

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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September, 2015

We celebrate this month's holidays with a Jewish atheist, compare Epicurus, ancient Jews and 18th century Jefferson, and consider our own 21st century atheist image. We are further instructed on humanist optimism and on the liberal arc of history, while we give space to a fiery political liberal (*pace*, libertarians) and reprint an eerily prescient 1947 essay. We learn that we write and therefore think, and that Campari and soda is anodyne for humanist stress. Meanwhile, *Gut yontif*. — JR

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## HIGH HOLIDAYS FOR JEWISH ATHEISTS

**Herb Silverman**

(Reprinted from The Washington Post On Faith column, 9/6/2013)

Since Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the most sacred days of the Jewish calendar, why would an atheist Jew like me note these high holidays? And I'm by no means unique. There are atheist Jews in Reform, Conservative, and even Orthodox congregations. And the openly nontheistic Society of Humanistic Judaism celebrates all the Jewish holidays.

Regardless of belief, there is a one-word reason why most Jews remember Jewish holidays—God. Without that concept, there would be no Jews. So I'm happy to credit God for the holidays, even if he/she/it doesn't exist. I commemorate this time of year partly due to my Jewish tradition, but also because I want to help change that tradition into a more godless one.

There are two religious reasons for celebrating the Jewish New Year of Rosh Hashanah. One is bad, and the other is worse. Here's the bad: Rosh Hashanah commemorates the scientifically indefensible anniversary of the creation of the world, 5,774 years ago. And here's worse: It's also the anniversary of Abraham agreeing to kill his son Isaac, as proof of his faith and obedience to God. This Torah portion in Genesis 22 is read every Rosh Hashanah.

That biblical passage also refers to Isaac as Abraham's only son, which means his first-born son Ishmael doesn't count. Why? Because Isaac's mother, Sarah, was Jewish and Ishmael's mother was merely Sarah's gentile servant whom Sarah lent to Abraham when she thought she was barren. On the other hand, in Islamic tradition it is Ishmael and not Isaac who was to be sacrificed by Abraham. And Muhammad is believed to be a direct descendent of Ishmael.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three major monotheistic religions, all treat Abraham as a respected prophet because of his unquestioning faith. Furthermore, the God who created heaven and earth also appears to have been in the real estate business, because he allegedly promised the same plot of land to each of these three religions, and they continue to fight over it to this day.

Traditional Jews often seek humane interpretations for the literal words they believe come from or are inspired by their God. Humanistic Jews focus on humans, without worrying about the biblical needs of an imaginary deity. So what are our reasons for observing the season?

The days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are considered a time for reflection on our actions during the previous year. No God is sitting in judgment, but each of us can contemplate and judge our own actions as we try to improve in the coming year. The Abraham myth ends better than it begins. God provides a ram to take Isaac's place for the sacrifice, a switch that is probably meant to benefit the entire community. That's why on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur Jews blow a shofar (a ram's horn). Today we can think of the shofar as summoning Jews to turn their commitments and values into action.

Discussion of death is certainly appropriate on Rosh Hashanah, when God supposedly decides who will die in the coming year. But it's also a time to promote long, if not eternal, life. The same tradition that venerates Rosh Hashanah as the beginning of year 5774 also credits Methuselah with living 969 years. Such fables pale in comparison to that of Paul Erdos, a Jewish atheist and one of the finest mathematicians of the 20th century, who claimed to be 2.5 billion years old. His reasoning? When he was a child, the earth was known to be two billion years old. And now it's known to be 4.5 billion years old.

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Perhaps Erdos was telling us that we don't have all the answers and, in light of new evidence, we must sometimes discard beliefs learned in childhood. When we don't, we can sound pretty foolish. To make his point, Erdos used humor, which cuts across every denomination of Jews, religious or not. So I'll commemorate the holidays in the Jewish Humoristic tradition, by closing with two jokes for the season.

A rabbi delivers a moving sermon telling how we are nothing in this vast universe and that we must let God know we are appropriately humble. After the sermon, the assistant rabbi runs to the front and yells, "I am nothing!" followed by the president of the congregation who does the same. Then a newcomer runs up yelling, "I am nothing!" At this, an old congregant pokes the man sitting next to him and complains, "So look who thinks he's nothing."

On another occasion a Jew tries to enter the shul (synagogue) during the high holidays and is stopped by the shammass (caretaker) who asks for his ticket. The man hadn't paid for one, but says he just wants to come in for a minute so he can give an important message to a friend. The shammass lets him pass, but warns, "Now, don't let me catch you praying in this shul!"

## EPICURUS, THE JEWS, AND JEFFERSON

Edd Doerr

(Excerpted from a review by Mr. Doerr of *Epicurus & Apikorism: The Influence of the Greek Epicurus and Jewish Apikorism on Judaism*, by Yaakov Malkin.)

**A** *pikorsim* is the Hebrew word for heretics (*apikorsut* = heresy). The word is evidently derived from the name of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE), whose ideas spread throughout the Hellenic world, including what we call the Middle East, after the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE). Epicurus rejected the idea of divine providence and personal immortality. Malkin writes that Epicurus may well have influenced the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible, one reason why many early Jewish religious authorities did not want it included in the canon.

Epicureanism, not to be confused with hedonism, was passed along by the great Roman writer Lucretius (95-55 BCE) and influenced secular Jewish thought, and even liberal Muslim thought, for centuries, extending all the way to the Dutch/Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a precursor of modern Humanism, and to such influential thinkers as John Locke and David Hume.

Israeli scholar Yaakov Malkin makes the point that "an individual or society can improve its quality of life by adopting the principle that happiness as its ultimate goal, as did the founders of the United States of America – the only state in the world to establish the Epicurean principle of 'the pursuit of happiness' as a bedrock of all legislation and public policy. The inclusion of this idea in the American Declaration of Independence can be traced to Thomas Jefferson, who was a declared Epicurean." Malkin writes that the Deism of Jefferson and his generation was essentially an Epicureanism in which the word "God" was largely code for "Nature".

Among Malkin's insights is this: "Capitalism driven by hedonism, consumerism and globalization is generally not restrained by the principles of social justice and legislation based upon them. One of the exceptions to this rule is the state of affairs in Scandinavia, where there is no uncontrolled population growth, and where egalitarian (between men and women) democracy has succeeded in implementing policies based on a free-market economy and social legislation. In countries and regions suffering from population explosion, the suffering of the masses simply increases, while their 'kleptocracies' (as termed by Saul Bellow), are the main beneficiaries of financial aid from the world's rich countries." We might note that the Norwegian Humanist Association, the *Norsk HumanEtisk Forbund*, is the largest Humanist organization in the world in terms of both numbers and percentage of national population.

## EMBRACE THE BEAUTY AND THE PLEASURE

Stephen Greenblatt

(Reprinted from *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* – the focus of our "Studying Humanism" meeting this month – see page 7.)

**T**he stuff of the universe, Lucretius proposed, is an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, working together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction. There is no escape from this process. When you look up at the night sky and, feeling unaccountably moved, marvel at the numberless stars, you are not seeing the handiwork of the gods or a crystalline sphere detached from our transient world. You are seeing the same material world of which you are a part and from whose elements you are made. There is no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design. All things, including this species to which you belong, have evolved over vast stretches of time. The evolution is random, though in the case of living organisms it involves a principle of natural selection. That is, species that are suited to survive and to reproduce successfully endure, at least for a time; those that are not so well suited die off quickly. But nothing—from our own species to the planet on which we live to the sun that lights our days—lasts forever. Only the atoms are immortal.

In a universe so constituted, Lucretius argued, there is no reason to think that the Earth or its inhabitants occupy a central place, no reason to set humans apart from all other animals, no hope of bribing or appeasing the gods, no place for religious fanaticism, no call for ascetic self-denial, no justification for dreams of limitless power or perfect security, no rationale for wars of conquest or self-aggrandizement, no possibility of triumphing over nature, no escape from the constant making and unmaking and remaking of forms. On the other side of anger at those who either peddled false visions of security or incited irrational fears of death, Lucretius offered a feeling of liberation and the power to stare down what had once seemed so menacing. What human beings can and should do, he wrote, is to con-

quer their fears, accept the fact that they themselves and all the things they encounter are transitory, and embrace the beauty and pleasure of the world.

I marveled—I continue to marvel—that these perceptions were fully articulated in a work written more than 2000 years ago.

## **COPING WITHOUT GOD**

**Giles Kelly**

**R**ecognition of the so-called natural order of the universe, including the multitude of systems within systems that can be observed, may raise the profound question of “How come?” Or “What’s it all about, Alfie?”

Lucretius (perhaps the original secular humanist) said that knowing the way things are awakens the deepest wonder. Yes indeed, but that deepest wonder may in turn, raise the question of *why* things are the way they are.

That question is really unanswerable, a mystery, so the question is often answered by the clergy claiming that “God has His reasons!”

Meanwhile, some humans are awed by the systems, and by the beauty they experience in life, and want to celebrate or express appreciation. Some in the face of death may seek to leave some sort of legacy of their appreciation.

The desire to express such spiritual feelings has always inspired various art forms, including music, dance, architecture, paintings and poetry. Such products of humanity’s spirit should be collected, celebrated and encouraged.

Could we have Spiritual Centers for the Appreciation of Life, to celebrate the mystery of it, and of what is next?

## **ATHEISTS:**

### **NOT JUST OLD WHITE GEEKS ANYMORE**

**Adam Lee**

*(Excerpted from “Finally, atheists are no longer just old white men”, in The Guardian (UK) 5/3/2015, forwarded by Giddian Beer)*

**W**omen are joining the atheist community by the millions – and they are being joined by racial and ethnic minorities

When you think of atheists, the face that probably comes to mind is male, white, older and a little bit nerdy. There’s more than a grain of truth to this reputation. Atheist groups in America *have* traditionally been dominated by older white men, but that may finally be starting to change.

The Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, recently released their 2015 *State of Atheism in America* report. Based on a year of research on the non-religious demographic, Barna found not just that atheists and agnostics’ numbers are growing rapidly, but that they’re very quickly becoming more diverse.

The most important finding in Barna’s report is that women are joining the atheist community by the millions. In 1993, just 16 percent of nonbelievers were women, but in

2013, that number was 43 percent – representing a nearly threefold leap. And this shift isn’t because men are *leaving* the community, which would bring the gender balance closer to parity. Barna found that the absolute numbers of both male and female atheists have increased in the last twenty years, but the number of women has grown far faster.

The atheist community is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse as well. In 1993, people of color made up just 20 percent of nonbelievers. The change in these numbers hasn’t been as dramatic, but there’s been change nonetheless, with the number rising to 26 percent in 2013. Many of these religious skeptics have come from the Hispanic and, especially, Asian communities.

Rapid diversification of the secular community debunks the spurious claims by prominent white male atheists that the lack of diversity had biological reasons. The libertarian skeptic Michael Shermer said that atheism and skepticism are “more of a guy thing”, while Sam Harris infamously attributed the under-representation of women in the atheist community to its lack of an “estrogen vibe”.

The real reason for atheism’s monochrome public image has nothing to do with the subtle effects of testosterone on the brain or natural selection. The fault lies with past generations of leaders who didn’t address the issues that matter most to women and minorities.

It’s only in the past few years that major atheist and humanist organizations have started to make a collective effort to reach out to women and people of color, to include them, to listen to them and to take their concerns seriously. And despite the inevitable backlash, tantrums and harassment from atheism’s regressive faction, this effort is bearing fruit.

Conferences like CFI’s Women in Secularism and this year’s Secular Women Work spotlight the too-often-overlooked contributions and achievements of freethinking activist women. Other large skeptic conventions have sought out and invited feminist groups like the Ada Initiative for ally training in topics like harassment, unconscious bias and microaggressions. We’re increasingly emphasizing the convergence of interests between feminism and humanism, such as when the Humanist Community of Harvard named Anita Sarkeesian its 2015 Humanist of the Year.

Atheists of color, too, have made strides in the past few years, as the broader community realizes the importance of supporting projects like First in the Family Humanist Scholarships to help youths from underprivileged communities go to college, or New Turn to assist former inmates to reintegrate into society. Secular student groups have taken more of an active role in Black Lives Matter and other civil-rights protests. In the aftermath of the Michael Brown shooting, national humanist organizations issued strong statements on racial injustice and marched with protesters in Ferguson.

America is changing and the atheist movement needs to change along with it. As women gain social and political

power and the US becomes a majority-minority nation, it's vital that the secular community sends a message of welcome and inclusion to all kinds of people. Doing anything less is a sure path to irrelevance and demographic decline. Fortunately, if Barna's findings can be believed, atheists are hearing that message loud and clear.

Atheists don't use their dying to bargain for a better seat at the table; indeed, they may not even believe supper is being served. They are not storing up "merit". They just smile because their heart is ripe. They are kind for no particular reason; they just love. — *From A Year to Live, by Steven Levine, forwarded by Marjorie Vai.*

### **SCIENTISTS: EARTH ENDANGERED BY NEW STRAIN OF FACT-RESISTANT HUMANS**

**Andy Borowitz**

*(Excerpted from thenewyorker.com, 5/12/2015)*

Scientists have discovered a powerful new strain of fact-resistant humans who are threatening the ability of Earth to sustain life, a sobering new study reports.

The research, conducted by the University of Minnesota, identifies a virulent strain of humans who are virtually immune to any form of verifiable knowledge, leaving scientists at a loss as to how to combat them.

"These humans appear to have all the faculties necessary to receive and process information," Davis Logsdon, one of the scientists who contributed to the study, said. "And yet, somehow, they have developed defenses that, for all intents and purposes, have rendered those faculties totally inactive." ...

While reaffirming the gloomy assessments of the study, Logsdon held out hope that the threat of fact-resistant humans could be mitigated in the future. "Our research is very preliminary, but it's possible that they will become more receptive to facts once they are in an environment without food, water, or oxygen," he said.

### **SIX-YEAR-OLD CALVIN'S LIFE IS UNSETTLED**

**Bill Watterson**

*(Transcribed from the 1980s comic strip, "Calvin & Hobbes")*

*Calvin* (handing a book to his mother): I read this library book you got me.

*Mom*: What did you think of it?

*Calvin*: It really made me see things differently. It's given me a lot to think about.

*Mom*: I'm glad you enjoyed it.

*Calvin*: It's complicating my life. Don't get me any more.

By the age of six the average child will have completed the basic American education. ... From television, the child will have learned how to pick a lock, commit a fairly elaborate bank holdup, prevent wetness all day long, get the laundry twice as white, and kill people with a variety of sophisticated armaments. — *Russell Baker,*

### **CAMPARI IS GOOD FOR SECULAR HUMANISM**

**Joel Galker**

Lately I've been getting more email from secular organizations urging me to send emails to my representatives in government to support secular positions opposing religion-cozy, constitutionally questionable and even blatant supports of religion.

Most recently it was the NY State bill to grant a 90 percent tax credit for "charitable donations" of up to \$1 million to primarily wealthy promoters of private education, including religious schools. Stated plainly, it's a give-away of \$900,000.00 to individual über-rich and a wave to religious supporters at the expense of the poor and middle class who depend on public education. The intention of the bill, besides benefiting millionaires, isn't even to mainly give a helping hand to religious schools as much as charter schools and their business investors. And let's not forget how it bashes unionized teachers in the public system. Would you be surprised if clever billionaires make big money contributions to elect religion-friendly legislators?

I'm not optimistic that there's anything I can do that will definitely stop this or any other outrage, but nothing could be easier than just clicking on the link which takes me to a web page where I just enter my name and address which sends an email to my representative in the NY Assembly. Until recently, I've tended not to click those links, discouraged as I am by the experience of frustration where my acts in support of secularism seemed to amount to no more than an ineffectual gesture. Recalculating that equation I've decided to consider that great political and cultural shifts are most often the result of many small deeds and come slowly, very slowly, until they become visible and even then there is a great deal of resistance.

I encourage all of us in the secular community to invest a minute or two in promoting the often violated constitutional separation of church and state. And if you feel the effort is stressful and demanding do it as I have sometimes done, with a Campari and soda in hand.

### **MUST-SEE TV (REALLY)**

**John Rafferty**

Go to YouTube and type in "Neil deGrasse Tyson A Brief History of Everything". It's the best less-than-8-minutes you'll spend today.

When you're done (and still smiling at the scientific whirlwind of a tour of, well, everything), you'll see a link to another of our favorite astrophysicist's posts.

"Does the Universe Have a Purpose?" is just two-and-a-half minutes, and a knockout rationalist dissection of the "universe-was-made-for-us" anthropocentric fallacy.

So, fix a Campari and soda (thank you, Joel), and go to YouTube for a great break in the day.

I have one share in corporate Earth, and I am nervous about the management. — *E.B. White (and see page 12)*

## HOW I BECAME A NONE

Stan Friedland, Ed.D.

I accept your invitation to describe my journey from theism to atheism, not because my trip was unusual, but because it enables me to introduce my fellow Secular Humanists to the extraordinary man who was the catalyst and guide who truly opened those doors for me at the right time. Say hello to Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, the founding father of Secular Humanistic Judaism and a brilliant humanist who has much to offer each one of us today.

After “wandering” around Judaism for many years and going through the motions to satisfy my family and my wife’s family, I knew that I needed to make a cleaner break but that I also wanted to maintain my Jewish identity. Founders of Israel such as David Ben Gurion, Menachim Begun, Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin were secular Jews and that appealed to me greatly, but in a general sense rather than an informed one. I needed some more defined “flesh” and substance in this area and it seemed to be in short supply.

Then I happened to do a workshop in the suburbs of Detroit, where a good friend of mine lived and he told me about a local rabbi, who was an atheist and led a congregation in his community. “A rabbi who was an atheist?” I didn’t believe him. So, after dinner that evening, he took me to that particular synagogue and I had my first experience with Secular Humanistic Judaism and its founder, Sherwin T. Wine. Although I didn’t meet him then, I chatted with some congregants and staff for several hours, took away as many materials as I could and immediately recognized that this was what I had been looking for. And it certainly was.

Let me introduce Rabbi Wine to you biographically.

He graduated from and was ordained by the Reform Judaism’s Hebrew Union College in 1961 and after serving as rabbi of a small congregation in Detroit for a short time, a small group of disaffected Jews asked him, in 1963, to form a new temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan, more in accordance with their beliefs. Wine, after much soul-searching, decided to eliminate the word “God” from all services, instead using new liturgy that extolled Jewish history, culture and ethical values. This initial set of beliefs would lead to the development of a new Judaism, “Humanistic Judaism”, as separate and distinct from Reform or any other stream of Judaism. (Society for Humanistic Judaism, shj.com)

This development soon was noticed and a firestorm of criticism and publicity broke out, with major stories in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times* itself, both stimulated by the *Detroit Free Press* article, its headline blaring, “Suburban Rabbi: ‘I Am An Atheist’”. Wine explained that his views were not precisely atheistic. Rather, reflecting the basic outlook of the “logical positivists”, he declared that it was not possible empirically to either prove or disprove the existence of God and, therefore, the concept was meaningless. He referred to this stance as “Ignosticism” rather than atheism, giving birth to that term.

He and his new congregation then were expelled from the building they were using and were subjected to similar

treatment from all facets of Jewish religion and others as well. He led the construction of a new temple in Michigan, and placed its Torah scroll in its library, rather than the sanctuary, where it normally belonged. In its place, he had a large sculpture, spelling out in Hebrew the word “Adam”, meaning “man” or “people”.

Wine served as its Rabbi until his retirement in 2003, a forty year period, during which time he developed Secular Humanistic Judaism organizations not only throughout the country, but also around the world as well. He became closely affiliated with the non-Jewish humanist movement, was an early signer of the First Humanist Manifesto and was awarded the “Humanist of the Year Award” by the American Humanist Association in 2003. He had many other notable achievements too numerous to mention, but suffice to say, he made a remarkable impact in spreading Secular Humanistic Judaism and secular humanism, and even opening up positive communication with many who had been critical of him and his ideas. Tragically, Rabbi Wine was killed in a car accident while on vacation in Morocco in 2007.

Everything Rabbi Wine wrote was mesmerizing to me. I finally caught up with him when he spoke at the Long Island Ethical Culture Society about his then new book, *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* in 1995, buying and getting an autographed copy, and chatting with him briefly. He was every bit as dynamic a speaker and engaging in person as I could have hoped. I also recommend two of his other books, *Humanistic Judaism* and *Judaism Beyond God: A Radical New Way To Be Jewish*. A “must read” is his biography, *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism*, by his former colleagues, Cohn-Sherbok, Cook and Rowens.

Growing up in orphanages as I did, being a high school principal, educator, graduate school professor and workshop presenter for many years, as I was, I regard myself as a street-smart person, skeptical and wary of “anything too good to be true”. But, Sherwin Wine was the “real deal” and he certainly was an inspiring and liberating force in my life that impelled me fully, not only into Secular Humanistic Judaism, but into secular humanism as well.

My transitional journey may not be memorable. But, if you delve into the writings by and about Sherwin Wine as a result of it, you will find a remarkable man whose extraordinary story and writings will indeed make an indelible contribution to you, which I recommend highly.

Because of Rabbi Wine, I replaced a “None” spiritual life with a spirited, energized and enriched humanistic one! I’ve enjoyed this telling and I hope that PIQUE’s readers will benefit from it as well.

### NOW ... HOW DID YOU BECOME A “NONE”?

We want *your* story. Evry issue from now on (if enough of you cooperate), we’ll print one reader’s “How I Became a None” story. Length? 250 - 750 words or slightly more. Payoff? Choose a gift book (humanist, of course) from our list after your story runs. So start writing, and send your text to editor@shsny.org - now! - JR

# SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2015

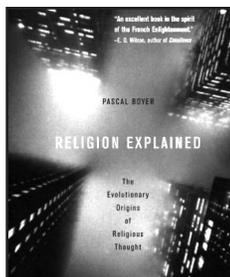
**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURS, SEP 3, 7-8:30 pm**  
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
**OF NEW YORK**

**40 East 35 St. (basement)**  
 We'll discuss

**RELIGION EXPLAINED:**  
**The Evolutionary Origins**  
**of Religious Thought**

**Pascal Boyer**

Why do people have religion? Cognitive anthropologist Boyer does not shrink from the task of explaining “the full history of all religion (ever)”.



Using findings from anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, and evolutionary biology, *Religion Explained* shows how this aspect of human consciousness is increasingly admissible to coherent, naturalistic explanation, and gives readers the first scientific explanation for what religious feeling is really about. — *Hardcover, paper, Kindle.*

*Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!*

## PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

**Book Club: First Thursday**  
 at the Community Church of NY  
**Movie Night: Second Monday**  
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Brunch: Third Sunday**  
 at Stone Creek Lounge

**Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday**  
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Studying Humanism: Last Monday**  
 at the Community Church of NY

More info: [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org),  
 and/or 646-922-7389

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURS, OCT 1, 7-8:30 pm**  
**Community Church of New York**  
**SAPIENS:**

**A Brief History of Humankind**  
**Yuval Noah Harari**

One hundred thousand years ago, at least six different species of humans inhabited Earth. Today there is only homo sapiens. What happened to the others? And what may happen to us?

From a renowned historian comes a bestseller narrative of humanity's creation and evolution, exploring how biology and history have defined us and enhanced our understanding of what it is to be “human”. — *All formats (P.S.: See page 11 for an advance peek into this fascinating book.)*

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURS, NOV 5, 7-8:30 pm**  
**Community Church of New York**  
**BIGGER THAN PHIL**

**Adan Gopnik**

When did faith start to fade? Adam Gopnik asks in this *The New Yorker* essay from 2014. When did the burden of proof pass from atheists to believers? For some answers, Gopnik takes us on a tour of modern atheism.

Why that title? Find the witty answer when you read *Bigger Than Phil* at [www.meetup.com/shsny-org/files/](http://www.meetup.com/shsny-org/files/) ... as a Word file at [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org) ... or at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/17/bigger-phil>

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**MON, SEP 14, 6:30 pm**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**THE BAND'S VISIT**

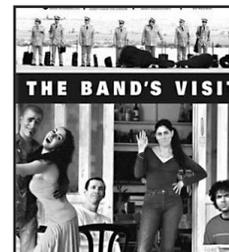
When an Egyptian police brass band travels to Israel to play at the opening of an Arab arts center, they end up lost in a remote desert town, igniting a charming cross-cultural comedy.

Defying expectations, the tiny Israeli community embraces the musicians, and both the Egyptians and the locals learn a few things about one another and themselves.

**After-Film Discussion:**

*A story too good to be true?*  
**SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.**

*(But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)*



**BRUNCH & CONVERSATION**  
**SUN, SEP 20, 11:30 am**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

We gather in the saloon's back room, where we have enough privacy to have different conversations around the several large tables, as well as the big one led by Dorothy Kahn.

The expanded pub-grub menu has been enhanced with an \$11 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more other freethinkers for food, fun and well-fed conversation.

**Discussion:**  
**“Fight for \$15”**



# SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2015

## GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, SEP 23, 7:00 pm  
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

### NEANDERTHAL MAN: IN SEARCH OF LOST GENOMES

**Dr. Svante Paabo**

Dr. Paabo, of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, tells the story of his mission to answer the question of what we can learn from the genes of our closest evolutionary relative, culminating with his sequencing of the Neanderthal genome in 2009.



We learn that Neanderthal genes offer a unique window into the lives of our hominid relatives and may hold the key to unlocking the mystery of why humans survived while Neanderthals disappeared as a distinct race of people.

Drawing on genetic and fossil clues, Paabo explores what is known about the origin of modern human beings and their relationship to the Neanderthals and describes the fiery debate surrounding the nature of the two species interactions.

It turns out that each of us carries 1 to 4 percent Neanderthal ancestry in our DNA, and that about 20 percent of the Neanderthal genome is preserved in ours overall – a rather intimate stranger indeed.

And then there is another cousin, Denisovan Man and Woman. It gets more interesting every day. We were born at the right time to see marvels.

**Great Lectures on DVD is FREE.**  
(But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

## STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, SEP 28, 6:30 – 8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
40 East 35 St (church basement)  
2015-16 Meeting/Discussion #1  
“Epicureanism & Humanism”

We begin our fourth year (Wow, already?) of Studying Humanism with, as usual, a review of the “What-is-humanism?” basics (online), and with special attention to a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner that explains how ancient Epicureanism prefigured and defined modern humanism.

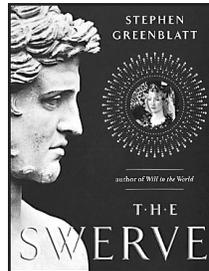
Did you know that Jefferson wrote, “I am an Epicurean”?

Our reading for September 28:  
**Online:** at [americanhumanist.org/](http://americanhumanist.org/)  
Edwards: *What is Humanism?*

### Book:

Greenblatt, Stephen: *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*

**Note:** *Studying Humanism is a study group, not a book club. If you have not done the reading, you may audit the discussion. All are welcome, definitely including newcomers!*



## SHSNY MEMBERS ALSO ...

- **Sep 8 - Oct 3, Artist Irene Christensen** will show acrylic paintings and drawings, “Nature’s Intermezzo”, at Atlantic Gallery, 548 West 28 St, Suite 540. Opening Reception, Sep 10, 5-8pm.
- **Sep 10, 7:00 pm, John Wagner** will address the Long Island Atheists Meetup Group on “Promoting Secular Politics in the Empire State”. Plainview-Old Bethpage Library, 999 Old Country Road, Plainview, L.I.

Reserve the date, for the ...

## 7th ANNUAL SHSNY FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH, LECTURE AND CONVERSATION

Sunday, October 11

at 12 Noon, at

**PETE’S TAVERN,**

129 East 18 St. (Irving Place)

With guest speaker

**MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI**

on

### “STOICISM TODAY”

Massimo Pigliucci is a Professor of Philosophy at CUNY-City College, editor in chief of the online magazine *Scientia Salon*, prolific author, and Honorary Member of SHSNY



who has lately turned his attention to the ancient Greco-Roman philosophy of ethics and resilience that is Stoicism. He says:

*“Stoicism is experiencing a surprising comeback these days, positioning itself as the Western answer to Buddhism, with which it shares a number of similarities. In this talk I will explain the basics of Stoicism and argue that it is a philosophy highly suitable to the complexities of life in the 21st century, perhaps even a good complement to secular humanism.”*

### Join us! Brunch is \$25

... for your choice of 11 excellent entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.) and coffee or tea, and including all taxes and tips.

### Pre-pay now at [shsnny.org](http://shsnny.org)

... to reserve your place, because the room at Pete’s only seats 50. Questions? email [editor@shsnny.org](mailto:editor@shsnny.org) ... or call 646-922-7389, and leave a call-back number.

## HUMANISM, DOUBT, AND OPTIMISM

### Part 2

Lawrence Krauss,

2015 Humanist of the Year

(Reprinted from *thehumanist.com*, 5/26/2015)

(Editor: In the August issue, we recorded the first half of Professor Krauss' speech upon accepting the Humanist of the Year award at the American Humanist Association's conference in Denver on May 9. In it, he claimed that "humanism offers the world one of the most important drivers of change that can improve our future", urged more and more widespread science and critical thinking education, imagined "a future without the tyranny of religious myth and superstition, and its chokehold on supposed morality", and challenged the idea of science and religion as "non-overlapping magisteria".

By arguing in public (in many cases against their own internal views) that science presents no challenge to religious belief, my colleagues are being disingenuous. While science cannot falsify the vague postulate that there may be purpose to the universe, nevertheless the specific claims of the scriptures are, in many cases, empirically falsifiable, and those that have been falsified.

"Non-overlapping magisteria" has a nice ring to it. The problem is that there are many religious claims that not only "overlap" with empirical data but are incompatible with it. As a scientist who also spends a fair amount of time in the public arena, if I am asked if our understanding of the Big Bang conflicts with the idea of a six-thousand-year-old universe, I face a choice: I can betray my scientific values or encourage that person to doubt his or her own beliefs.

Scientists who argue that we shouldn't focus on these embarrassing contradictions are misrepresenting the key facet of science that Feynman so extolled. Science, at its basis, encourages open expressions of doubt, and progress often occurs by disproving the accepted wisdom of the previous generation. It also seems inconsistent to have no problem ridiculing the claims of astrology, even though a significant fraction of the public believes these claims, while arguing that it hurts the cause of science to suggest that various religious tenets are also poorly founded in reality.

Without demeaning the thoughtful faithful, we shouldn't shy away from publicly accepting that many of the specific claims of the sacred books of the world's major religions are not valid. One need not turn to the numerous contradictions with known physics and cosmology—after all, many of these books were written before we knew the Earth orbited the Sun. There are simpler falsehoods, from the existence of domesticated camels in the time of Abraham, to Muhammad's famous night journey to a mosque in Jerusalem in spite of the fact that there were no mosques in Jerusalem at the time, to the fact that one of the central holy books of the Mormon faith—an Egyptian papyrus translated into the book of Abraham—is now known to merely describe the burial rites for Ra.

There may be places in the world where one risks decapitation for questioning certain religious claims, but in

a rational world it is hard to argue that questioning these, or a host of others of dubious repute, should be viewed as inappropriate. Education at its heart is inseparable from teaching doubt.

It is good to be skeptical, especially about ideas you learn from perceived authority figures. Recent studies even suggest that being taught to doubt at a young age could make people better lifelong learners. That, in turn, means that doubters—people who base their views on evidence, rather than faith—are likely to be better citizens.

Last year, writing in *The New York Times*, the political scientist Brendan Nyhan explained how "identity often trumps the facts". We would rather reject evidence than change our sense of who we are. Knowledge is comparatively helpless against identity: as you grow better informed about the issues, you just get better at selectively using evidence to reinforce your pre-existing commitments. A 2014 Yale Law School study, for example, demonstrated that the divergence between religious and nonreligious peoples' views on evolution actually grows wider among those who are familiar with math and science. Describing Nyhan's work in *The New Yorker*, Maria Konnikova summarized his findings by writing that "it's only after ideology is put to the side" that the facts become "decoupled from notions of self-perception". If we want to raise citizens who are better at making evidence-based judgments, we need to start early, making skepticism and doubt part of the experience that shapes their identities from a young age.

Meanwhile, earlier this year, an AP-GfK poll revealed that less than a third of Americans are willing to express confidence in the reality of human-induced climate change, evolution, the age of the Earth, and the existence of the Big Bang. Among those surveyed, there was a direct correlation between religious conviction and an unwillingness to accept the results of empirical scientific investigation. Religious beliefs vary widely, of course—not all faiths, or all faithful people, are the same. But it seems fair to say that, on average, religious faith appears to be an obstacle to understanding the world.

And it is an obstacle that may begin early. Last summer a new study published in the journal *Cognitive Science* claimed to find a significant difference in the ability of children as young as five and six years old to distinguish fact from fantasy, depending upon their past exposure to religious education, in church or parochial school. The children with religious training (coming from many different religious backgrounds) were less able to judge that characters in fantasy stories were fictional rather than real compared to children with no such exposure. Unfortunately, the methodology of the study was badly flawed, but I suspect a good scientific study would be likely to demonstrate something similar, and I encourage better scholars to carry out such studies.

By planting the seeds of doubt, education offers the best opportunity to immunize children against the intellectual virus that is associated with dogma and superstition in the world today.

Of course, science class isn't the only place where students can learn to be skeptical. A provocative novel that presents a completely foreign worldview, or a history lesson exploring the vastly different mores of the past, can push you to skeptically reassess your inherited view of the universe. But science is a place where such confrontation is explicit and accessible. It didn't take more than a simple experiment for Galileo to overturn the wisdom of Aristotle. Informed doubt is the very essence of science.

Some teachers shy away from confronting religious beliefs, because they worry that planting the seeds of doubt will cause some students to question or abandon their own faith or the faith of their parents. But is that really such a bad thing? It offers some young people the chance to escape the guilt imposed upon them simply for questioning what they're told. Recently I received an e-mail from a twenty-seven-year-old man who is now studying in the United States after growing up in Saudi Arabia. His father was executed by family members after converting to Christianity. He says that it's learning about science that has finally liberated him from the specter of religious fundamentalism. The same week, I received an e-mail from a young man who lives in Indiana; he feels isolated and damaged because of the reaction of his friends and family to his rejection of religion and his love of science. I get e-mails like this regularly. We owe it to these young people to help them feel, as another young letter-writer put it, that, "I'm not the only one who has these thoughts."

Is it naïve to imagine we can overcome centuries of religious intransigence in a single generation through education? Maybe. But as Nelson Mandela said about going from prisoner to president in the span of a generation, "It always seems impossible until it's done."

The stakes are too high not to try, as Feynman warned us a generation ago:

"It is our responsibility to leave the men of the future with a free hand. In the impetuous youth of humanity, we can make grave errors that can stunt our growth for a long time. This we will do if we, so young and ignorant, say we have the answers now, if we suppress all discussion, all criticism, saying, 'This is it, boys! Man is saved!' Thus we can doom man for a long time to the chains of authority, confined to the limits of our present imagination."

## LIBERALS ALWAYS WIN

James A. Haught

(Reprinted from "The Tide of History Flows Left", on *Tribune News Service*, and forwarded by Edd Doerr, who is Mr. Haught's fellow columnist at *Free Inquiry magazine*.)

One of my history-minded friends has a long-range political view summed up in three words: Liberals always win. Complex social struggles may take centuries or decades, he says, but they eventually bring victory for human rights, more democratic liberties and other progressive goals.

Look how long it took to end slavery. Generations of agitation and the horrible Civil War finally brought triumph

for liberal abolitionists and defeat for conservative slavery supporters.

Look how long it took for women to gain the right to vote. In the end, liberal suffragists prevailed, conservative opponents lost.

Look at the long battle to give couples the right to practice birth control.

Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger was jailed eight times for the crime of mentioning sex – but she eventually transformed U.S. society. A Supreme Court victory in 1965 struck down contraceptive bans for married couples, and a follow-up victory in 1972 struck them down for unwed ones.

Liberals won, conservatives lost.

The same pattern applies to the struggle for Social Security pensions for retirees – and unemployment compensation for the jobless – and equality for blacks – and Medicare and Medicaid – and equality for women – and food stamps for needy families – and expanded health insurance under the Affordable Care Act – and equality for gays, etc. These stormy social conflicts ended the same way: Liberals always win. Conservatives always lose.

Of course, history doesn't move in a clear, predictable manner. Germany was advanced and modern – yet it sank into the horrors of Nazism. Other setbacks occur. But the overall tide of civilization flows in a progressive direction.

In his landmark book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker concludes that all sorts of human evils – war, genocide, murder, rape, torture, dueling, wife-bashing, attacks on minorities, etc. – have faded enormously from the Western world. International warfare has virtually vanished. Pursuit of such humane goals lies at the heart of the liberal agenda.

When I first became a news reporter in the 1950s, conservative Bible Belt morality was enforced by laws. It was a crime for stores to open on the Sabbath. It was a crime to look at the equivalent of a *Playboy* magazine, or to read a sexy book. (Our mayor once sent cops to raid bookstores selling *Peyton Place*.)

Back then, it was a felony to be gay, and those who were caught were sent to prison under old sodomy laws. Back then, it was a felony for a desperate girl to end a pregnancy. It was illegal for an unmarried couple to share a bedroom. Divorce or unwed pregnancy was an unmentionable disgrace. Jews weren't allowed into Christian-only country clubs. Public schools had mandatory teacher-led prayer. It was a crime to buy a cocktail or a lottery ticket.

That world disappeared, decade after decade. The culture slowly evolved.

Sunday "blue laws" were undone. Teacher-led prayers were banned. Gay sex became legal. Liquor clubs were approved. Abortion became legal. State governments became lottery operators. Censorship ended. Other conservative taboos gradually disappeared.

Within my lifetime, morality flip-flopped. Conservative thou-shalt-nots lost their grip on society. Liberals won – yet it happened so gradually that hardly anyone noticed.

For several decades, the strongest indicator of politics was church membership. White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Mitt Romney. People who don't attend worship voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama. The latter became the largest group in the Democratic Party base.

Today, survey after survey finds American church membership fading, while the young generation ignores religion. Sociologists think the secular trend is unstoppable. People who say their faith is "none" already comprise one-fourth of the adult population—56 million Americans—and they seem destined someday to be the largest segment. The social tide is flowing away from conservative fundamentalism and its Puritanical agenda.

All these factors support my friend's maxim that liberals always win. The progressive worldview is called humanism—trying to make life better for all people—and it's a powerful current. In 1960, John F. Kennedy said in a famed speech:

*"If by a 'liberal' they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reaction, someone who cares about the welfare of the people – their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights and civil liberties – then I'm proud to say that I'm a liberal."*

Amid all the chaos of daily life, through a thousand contradictory barrages, the struggle for a safer, fairer, more secure, more humane world never ceases. Thank heaven for progressive victories that keep on prevailing.

## **MAD AS HELL, AND WE SHOULD BE, TOO** **Senator Elizabeth Warren**

*(The following is offered without regard to left, right or center politics. In my opinion, the points that Senator Warren made, the questions she raised at the Re/code Conference May 26, are a wake-up call to Americans – especially humanists – of every persuasion. – JR)*

**QUESTION:** How am I or the fifty percent of people who can vote or don't supposed to actually believe any politician that says we are going to rebuild this country, energy infrastructure, internet infrastructure, education all these things matter. I believe that. And with interest rates this low, it makes sense for us to issue paper on 30 or 100 year notes to rebuild America. Why aren't we doing that?

**WARREN:** It's exactly the right question. We are not doing it because the people in Washington, too many of the people in Washington, do not represent the folks who elected them. They represent the rich and the powerful who don't want their taxes raised, who don't want to see any change. Who are perfectly happy with things where they are, indeed they're doing great with things where they are. And they stay in the ear of enough of the folks in Washington that it has made it impossible to get any kind of change. The only way we get change is when enough people in this country say I'm mad as hell and I'm fed up and I'm not going to do this anymore. You are not going to go back and represent me in Washington, DC, if you are not willing to

pass a meaningful infrastructure bill. If you are not willing to refinance student loan interest rates and stop dragging in billions of dollars in profits off the backs of kids who otherwise can't afford to go to college. If you don't fund the NIH and NISF, because that is our future.

We have to make these issues salient and not just wonky. When you hear us talk about this and you say this is like the wonkiest conference ever, can you imagine saying that at a tech conference, when you say this is the wonkiest conference we've ever had, no! These have to be the things that you wake up people all over America and say what matters? Whether or not you're going to have a job, whether or not you're going to have a retirement, whether or not your kids are going to have any chance to build a future for them.

It's gotta be about these core issues. And we gotta talk about 'em, talk about 'em enough until there's some real change in this country – that's all I know to do.

## **A DANGEROUS ARROGANCE** **Jonathan Engel**

Dan Patrick is the Lieutenant Governor of Texas. In 2013, during a debate in the Texas legislature over proposed abortion restrictions, Mr. Patrick, who was then a State Senator, asked, "How would God vote tonight if he were here?" He was presumably implying that God would vote for the abortion restrictions bill being debated. I don't think that anyone would be too shocked to hear that Mr. Patrick supported and voted for the legislation. "Hey, God thinks just like me!"

What an arrogant, and yes, dangerous way of thinking. Now, I say this as a non-believer in the supernatural, but I think even true believers should be troubled by what Mr. Patrick said. Is he really saying that he, Dan Patrick, knows how God would vote on this or any other bill? Especially as the Bible doesn't actually say anything about abortion. If, as people like Mr. Patrick believe, the Bible (his version of it, of course) is the true word of God, and if God is as against abortion as Mr. Patrick would have us believe, wouldn't He have said something about it in His own book?

And what of the incredible hubris of claiming to know how God thinks? Do arrogant faith-heads like Patrick even read their own Bibles, or do they just thump them when it's politically advantageous to do so? Micah 6:8 says "And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Claiming to know how God would vote on a bill in the Texas state legislature? Not all that humble, by my way of thinking.

Or try Corinthians 8:2: "If anyone thinks they know something, they don't know as much as they should know." Hear that, Lieutenant Governor Patrick?

Then there's the issue of how states such as Texas defend their anti-abortion laws when challenged in federal court. After all, abortion is still constitutionally protected since *Roe v. Wade*, so you can't just tell a federal court that the state's goal is to deprive women of that right.

The 2013 law of which Mr. Patrick claimed divine

knowledge requires clinics that perform abortions in Texas to have all the staffing, equipment, etc., of a hospital surgical center, despite the fact that abortion is and has been an extraordinarily safe procedure in Texas and elsewhere. Many clinics cannot meet these new requirements, and so now must close, which was the law's true intent all along. But in federal court the State of Texas says that they're not trying to force clinics to close. Oh no, they just want to make sure that clinics that perform abortions do so safely. Just concerned about women's health, don't you know. But of course the real-world effect is to force clinics to close. The result is that women (mostly poor; the rich can always get theirs) who now cannot get a safe abortion in a medical clinic take pills they bought online to end their unintended pregnancies, or go to the local back-alley butcher.

So Mr. Patrick and his fellow leaders of the great state of Texas go into court and lie about their intent, which is really to make abortions more difficult to obtain by closing down clinics that perform them. Even worse, they lie that they're concerned with women's health, when they know damn well that the law that they passed and are defending will result in terrible harm to women who no longer will be able to access safe, legal abortions. But the Good Book's ninth Commandment says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

So does the Lieutenant Governor really think that it's okay for the state of Texas to lie to a federal court about the intent behind its new abortion restrictions? What would God say about that? I, for one, don't presume to know.

#### ***A preview of our October Book Club selection ...***

### **SAPIENS: THAT'S US!**

**Yuval Noah Harari**

*(Excerpted from Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind)*

In the brain, all data is freely associated. When I go with my spouse to sign on a mortgage for our new home, I am reminded of the first place we lived together, which reminds me of our honeymoon in New Orleans, which reminds me of alligators, which remind me of dragons, which remind me of The Ring of the Nibelungen, and suddenly, before I know it, there I am humming the Siegfried leitmotif to a puzzled bank clerk. In bureaucracy, things must be kept apart. There is one "drawer" for home mortgages, another for marriage certificates, a third for tax registers, and a fourth for lawsuits. Otherwise, how can you find anything? Things that belong in more than one drawer, like Wagnerian music dramas (do I file them under "music", "theatre", or perhaps invent a new category altogether?), are a terrible headache. So one is forever adding, deleting and rearranging drawers.

In order to function, the people who operate such a system of drawers must be reprogrammed to stop thinking as humans and to start thinking as clerks and accountants. As everyone from ancient times till today knows, clerks and accountants think in a non-human fashion. They think like filing cabinets. This is not their fault. If they don't think that

way their drawers will all get mixed up and they won't be able to provide the services their government, company or organization requires. The most important impact of script on human history is precisely this: it has gradually changed the way humans think and view the world. Free association and holistic thought have given way to compartmentalization and bureaucracy.

As the centuries passed, bureaucratic methods of data processing grew ever more different from the way humans naturally think — and ever more important. A critical step was made sometime before the ninth century AD, when a new partial script was invented, one that could store and process mathematical data with unprecedented efficiency. This partial script was composed of ten signs, representing the numbers from 0 to 9. Confusingly, these signs are known as Arabic numerals even though they were first invented by the Hindus (even more confusingly, modern Arabs use a set of digits that look quite different from Western ones). But the Arabs get the credit because when they invaded India they encountered the system, understood its usefulness, refined it, and spread it through the Middle East and then to Europe. When several other signs were later added to the Arab numerals (such as the signs for addition, subtraction and multiplication), the basis of modern mathematical notation came into being.

Although this system of writing remains a partial script, it has become the world's dominant language. Almost all states, companies, organizations and institutions — whether they speak Arabic, Hindi, English or Norwegian — use mathematical script to record and process data. Every piece of information that can be translated into mathematical script is stored, spread and processed with mindboggling speed and efficiency.

A person who wishes to influence the decisions of governments, organizations and companies must therefore learn to speak in numbers. Experts do their best to translate even ideas such as "poverty", "happiness" and "honesty" into numbers ("the poverty line", "subjective well-being levels", "credit rating"). Entire fields of knowledge, such as physics and engineering, have already lost almost all touch with the spoken human language, and are maintained solely by mathematical script.

More recently, mathematical script has given rise to an even more revolutionary writing system, a computerized binary script consisting of only two signs: 0 and 1. The words I am now typing on my keyboard are written within my computer by different combinations of 0 and 1.

Writing was born as the maidservant of human consciousness, but is increasingly becoming its master. Our computers have trouble understanding how Homo sapiens talks, feels and dreams. So we are teaching Homo sapiens to talk, feel and dream in the language of numbers, which can be understood by computers. And this is not the end of the story. The field of artificial intelligence is seeking to create a new kind of intelligence based solely on the binary script of computers.

## TO LIVE AND (MAYBE) DIE IN NEW YORK

E.B. White

*(Editor: This, from Here is New York, in 1949, seems “eerily prescient” as we approach another September 11 anniversary, and as the editors of DelanceyPlace.com described it when they excerpted it last year. – JR)*

To a New Yorker the city is both changeless and changing. In many respects it neither looks nor feels the way it did twenty-five years ago. ... New York has changed in tempo and in temper during the years I have known it. There is greater tension, increased irritability. You encounter it in many places, in many faces. The normal frustrations of modern life are here multiplied and amplified — a single run of a cross-town bus contains, for the driver, enough frustration and annoyance to carry him over the edge of sanity: the light that changes always an instant too soon, the passenger that bangs on the shut door, the truck that blocks the only opening, the coin that slips to the floor, the question asked at the wrong moment. There is greater tension and there is greater speed. ...

The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.

All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all targets, New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm.

It used to be that the Statue of Liberty was the signpost that proclaimed New York and translated it for all the world. Today Liberty shares the role with Death. Along the East River, from the razed slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay, as though in a race with the spectral flight of planes, men are carving out the permanent headquarters of the United Nations — the greatest housing project of them all. In its stride, New York takes on one more interior city, to shelter, this time, all governments, and to clear the slum called war. New York is not a capital city — it is not a national capital or a state capital. But it is by way of becoming the capital of the world. ....

This race — this race between the destroying planes and the struggling Parliament of Man — it sticks in all our heads. The city at last perfectly illustrates both the universal dilemma and the general solution, this riddle in steel and stone is at once the perfect target and the perfect demonstration of nonviolence, of racial brotherhood, this lofty target scraping the skies and meeting the destroying planes halfway, home of all people and all nations, capital of everything, housing the deliberations by which the planes are to be stayed and their errand forestalled.

9/11 (2001) foreseen in 1947  
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