out of stock. Please be assured that we plan to replenish our supply soon so that you do not resort to wiping your ass with the Constitution.

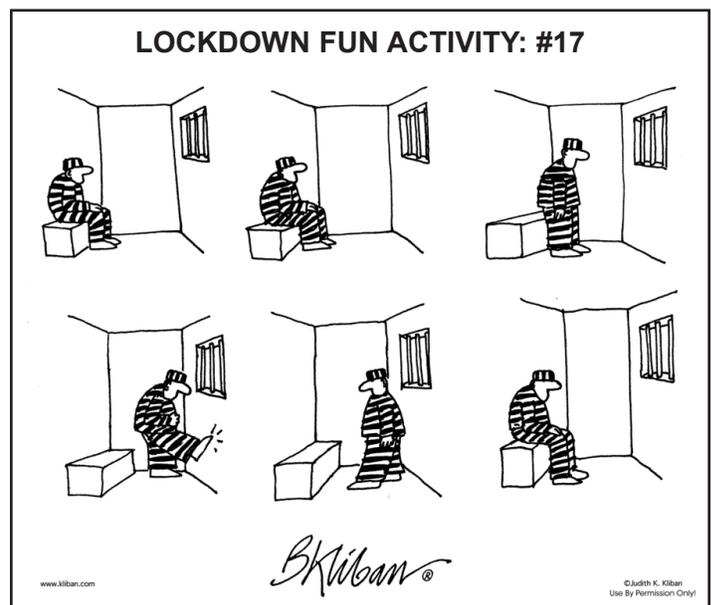
Dear Human Deserving of Basic Rights: To our dismay, we remain unable to fulfill your order for universal health care. Might we kindly suggest that you turn back time and move to Canada?

Valued Citizen: The competent leader you requested is no longer in the White House. Please accept this uninformed, delusional ratings-chaser as an inadequate replacement. Unfortunately, we cannot accept returns at this time.

Deepest Apologies, America: Your democracy has been discontinued. With enough November preorders, however, we hope to offer this product to you again in 2021.

DENNIS HORVITZ PASTES A LOCKDOWN ROUTINE ON FACEBOOK

Today marks at least 6 weeks of isolation. Been running 2.5 miles a day, drinking 2 gallons of water, cut out all meat, sugar, dairy, and flour. I feel great! Zero alcohol, a healthy vegan diet, gluten-free, caffeine-free, sugar-free, and a 30 minute home workout each day. Cleaned out all the closets and garage, and finished half the home projects on my list. I have no idea whose post this is, but I am really proud of them so I decided to copy and paste.



SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY – JULY 2020

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.

HUMANIST BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We had our first online meeting May 7, and Zoom works! So we'll continue online for the duration of our social distancing, and Harry French will send the linking codes. Send him your address at: htfrench46@gmail.com Meanwhile, do the reading ...

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

BELIEVERS

Faith in Human Nature

Melvin Konner

Conceding that faith is not for everyone, anthropologist Konner views religious people with a sympathetic eye, examining the nature of religiosity, and how it shapes and benefits humankind.

Believers shows us that for at least a large minority of humanity, the belief in things unseen neither can nor should go away.

THURS, AUGUST 6, 7:00 pm

To Be Announced

HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

Premiere Meeting:

SUN, MAY 10, 4:00 pm
(Yes, it's finally happening!)

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, it's Mothers Day, and your Mom is welcome, too. Link in at <https://us04web.zoom.us/j/73457851133>

The Meeting ID is: 734 5785 1133

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're social distancing. Meanwhile ...

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