

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2017

“What should humanists *do* in the Age of Trump?”, we asked readers in an abbreviated January mailing, and *nineteen* of you responded to the call to fill these pages with your ideas – thank you. A little less politically, we also visit a supermarket in Appalachia and a “cultural cafeteria” in the UK. Herein, too, we consider a future of robo-ethics and say good-bye to one of the last of SHSNY’s first.

But let’s start with some good news, for a change, from two of the very best of us. – JR

(Ed: This would have been Page 1 of the January issue, if there had been a January issue. Happy New Year! — JR)

A LITTLE “HAPPY NEW YEAR” UPLIFT FROM TWO OF OUR BEST

Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker

(Transcribed from a conversation between the two men that concludes the video “Richard Dawkins: Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life – Part 1: Sin”).

Dawkins: our capacity for empathy, together with a more rational, tolerant society is, I believe, making us more moral than ever before. And yet, if you were to believe some moralists and newspapers, society is going to hell in a handcart. But is it?

The psychologist Steven Pinker has looked at the figures in detail, including data from the British home office and the US Bureau of justice, and found that as religion declines, we are becoming ever more civilized.

Pinker: I had no idea that, say, in the last 40 years, the rate of rape has declined by 80 percent ... in the United States.

Dawkins: Surprising, because presumably the number of reportings has gone up.

Pinker: Exactly. That’s right. Child abuse has gone down, attitudes toward racial minorities, toward homosexuals, and treatment of animals in laboratories.

Dawkins: Yet the perception of these things has gone in the other direction, because everybody thinks that child abuse has been climbing.

Pinker: It may be because of the increased concern that we both think is more prevalent than ever before, and we managed to put it down because people care about it, take steps to minimize it and those steps clearly succeed. And

there are many positive developments that we take for granted because they are non-events, they’re dogs that don’t bark.

An example would be the disappearance of war between developed states. Even in the developing world, that we think of as a war-torn hell-hole ... the number of wars and the number of deaths in war have plummeted in the last 20 years, since the end of the Cold War. Deaths are lower in absolute numbers. In a world of seven billion people, fewer people are dying than ever before.

Dawkins: Are we too down on ourselves? Do you think that, actually, we are becoming more moral?

Pinker: I don’t know if we are becoming more biologically, but I think there is something about a society with free speech, with open inquiry, with rational debate, with the accumulation of evidence, that will tend to push us in a moral direction. In particular, the

whole current that we call humanism, which almost sounds banal and boring and treacly nowadays, simply because it’s become second nature to us, but I think it’s a radical idea in human history.

Dawkins: A critic about human nature might say that religious morality is an effective way of keeping people in line: the threat of hell, the reward of heaven. But the rules of the holy books are out of date and often barbaric.

Science shows that we are governed by quite logical hidden rules and customs, and the highly evolved senses that humans have, of reason and empathy. More important, we now live in a rational age and can look at where we’ve gone wrong in history, and avoid the tribalism that divides and harms us. This, surely, is real progress.



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WHAT SHOULD HUMANISTS DO IN THE AGE OF TRUMP?

Peter Flom

What should a humanist do in the Age of Trump? First, in the words of the late, great Douglas Adams: *Don't panic.*

Second, take the long view. Recognize that, in the long run, things are getting better. If you want reasons to believe this, you can read:

- *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, by Steven Pinker. Violence at all levels is down. Way down.
- *The Beginning of Infinity*, by David Deutsch. Why the Enlightenment can't be stopped and why no one is optimistic enough.

Now that you've stopped panicking and started realizing that we no longer, for instance, look for more painful ways to kill people who have committed crimes, what can you do?

1. *Give money.* Yeah. Give. If you're poor, give a little. If you're rich, give a lot. There are a lot of us Nones in the USA and if we each gave a dollar, it would be a tidal wave. Where to give? Well, there's lots of great places but here are three of my favorites:

- The ACLU. There's nothing more American than civil liberties.
- Union of Concerned Scientists. Science in the public interest. Good people. I am on the national advisory board.
- *Mother Jones.* *Mother Jones* is the best magazine in America (in, of course, my opinion). They are also known as the Foundation for National Progress.

2. *Give time.* Maybe you have more time than money.

3. *Write.* Write to Congresspeople, write to senators, write to newspapers, write write write!

4. *Use social media.* Yeah, you know. Twitter. Facebook. Personally, I like Quora a lot too.

5. *Love.* Love one another. "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." – *Martin Luther King Jr.*

6. *Hope.* Yeah. Hope is the atheist's prayer. It does all the good that prayer does, with none of the nonsense.

John A. Wagner

(Chair of the Secular Coalition for New York)

Read this First: Don't Try to Re-invent Political Action; Take it Easy, but Have an Impact.

Your best actions in the Trump Era are simple. Join and fund political groups dedicated to both a secular and a humanist agenda. Here are two of the best:

1. Go to the Secular Coalition of America (www.secular.org/), sign up for action alerts, follow their lead by contacting your politicians when they say it is a good time to do so, and give them the money they need to hire lobbyists to work for you. Think about the importance of their work, and send them a donation that reflects how much you care

about political issues.

2. Join the Freedom from Religion Foundation (ffrf.org/), and give them a big donation. They have been most effective in using lawsuits and education to promote the separation of church and state.

Those two actions will cost you less than 15 minutes a week. They will use your energy effectively and efficiently. Your money will be well spent, and, as a bonus, you will be better informed on humanist and political issues. Now, if you have more drive, follow some of the other suggestions you find on these pages or find your own way to make the world a little better, *but do these two things first.*

Anonymous

SHSNY is not a political organization and prescribes no political position with which we are obligated to comply. In any event, SHSNY isn't the kind of organization likely to accomplish political goals. Secular Humanism Plus doesn't seem efficient to me though secular humanists as citizens and members of society do have political and social obligations. Meaning well isn't of much value without at least the resolve to be effective. These are some thoughts about what does and doesn't help and what makes things worse.

Wasting time and energy on what's guaranteed to fail and demoralize doesn't work. Keep well informed and on the lookout for opportunities to participate in the fight. *The New Yorker Magazine* online, for instance, has been persistent and well-focused on the election and helpful in my thinking in a way I wouldn't have anticipated, whereas some other sources have tended to make me feel more demoralized.

Don't overdose on what tends to make you feel demoralized. Participate in your political party and volunteer. Support your party's influence locally and nationally. Staten Island and Long Island are a different political world but close enough to be sorta local. Join or make donations to organizations that have focused goals consistent with your humanist values, like Planned Parenthood, the Southern Poverty Law Center, etc. If you're more a joiner than an organizer, don't reinvent the wheel, join something. Signing online petitions from organizations you trust and share goals is easy but doesn't carry much weight. Don't pass up an opportunity to do what's easy.

The increasing number and mass of protests against the war in Vietnam had a lot to do with ending it and will do more today to mobilize opposition to the Trump agenda than watching TV at home. Writing letters to your elected officials gets attention, and your personal emails come in second (but if you're not in their district it's a waste of time). Phone calls also make a splash. Make your message brief, blunt, explicit, impossible to misunderstand and to be slotted in a column by an aide to your representative.

Get some support from your peers but don't waste time on complaining, about history from decades ago or on pointless fine points. There's no point arguing with Trump supporters because you're not going to change their thinking and what difference would it make if you did?

Brad Wheeler

We must do two things. First, we must be exemplars. We must be everything Trump is not, such as kind, thoughtful, honest, and wise.

Second, we must remember that our next chance to make a direct improvement in our government is in November, 2018.

The time is short and we must do everything we can to ensure that the Congress, especially the Senate, is a saner, more responsible, and more competent body after that election than it is today. Consider the possible retirements from the Supreme Court for but one reason we must get to work!

Chic Schissel

I don't know what to suggest. I have no idea what this character will actually do. I think we should sit tight and then loudly protest if, as expected, he starts to do outrageous things. But we don't know, not yet.

David Rafferty

You know why we elected this guy? Not because of "economic insecurity", or some other nonsensical crap to help us feel the pain of idiot voters. It's because an enormous percentage of the people in this country are stupid.

Yep, I said it, and I don't care who's offended. Here's a test for Trump supporters: Craft an affirmative defense of the man, his plan, his policies and so on, and don't at any time use the words "Hillary", "Clinton", or "Obama" in your sentences. Only affirmative defenses. What will he do, what actions will he take? Who does he support for key positions in his administration? Which stands on foreign affairs, world climate, global trade and more do you agree with? Can't do it? Or are your defenses so thin that you are embarrassed to say them out loud? Then f*** you, you stupid, stupid person.

So wait, what was the question again? What should humanists *do* about Trump? Well honestly it's your call. Sure, we can (and should) go the pitchforks-and-torches route, but unfortunately I believe the American public is no longer interested in genuine rebellion. Slacktivism and hashtag activism are the new normal. You want me to turn off Jimmy Fallon because you think he's the Trump enabler in chief? That'll show 'em! Actually, that one's not bad because it will hit advertisers in the pocket, but you get the idea. Is this the best we can come up with?

Maybe it will be, but here's a very inconvenient truth. There are going to be people who are going to make out very well in a Trump administration. I mean, I'm 55 so I probably won't be around to see the sea levels rise and besides, my taxes are going to go down so much I'll be able to afford a second house somewhere inland. My kids are done with public education so why should I care if my local school is going to be outsourced to a bunch of for-profit bible thumpers? Added bonus: my already well-educated kids are going to seem like modern day Leonardos compared

to the generation that will come after them.

Americans have earned the right to be called stupid. After the 2004 re-election of Bush the Lesser *The Mirror* in England asked on its front page, "How Could 59,000,000 People Be So Dumb?" Well, they had it right. We are a country of stupid fools who think a presidential election is a TV show designed to entertain us like Duck Dynasty. Who don't care that the guys in Duck Dynasty are actually golf playing, hair highlighting frat boys playing a role. Who turn on Fox News and can't be bothered to stop and think about what they are saying, no matter how absurd it sounds. How in the world are humanists ever going to be able to DO anything to combat gen-u-wine and proud of it stupidity?

Sigh. But we gotta try, don't we? It all comes down to the age-old magic bullet: education. Not education in schools this time, but one-on-one, face-to-face, confrontational education. When they say the sky is green you have to say the sky is blue and no, there are no two sides about it. You bring out the encyclopedia and show them a definition of blue. You show them the scientific research that says that yes, the sky is blue. And you do not back down. This will be painful and you may lose friends along the way, but it is necessary. Falsehoods must not be allowed to stand, that's what got us into this mess: saying bullshit over and over until enough people thought, well, I've heard it so much it must be true.

As humanists we are used to having unpopular and polarizing conversations. At the same time we have learned patience and the virtue of building a positive case without demonizing the other side. Helping people understand reason and free thought. The stupid are wrong and that makes them dangerous. It is up to us, dare I say it, to spread the gospel of truth and honesty, educating them one at a time if necessary.

Oh, and motivating the Gen Xers and Millennials to get their sorry asses off the couch, away from their phones and into the street where real rebellion is messy, loud, dangerous and most importantly.

Remo Cosentino

Frankly, other than opposing, with every sinew of our bodies, all his idiocies, it's tilting at windmills. Obviously, whatever can be done, must be done collectively, and primarily in the halls of Congress. Unfortunately, the Democrats, preoccupied with playing defense, will not or cannot strengthen the safeguards of our democratic society.

I have rather a poor opinion of the success of organized marches, letter campaigns, or rational protest. What happened was not about the Electoral College or Hillary's poor campaigning skills. It has been nothing less than the rise of the religious-red-neck rabble, led by a false messiah, that wishes to punish the unbelievers with fire and brimstone. Our only hope is that they will go too far and impeachment will result, or he will perpetrate great fraud and be driven from office.

Giles Kelly

My feeling is not to try to anticipate Trump's actions and style in office yet, but wait guardedly to see what he is going to do for, or do to our country.

He shows some troubling traits. We know he has a tendency to act on impulse, that he had a strong ego and a thin skin and doesn't read much. We don't know if we have sufficient checkers and balancers to curb him if necessary.

There are many critics out there ready and willing to publicly watch and criticize him. They will question how he uses his power and see if he follows the laws and ethics of our country. If lacking, do we have the people and institutions who will stand up to him, block him, or guide him? Many of us fear possible excesses and his vision for America. Is the Republican Party going to enable, moderate or block him? Will he obey the law? It's still too early to tell.

Concerning the future: What role will he play in the world of tomorrow? What is Trump's vision? Are we at a threshold of a new political era? Will we (can we) keep and protect our Constitutional ideals intact? Will we continue to champion and foster peace, democracy and prosperity in the world? Will we continue to take measures to preserve life on our planet? Is neo-Fascism raising its ugly head?

We don't know yet, but we will soon find out.

I believe Americans are resilient and capable of handling or disposing of Trump if necessary.

Anton Spivak

How to trump Trump? As for secular humanists, we know that we are one of the least respected segments of the US public, especially as far as Republicans are concerned. Which is why organizations such as SHSNY and AHA not only have a greater urgency to fight for recognition. We have to stick by those who are on our side and stand by them, even if they disagree with our beliefs. We need to prove that we are on the same side as them regarding what to do about Trump.

This does not mean that we should kowtow to religious viewpoints we disagree with. We should continue to uphold our values, such as church-state separation, sound science in schools, reproductive rights, and end-of-life treatment. With conservatives ruling the roost it is more crucial than ever that we defend our principles, even if it means taking to the streets.

Also, we must avoid the trap of viewing ourselves as intellectually and morally superior to Trump supporters. Many parallels have been drawn between Trump's rise to power and Adolph Hitler's, as Hitler was also a demagogue who also appealed to the masses by scapegoating other groups for their problems and was never expected to get as far as he did. Like the Germans under the Third Reich who supported Hitler simply because they were dealing with a war-torn economy and saw Hitler as the solution, many Americans stood by Trump not out of their own bigotry but out of the sincere belief that he would cure the country's ills. And if we were in their position, we would have voted Trump as well. Yet there must be many Republicans who

accept the reality of climate change and do not approve of Trump's stance on women and immigrants. They simply aren't in a position to come out publicly about it.

It will be a difficult four years ahead, possibly eight if what happened with Bush is any indication, yet we will persevere if we direct our energies toward upholding what we and other US citizens hold dear, whether or not they agree with our viewpoints. We can prove, by acting on behalf of our best interests even when the president doesn't, that the person in the Oval Office works for us, not the other way around. And that secular humanists belong to that all-encompassing group known as We The People.

Donna Marxer

Our elusive new president has brought much speculation about who he truly is: He has been called everything from a narcissist to a populist, a philanthropist to a grifter, a genius to an idiot.

But to my ordinary eye, I see an opportunist above all. He sees, almost with second sight, an opportunity, grabs it and runs with it. Often it works for him. If another, better opportunity develops, right away he drops the first one and flies with number two. This even if it is diametrically opposed to the first option. The premise doesn't matter, only the results. Those results are only meant to benefit himself and his family. He lacks conviction and ethics. The end always justifies the means. "Friends" fall so often that the bodies are stacking up.

He has no breadth. He does not read. One scholar colleague of ours suggests that leaves him without structure—no foundation in meaningful knowledge.

As an octogenarian and an artist, I have learned a few things that I regard as personal truths, and the main one that applies here is that I know that by practicing what I know best, I accomplish the most for myself and others. I know that I am too old to demonstrate, to stand or march in a crowd, to holler and scream. I can no longer create or run a demanding organization or command a large audience.

What I can do is continue to paint, to write, to persuade about that in which I believe, which is the power of art. Although it is not popular or talked about a lot in these trying times, I know that art matters and is worth fighting for. This is not about self-aggrandizement but about assuring the continuity of art. There is a necessity of keeping arts organizations alive when they may be doomed to failure. If we lose a museum or a symphony orchestra, it will never be replaced. On the simplest level, if we throw down our brushes, batons and pens and leave the stage in despair, all will lose. So I will continue to support the organizations, mentor young artists, paint and write until my hands and brains fail.

Art is not always wonderful. Sometimes it is political, sometimes completely not so. We will always have bad art around. Because art is and has always been necessary, even though our present leader is without aesthetic consciousness, it will be again.

Ars longa, vita brevis.

Steven Green

As far as what to do now: Marching won't mean a thing to the likes of Trump, Pence, and Sessions. We have to support as many agencies and organizations as possible. We have to be active in these organizations. We have to demonstrate our inclusion of "others". We have to make every effort to Flip The House in two years.

I plan to drown out Jan 20 with a lot of Loud Rock Music and maybe a few drinks with friends.

Positive Energy! The country is still here! Love and caring are still alive! This bump in the road is only the last howl of some dinosaurs. Let's hear it for Evolution!

Marjorie Vai

How do humanists support our democracy, our values and the more vulnerable among us in this time of Trump? Here are some suggestions.

- *Take Action:* Call, write, talk, listen, research, donate, volunteer, march, show up.
- *Model Personal Values:* This disaster of leadership calls on each of us to challenge ourselves to step up and model values such as honesty, compassion, fairness, kindness, open-mindedness, and taking personal responsibility. These values are alien to too many of our new leaders.
- *Support Truthfulness:* There are ways to bring back the core role of the truth. Support truth in general, not just when it works for you.

Be the fact checker in meetings. But don't just check the truth of what the opposing side argues, be sure that your side is on target with the facts as well. This is the only way to put truth ahead of belief or just being right.

When it is shown that you are wrong, admit it. When no one is around self-check the truth of your arguments. Make this a practice, a habit. Talk to others about doing this and make it a movement.

If the person you are arguing with is reasonable enough, change the subject to a discussion of truth *per se*, why it's important and how you can check on it. Find a way to show how knowing the truth, checking on the truth, is an end in itself, because only then can we know where we are going and how we can get there.

- *Point to Good Role Models:* Who should our youth look to as role models? The Obamas and Bidens were unparalleled. They made us realize that the President and VP could actually be role models. Well that's over, or maybe not. Why replace them? Keep them and other great role models in view for our children and young adults. If they are old enough use the Trump presidency as a lesson on how things can go very wrong. Point to history to show that this is not the first time. Not everyone who is in charge is a role model.
- *Dialogue and debate with those who do not agree with you.* I tried to start a series of public debates at The New School some years ago. Bob Kerrey, and the editors of *The National Review* and *The Wall Street Journal* were on board, but I couldn't stir up any interest. In general, students going to a progressive school only want to be exposed to progressive content. Most of the time that's what they get - and we wonder why we

can't talk to each other.

Try to engage people of opposing opinions. Know your facts and stats. Be patient. Think about the greater good of making the conversation happen.

I found that I had the best debates with the Skeptics. If you brought up facts or evidence they didn't know about they could change their opinion, as can I when faced with the same. In general, they listened, they thought, they researched and were wed to the truth instead of beliefs or impressions.

- *Be Pessimistic but Fearless:* Keep up with what's going on. Be attuned to the worst that can happen so that you can take action. But don't worry about things that only *might* happen. Fear can paralyze.
- *Be Optimistic but not Complacent:* Keep up with what's going on. Be mindful of the best that can happen and support what needs to be done to get there.
- *Lastly, Stay Real*

Jonathan Engel

The novel *Foundation*, by Isaac Asimov (SHSNY's first Honorary Member), is considered by aficionados to be one of the greatest works of science fiction ever written. There is a character in the book named Salvor Hardin who is known for his epigrams. One of these is "Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent", which I wholeheartedly agree with. Another is "Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right". This, on the other hand, has always troubled me.

I believe in doing what's right, but I've always feared that if we abandon our respective canons of morals and ethics we risk becoming a society under the rule of men, as opposed to the rule of law, which ultimately could lead to despotism and possibly dictatorship. After all, whom do we trust to always know what is "right"? Certainly not our new president; he would seem to be just what I always was afraid of: the leader with no rules, ethics or morals, who thinks he knows everything and is always right, and is therefore free to do whatever he wants. And yet, despite these reservations, recent events have left me wondering if maybe there is something valuable to be learned by Hardin's bromide after all.

Which brings us to how to deal with Trump. A headline in the December 15 *New York Times* read "Afraid to Politicize Intelligence, Obama Delayed Blaming Russia for Hack". Now I am very fond of President Obama, and overall I think he did an excellent job as president, especially given the circumstances. But reading this headline, I couldn't help but wish that he had a little more Salvor Hardin in him. While of course Trump, F.B.I. Director James Comey and their fellow Republicans were happy to have Putin meddle in our election in The Donald's favor, Obama's adherence to what he believed to be moral behavior prevented him from publicly calling out the Russians for their email hacks, lest doing so "influence" the election, never mind the influence

"What to DO" essays continue on page 8 —

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, FEB 2, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

LONE SURVIVORS:

***How We Came to Be the
Only Humans on Earth***

Chris Stringer

In this groundbreaking and engaging work of science, world-renowned paleoanthropologist

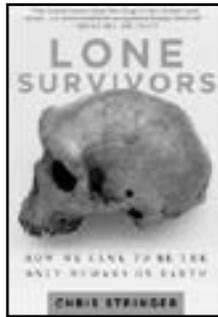
Chris Stringer sets out a new theory of humanity's origin, challenging both the multiregionalists (who hold that modern humans developed from ancient

ancestors in different parts of the world) and his own "out of Africa" theory, which maintains that humans emerged rapidly in one small part of Africa and then spread to replace all other humans within and outside the continent. Stringer's new theory, based on archeological and genetic evidence, holds that distinct humans coexisted and competed across the African continent - exchanging genes, tools, and behavioral strategies.

Stringer draws on analyses of old and new fossils from around the world to show how the most sensational recent fossil findings fit with his model, and he questions previous concepts (including his own) of modernity and how it evolved.

- Paperback & Kindle available

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



SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MARCH 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

A UNIVERSE

FROM NOTHING:

***Why There is Something
Rather Than Nothing***

Lawrence Krauss

Where did the universe come from? What was there before it? What will the future bring? And finally, why is there something rather than nothing?

One of the few prominent scientists today to have crossed the chasm between science and popular culture, Krauss describes the staggeringly beautiful experimental observations and mind-bending new theories that demonstrate not only can something arise from nothing, something will *always* arise from nothing.

- Paperback & Kindle available

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, APRIL 6, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

MIND & COSMOS:

Why the

***Materialist Neo-Darwinian
Conception of Nature is
Almost Certainly False***

Thomas Nagel

The modern materialist approach to life has conspicuously failed to explain such central mind-related features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, and value.

This failure to account for something so integral to nature as mind, argues philosopher Nagel, is a major problem, threatening to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture, extending to biology, evolutionary theory, and cosmology.

- Paperback & Kindle available

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, FEB 13, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE

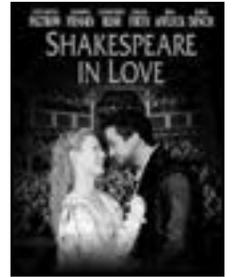
For the eve of Valentine's Day, what could be better than the 1998 Best Picture-Award winner that re-imagines the creation of one of the greatest love stories ever written, *Romeo and Juliet*? A rollicking comedy, with Joseph Fiennes, Judi Dench, Geoffrey Rush, Ben Affleck, and an almost unbelievably beautiful Gwyneth Paltrow.

Come, enjoy, fall in love.

After-Film Discussion:

Shakespeare and humanism.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)



BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, FEB 19, 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 \$12 breakfast



special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

***Humanists and the
"Fake News" meme.***

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL

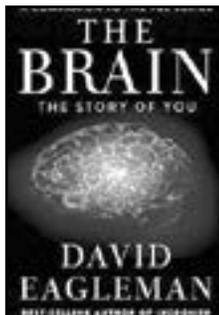
GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, FEB 22, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

**THE BRAIN - Part 2:
What Makes Me Me.**

Dr. David Eagleman

(Note: This is a re-scheduling of our December plans, overturned by Bob Murtha's accident.)



How do our personalities, memories and sense of self all emerge from neural activity?

Following up on our October screening and discussion, we take an extraordinary journey that explores how the brain, locked in silence and darkness without direct access to the world, conjures up the rich and beautiful world we all take for granted.

Begin with the astonishing fact that this Technicolor multi-sensory experience we are having is a convincing illusion conjured up by our brains. In the outside world there is no color, no sound, and no smell. These are all the constructions of the brain; our experience of reality is an electrochemical rendition of the world outside.

Each of our brains is different, and so is the reality it produces.

What is reality? It's whatever your brain tells you it is.

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

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@SHS_NewYork

Book Now:

The SHSNY 9th Annual Darwin Day Celebration

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 5:30 – 8:30pm

Whitman & Bloom Restaurant

384 Third Avenue (27 St)

Confirm your place at our celebration of Charles Darwin's 208th birthday - and the 29th Anniversary of the founding of SHSNY - along with 50 or more of your fellow and sororal freethinkers at conveniently-midtown Whitman & Bloom. The highlight of the evening will be a lively talk on ...

"Darwin's Evolution Odyssey:

**Tales from the Frontline of Biology and Scientific
Investigation"**

... by Abby Hafer, who teaches human anatomy and physiology at Curry College.



Professor Hafer is the author of *The Not-So-Intelligent Designer: Why Evolution Explains the Human Body and Intelligent Design Does Not*, and her witty lectures and interview appearances on NPR, WBAI and other media presage a fun-filled evening.

It's going to be a great evening ... feasting on a lavish buffet (veggie choices, of course) in our own curtained-off section of the pub (with our own cash bar) ... mingling and making new friends ... voting for the Dumbth of the Year ... and enjoying a fascinating and fun presentation, all for ...

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STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, FEB 27, 6:30 - 8:30 pm

Community Church of New York

28 East 35 St. (Gallery)

Study Topic TBA

The sudden and untimely death of scholar and discussion leader Mike Orzechowski has dis-

rupted our Studying Humanism schedule. So January 30 attendees (Topic: *Humanists and Trump*) will plan the next few months.

Topics/readings will be posted on the website (shsny.org), and on our Facebook and Meetup sites (<< see info left column).

the hacks themselves (and Comey's shameless partisanship) were having on the election for the other side. And so Trump becomes president, and we are stuck with all the damage that he and his fellow Republicans will no doubt do. But President Obama will still have his moral stature intact, so it's supposed to be okay. But it isn't.

Much of our government's functioning used to depend on following norms of behavior that are not actually laws. But Republicans have stopped following these norms, and so, of course, government no longer works. Last year my wife asked me if Republicans really could just refuse to consider Obama's nominee to the Supreme Court (I'm a lawyer). My reply was that in the past no one would consider doing such a thing, but that there's nothing in the Constitution that prevents it. It's just something that wasn't done, except that now they've done it, it worked, and they've suffered zero consequences for their perfidy.

To sum up: It is time to fight back with every means at our disposal. "When they go low, we go high" my ass! "Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right" is sounding better and better by the day.

Herman Schmidt

What we must do is fight the lies and phoniness in every way we can – in other words, "speak truth to power".

But how do you speak truth to stupidity?

Brian Lemaire

"Are nations to work without respite to satisfy the vanity, the luxury, the greed of a pack of useless and corrupt bloodsuckers?"

– Baron D'Holbach, quoted in *The Age of Voltaire*

Since freedom of the press may come under attack, we must support the press and press watchdogs. I suggest paying the monthly firewall fee to a few honest brokers of information, *The New York Times* for one. In the past I have donated money to a media watchdog group, Media Matters. Their Twitter feed is @MMFA – short for Media Matters for America.

Since a government of the people, by the people, and for the people must be responsive to the will of the people, I have in the past supported, and attended meetings of, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to getting money out of politics. The organization is called Represent.US.

Giddian Beer

The political deterioration of George W. Bush did not begin till after his Iraq disaster, and was not complete till after hurricane Katrina. I think Trump's deterioration will begin rather soon after his inauguration, unfortunately *after* he has done a lot of damage.

Democrats in the Senate and House have some power to deter Trump; we should support them as much as possible. Non-Republican political figures – governors, mayors, etc. – also need our support.

Other than that, we – humanists, liberals, reasonable conservatives and all worried people – have *only* our voices: phone calls, letters and emails to elected officials. These will be ineffective unless supported by Republicans, so we should identify ourselves as concerned citizens; "liberal" and "progressive" are dirty words for them.

With one exception, we should support every item of Bernie Sanders's platform without identifying them as his (certainly he deserves the credit, but we're cajoling Republicans). The exception is international trade agreements like NAFTA and TPP. These are important for political as well as economic reasons. And without such agreements, we will have trade wars and economic instability, not more jobs.

Larry Shaw

So, what kind of administration will Donald Trump have? Political forecasting is a most unscientific activity. That said, from a liberal's perspective there is optimism based on Trump's history of being a political moderate, even a liberal, and with a Republican dominated Congress, Trump, unlike Obama, could get support for massive infrastructure repair, and even a single payer healthcare system. On the other hand, unlike Obama, Trump is narcissistic and thin skinned with little tolerance for criticism, qualities that could bring on dangerous, irrational temper tantrums. More unsettling is Trump's dishonesty. While all successful politicians distort truth, he is a master of mendacity, which could prove disastrous because liars often believe their own, or other people's lies, leading to dangerous policies.

What then should humanists do in the age of Donald Trump? If we were religious that would be easy: Pray! This not being the case, we must get politically involved. See what the Democratic Party is doing, and support it. Write letters to political officials. Join organized protests.

John Rafferty

On the morning after the election film-maker/documentarian Michael Moore posted a to-do list for progressives that we reproduced in these pages ("A Morning (and Month)-After To-Do List") in December. Since Mr. Moore was one of the very few public figures to predict early and forcefully that Donald Trump would win the Republican nomination, then that he would win the election, his opinions are worth noting. And the first point on his to-do list is:

1. Take over the Democratic Party and return it to the people.

Yes! For the first half of my long life, the Democratic Party (at least outside the Jim Crow South) was the party of the working class and of the upwardly-striving middle class, of auto workers and teachers, of waitresses and academics, of veterans on the G.I. Bill becoming the first-ever in their families to go to college and of union members using their credit unions for the mortgages on their first-ever homes.

But the Republican Party went to work after its Goldwater disaster in 1964, rebuilding from the ground up. How? By fighting for and winning every lowly school-board and planning-commission election ... leveraging those powers to elect selectmen and councilmen, then state assemblymen and senators ... then using the legislatures to rig election laws in favor of Republican governors-to-be and to gerrymander Congressional district lines to guarantee majorities regardless of the popular vote. And always, always, *always* toeing the party line and repeating the party's mantras: "Liberals are atheist baby killers who want to take away your guns, turn your kids gay and turn America into a socialist hell like Sweden."

And while the most radically-right Republicans worked, Democrats simply watched - at least when not fighting internally over identity politics, of worrying not about winning a majority on a board or a commission, but about whether the commission had the right racial, ethnic, gender, and/or sexual-identity "balance".

But in spite of all of the above, we *are* the majority. Half a million more Americans voted for Al Gore in 2000 than for George W. Bush. And Hilary Clinton, for all her "unpopularity", won nearly three million more votes than the illegitimate clown who is now befouling the office of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, both Roosevelts and - *yes!* - Barack Obama.

Michael Moore is right:

We live in a country where a majority of its citizens have said they believe there is climate change, they believe women should be paid the same as men, they want a debt-free college education, they don't want us invading countries, they want a raise in the minimum wage, and they want a single-payer true universal healthcare system. None of that has changed. We live in a country where the majority agree with the "liberal" position. We just lack the liberal leadership to make that happen.

We can make it happen - Yes, we can. We have to go to work, from the ground up, just as the Republicans did half a century ago. That means joining and using the existing organization and structure of the Democratic Party. We can work and organize within the party to move it back leftward, back to being the party of the people.

Yes, we (most of us) live in a progressively-oriented city, and our reps (Schumer, Gillibrand, and my own Congresswoman, Carolyn Maloney) can be counted on to vote and work for liberal causes, but there is still work to be done.

I want to help, if I can, defeat some anti-science, anti-reason troglodytes we have in our State Assembly and Senate and even in our Congressional delegation. I want to help, if I can, to push Andrew Cuomo even further leftward than his evolving programs seem to be heading (Yes, return to tuition-free SUNY colleges!). I want to help, if I can, push our City Council further on increasing the minimum wage, on supporting public education over for-profit charter schools, and on making Manhattan and the entire city more

and more eco-friendly.

I want to help make New York City and State even more liberal, even more humanist.

That's why I will join the Upper East Side's Lexington Democratic Club and do what volunteer work I can.

I urge you, in your neighborhood, to do likewise.

Cy Adler

What we can do about the Trump/Republican ascendancy? *Join the Republican Party!*

The Republican Party has been swept into near monopolistic power by Trump's showmanship and empty promises. Republicans now control Congress, control over 60 percent of state legislatures and governorships, can name judges for the Supreme and many other courts, and will gerrymander elections for 40 years to come.

The discredited national Democratic Party in Washington appears to be a money-raising hulk. Billionaires throw millions of dollars to Hillary for a few words, while working Democrats hold local power in few cities and states.

The majority of Americans are anti-Trump. What if we joined the party of Abe Lincoln and democratized it? What if coal miners in West Virginia, and disillusioned unemployed workers, and the followers of Bernie Sanders, and progressive Democrats work within the now-dominant party to thwart the oligarchic, convulsive and violent tendencies of Trump?

Maybe we can do it before it's not too late.

Barack Obama

All of us, regardless of party, should be throwing ourselves into the task of rebuilding our democratic institutions. ...

It falls to each of us to embrace the joyous task we have been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours because, for all our outward differences, we in fact all share the same proud type, the most important office in a democracy, citizen.

Citizen. That's what our democracy demands. It needs you. Not just when there's an election, not just when your own narrow interest is at stake, but over the full span of a lifetime. If you're tired of arguing with strangers on the Internet, try talking with one of them in real life.

If something needs fixing, then lace up your shoes and do some organizing.

If you're disappointed by your elected officials, grab a clip board, get some signatures, and run for office yourself.

Show up, dive in, stay at it. Sometimes you'll win, sometimes you'll lose. Presuming a reservoir in goodness, that can be a risk. And there will be times when the process will disappoint you. But for those of us fortunate enough to have been part of this one and to see it up close, let me tell you, it can energize and inspire. And more often than not, your faith in America and in Americans will be confirmed. Mine sure has been.

Farewell Address to the Nation, - January 10, 2017

WE NOW RETURN YOU TO OUR REGULARLY-SCHEDULED PROGRAMMING ...

THE VIEW FROM THE HEART OF TRUMLAND J.D. Vance

Editor's Note: To gain even some small understanding of the class divide in our nation that has produced Donald Trump's America, I cannot recommend too highly Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis. Author J.D. Vance, now a Yale-educated lawyer, grew up dirt poor in the 1990s in the Appalachia of the Scots-Irish who settled the hills of Kentucky 300 years ago.

That region is now a vast "hollowed-out" Rust Belt from western Ohio to northern Georgia and Alabama. Even more than by geography, it is defined by a culture of lost hope: of joblessness, divorce, drug addiction and early death. "Poverty is the family tradition," Vance writes in his Introduction. His people are on the wrong side of a class divide exemplified by hopelessness and poverty in the heartland of the richest society in human history.

As to his excoriation in the following excerpt of the welfare system that helps perpetuate that divide, please don't read it as racist. "Readers of this book," Vance argues, "will realize quickly that there is little relationship between that specter [of black "welfare queens"] and my argument:

I have known many welfare queens; some were my neighbors, and all were white." – JR

Working as a cashier [at Dilman's, a small grocery chain in Ohio] turned me into an amateur sociologist. ... Some folks purchased a lot of canned and frozen food, while others consistently arrived at the checkout counter with carts piled high with fresh produce. The ... more they purchased precooked or frozen food, the more likely they were to be poor. And I knew they were poor because of the clothes they wore or because they purchased their food with food stamps. After a few months, I came home and asked Mamaw ["Grandma"] why only poor people bought baby formula. "Don't rich people have babies, too?" Mamaw had no answers, and it would be many years before I learned that rich folks are considerably more likely to breast-feed their children.

As my job taught me a little more about America's class divide, it also imbued me with a bit of resentment, directed toward both the wealthy and my own kind. The owners of Dilman's were old-fashioned, so they allowed people with good credit to run grocery tabs, some of which surpassed a thousand dollars. I knew that if any of my relatives walked in and ran up a bill of over a thousand dollars, they'd be asked to pay immediately. I hated the feeling that my boss counted my people as less trustworthy than those who took their groceries home in a Cadillac. But I got over it: One day, I told myself, I'll have my own damned tab.

I also learned how people gamed the welfare system. They'd buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They'd ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer,

wine, and cigarettes with cash. They'd regularly go through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones. I could never understand why are our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largesse enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.

Mamaw listened intently to my experiences at Dillmans. We began to view much of our fellow working class with mistrust. Most of us were struggling to get by, but we made do, worked hard, and hoped for a better life. But a large minority was content to live off the dole. Every two weeks, I'd get a small paycheck and notice the line where federal and state income taxes were deducted from my wages. At least as often, our drug-addict neighbor would buy T-bone steaks, which I was too poor to buy for myself but was forced by Uncle Sam to buy for someone else. This was my mind-set when I was seventeen, and though I am far less angry today than I was then, it was my first indication that the policy of Mamaw's "party of the working man" – the Democrats – weren't all they were cracked up to be.

Political scientists have spent millions of words trying to explain how Appalachia and the South went from staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation. Some blame race relations and the Democratic Party's embrace of the civil rights movement. Others cite religious faith and the hold that social conservatism has on evangelicals in that region. A big part of the explanation lies in the fact that many in the white working-class saw precisely what I did working at Dilman's. As far back as the 1970s, the white working class began to turn to Richard Nixon because of a perception that, as one man put it, government was "payin' people who are on welfare today doin' nothin'! They're laughin' at our society! And we're all hard-workin' people and we are gettin' laughed at for workin' every day!"

Postscript: This, post-election, from the loathsome Steve Bannon, late of alt.right Breitbart news and now Donald Trump's closest White House advisor:

"The globalists gutted the American working class and created a middle class in Asia. The issue now is about Americans looking to not get fucked over. If we deliver we'll get 60 percent of the white vote, and 40 percent of the black and Hispanic vote and we'll govern for 50 years. That's what the Democrats missed, they were talking to these people with companies with a \$9 billion market cap employing nine people. It's not reality. They lost sight of what the world is about."

JUST SAYIN'

(Transcribed from "The Daily Show", 1/11/2017)

(Video clip)

DONALD TRUMP: Is that Obama's real birth certificate? I don't know. No one knows. But a lot of people are talking.

(Live)

TREVOR NOAH: Did Donald Trump pay Russian prostitutes to pee on him? I don't know. No one knows. But a lot of people are talking.

THE MECHANICAL MORALS OF OUR FUTURE?

Nathan Heller

(From "Not Our Kind: What moral claims do animals – and robots – have on us?" in *The New Yorker*, 11/18/2016)

Will robots ever be due rights? John Markoff, a *Times* technology reporter, raises this question in *Machines of Loving Grace*. The matter is charged, in part because robots' minds, unlike animals', are made in the human image; they have a potential to challenge and to beat us at our game. Markoff elaborates a common fear that robots will smother the middle class: "Technology will not be a fountain of economic growth, but will instead pose a risk to all routinized and skill-based jobs that require the ability to perform diverse kinds of 'cognitive' labor." Don't just worry about the robots obviating your job on the assembly line, in other words; worry about them surpassing your expertise at the examination table or on the brokerage floor. No wall will guard U.S. jobs from the big encroachment of the coming years. Robots are the fruit of American ingen-uity, and they are at large, learning everything we know.

The future urges us to get our moral goals in order now. A robot insurgency is unlikely to take place as a battle of true-hearted humans against hordes of evil machines. It will probably happen in a manner already begun: by a symbiosis with cheap, empowering intelligences that we welcome into daily life. Phones today augment our memories; integrated chatbots spare us customer-service on-hold music; apps let us chase Pokémon across the earth. Cyborg experience is here, and it hurts us not by being cruel but by making us take notes of limits in ourselves.

The classic problem in the programming of self-driving cars concerns accident avoidance. What should a vehicle do if it must choose between swerving into a crowd of ten people or slamming into a wall, killing its owner? The quandary is not just ethical but commercial (would you buy a car programmed to kill you under certain circumstances?), and it holds a mirror to the harsh decisions we, as humans, make but like to overlook. The horrifying edge of A.I. is not really HAL9000, the rogue machine that doesn't wish to be turned off. It is the ethically calculating car, the military drone: robots that do precisely what we want and mechanize our moral behavior as a result.

"CAN'T WE JUST ALL GET ALONG?" UNFORTUNATELY, YES

John C Adams

North Yorkshire (UK) Humanists

So, this week in England is "Inter-Faith Week". I don't care much for "inter-faith" events – they are usually desperately anodyne and bland affairs where everyone sits around and smiles and says how much they respect each other's views. Moreover, if you are part of a panel of speakers it appears as if you are just one of a number of choices. There is the cafeteria: Jew, Muslim, Catholic, etc., and you are "another" of the faith positions, in effect, on equal footing with the others.

Now that is not how I see it at all. Rather there are these people all with their bizarre views, who believe in the supernatural and, at the end of the line, the voice of sanity and wisdom ... me!

Nevertheless, when the invitation to be part of a panel at York Minster came, as part of the City of York Inter-Faith Week, I duly toddled along.

It was exactly as predicted. There were a lot of very polite people standing around sipping wine and saying how important these events were and how pleased they were that I had accepted the invitation. We then sat on the stage in our line ... a Jew, a Catholic, a Muslim, an Anglican (The Chancellor of York Minster) ... and me. We all gave a little introduction about our position on the topic: "Disagreeing well – does religious belief help or hinder?" Then there were questions from the audience.

Up to this point it had all been going very well. We (or rather they) were all smiling and saying how good it was to be here. Indeed, we (or rather they) could scarcely finish a sentence without a beaming smile. We (or rather they) also all agreed that there were important differences between the faiths but there was much that they held in common and that we should all respect each other's views ... it was all very English.

But I'm afraid after an hour of this I really had had enough. Were I a better man I'm sure I would have added to the schmaltz and left it at that ... but I'm not. When the third (or fourth) person mentioned "respect" for others I felt that if I was to have any credibility as a Humanist I would have to point out one or two occasions when there had been little respect shown – and mass slaughter had ensued. In truth I felt some of the audience were pleased that the layer of mutual self-congratulation had been lifted and something of substance was being said.

However, when the Chancellor raised the subject of the Holocaust carried out in the "godless 20th century" my response: That Hitler was a Catholic, that the vast majority of the German troops were Catholic, that they had "*Gott mit uns*" tooled on their belts, that one of Hitler's first acts as Chancellor was to enter into a concordat with Pope Pious XII, that Mussolini was also a Catholic, as was Franco ... and that Hirohito was a god (thus cutting out the middle man).

Well, the smiles froze somewhat and the Jew and the Catholic (who were sitting side-by-side) looked less chummy than before. This was hardly a triumph and I do, of course, believe that we all need to get on together (what alternative is there) but honesty might be a good place to start rather than this collective amnesia and suggesting that people confront their own canonical works as the inevitable source of conflict doesn't seem to me to be too unreasonable.

For some reason the most discomfort among my fellow panelists came when I pointed out that I was in a unique position on the panel in that I was the only one who didn't believe in angels.

Still, sadly, they've asked me back.

WARREN ALLEN SMITH
1921 – 2017

Warren Allen Smith, one of the original founders of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, died on January 8, “of happiness”, according to the obituary/ death notice he prepared for himself.

On February 10, 1988, fourteen persons, solicited from the mailing list of *Free Inquiry* magazine, met at Variety Recording Studios, Room 551, 130 West 42nd Street, owned by Warren, for the first meeting of SHNY. When organizational responsibilities were divided up, Warren took charge of the mailing list, from which position, later that year, he produced the Society’s first typewritten, folded single-sheet newsletter. In spite of its crude, cut-and-paste look and less-than-creative first title, Editor Warren gave “Newsletter” two attributes that remain to this day: an editorial stance as a platform for humanist ideas and controversies, both original and (ahem) borrowed, and, in 1989, the name PIQUE.

Nothing—not even humanist solidarity—lasts forever, and SHSNY’s original growth and success led to divisions and even personal rancor over the directions the Society should take (Confront the 1980s AIDS epidemic with Act-Up-type or “checkbook” activism? What is a “humanist” issue, what isn’t?), and Warren quit SHSNY in 1996.



(Although he never “officially” returned to SHSNY, Warren rejoined surreptitiously in 2005 for several years under the name “Allen Windsor”; his address gave him away. – JR)

A teacher, editor, businessman, and author, Warren Allen Smith was born on October 29, 1921, in Minburn, Iowa, the son of a South Dakota homesteader’s daughter and a grain dealer who was a scout for the Chicago Cubs’ farm team in Portland, Oregon. He served in the U.S. Army in World War II, landing as an Acting First Sergeant on Omaha Beach, and in 1945 became Chief Clerk of the Adjunct General’s Office, Supreme Headquarters (SHAEF), in the Little Red Schoolhouse, Reims, France.

In 1948 Warren received his B.A. from the University of Northern Iowa and in 1949, with Lionel Trilling as his advisor, received his M.A. from Columbia University. He taught English at the Bentley School in Manhattan, the New Canaan High School, and at Teachers College, Columbia University. In the 1950s he was a Book Review Editor of *The Humanist*; wrote reviews for the *Library Journal* and, under the name Lvcretivs, founded the Humanist Book Club.

Eight of Warren’s works were published after he reached the age of 80, most notably *Who’s Who in Hell*, a 1264-page biographical listing of over ten thousand philosophic non-believers, and *Celebrities in Hell*.

New Year Greetings
(only a month late)
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