

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May 19, 2020

Still in isolation, but we rouse ourselves from our collective navel-gazing to consider What Comes After This? A new New Deal? National service? A new religion whose herald is a Capital Letter and whose deity is The Chosen You Know Who? (Hint: He's orange.) Herein, too, we examine the varieties of American stupidity, from anti-vaxxing to the valuation of hamburgers. Oh, and check out the new (5:00 pm) time for our Sunday Happy Hour (page 5). But first, meet the enemies. — JR

WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

John M. Barry

(From *The Great Influenza*, excerpted on *delanceyplace.com*, 5/13/2020)

Viruses are themselves an enigma that exist on the edges of life. They are not simply small bacteria. Bacteria consist of only one cell, but they are fully alive. Each has a metabolism, requires food, produces waste, and reproduces by division.

Viruses do not eat or burn oxygen for energy. They do not engage in any process that could be considered metabolic. They do not produce waste. They do not have sex. They make no side products, by accident or design. They do not even reproduce independently. They are less than a living organism but more than a collection of chemicals.

Several theories of their origin exist, and these theories are not mutually exclusive. Evidence exists to support all of them, and different viruses may have developed in different ways. A minority view suggests that viruses originated independently as the most primitive molecules capable of replicating themselves. If this is so, more advanced life forms could have evolved from them.

More virologists think the opposite: that viruses began as more complex living cells and evolved — or, more accurately, devolved — into simpler organisms. ... A third theory argues that viruses were once part of a cell, an organelle, but broke away and began to evolve independently.

Whatever the origin, a virus has only one function: to replicate itself. But unlike other life forms (if a virus is considered a life form), a virus does not even do that itself. It invades cells that have energy and then, like some alien puppet master, it subverts them, takes them over, forces them to make thousands of new viruses. ...

When a virus successfully invades a cell, it inserts

its own genes into the cell's genome, and the viral genes seize control from the cell's own genes. The cell's internal machinery then begins producing what the viral genes demand instead of what the cell needs for itself. So the cell turns out hundreds of thousands of viral proteins, which bind together with copies of the viral genome to form new viruses. Then the new viruses escape. In this process the host cell almost always dies, usually when the new viral particles burst through the cell surface to invade other cells.

But if viruses perform only one task, they are not simple. Nor are they primitive. Highly evolved, elegant in their focus, more efficient at what they do than any fully living being, they have become nearly perfect infectious organisms. And the influenza virus is among the most perfect of these perfect organisms.

AND WHO WE'RE UP AGAINST

John Rafferty

They will definitely *not* take a vaccine when one is offered. That's a view shared by [19 percent] nearly one in five Americans, according to a recent Yahoo News/YouGov poll, which found that an additional 26 percent *weren't sure* if they'd take it. ... Often, their reasons aren't medical: they are religious and political.

[A woman interviewed] believes that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the infectious disease expert on the administration's coronavirus task force, is part of the "deep state". She believes his and Bill Gates' interest in developing a coronavirus vaccine is "driven by money" as well as "a socialist agenda" designed to "get control of us". Based on research she's done online, she thinks it's likely that the vaccine will include some sort of human tracking device.

"It will keep track of us," she said. "Kind of like in the end days, as the Bible says, you'll be numbered."

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“RELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS” DON’T NECESSARILY CONNECT WITH REALITY

John Rafferty

The Morning Heresy, the excellent blog from CFI (*everyone ought to subscribe; go to centerforinquiry.org – it’s free*) on May 13 linked to one Julia Duin at GetReligion, summarizing that she says there needs to be more investigation into why the fervently religious are the ones latching onto coronavirus conspiracy theories:

“I know that reporters have a lot on their plate these days reporting about the coronavirus crisis.

“Nevertheless, please start tracking those who are spreading conspiracy theories, why they feel so moved to do so and why so many of them have religious connections of one sort or another. It’s part of this global story.”

Um, forgive me, Ms. Duin, but that is exactly backwards. People with “religious connections” believe wacko *new* conspiracy theories for the same reasons – whatever the hell those are – that they believe wacko *old* religious myths.

If you can believe that a talking snake convinced the first-ever woman to eat an apple ... or that a blue-skinned “god” turned himself into a turtle that supports the whole cosmos on its back ... or that an itinerant Hebrew carpenter/preacher rose from the dead 2,000 years ago ... or that a pedophile Arab merchant-turned mystic rose to heaven on a flying horse ... or that an “angel” named Moroni buried golden tablets on which were inscriptions in “Reformed Egyptian” that only one man could read, and only through his hat ... you can believe *anything*.

THE STUPIDING OF AMERICA

David Rafferty

(Excerpted from “The Great Stupiding of the United States”, Greenwich (CT) Time, 5/10/2020)

[Ed: This is the opening paragraph of an Op-Ed condemning suggested cuts to the Greenwich schools budget. – JR]

Think we can educate our children with less rather than more? Several years ago the A&W restaurant chain introduced what many people in test markets believed to be a superior tasting 1/3-lb burger to compete with the McDonald’s Quarter Pounder. They rolled it out nationwide with great fanfare and advertising, and yet it flopped. Mystified as to what had gone wrong, focus groups were assembled and lo, it was revealed that across all demographic and regional lines, nearly everyone misunderstood the value of 1/3 and thought they were being overcharged. They simply didn’t connect that 1/3 was greater than 1/4. Fast forward to today, and to paraphrase a current internet meme ...

If you think things are bad now, just wait 20 years when this country is going to be run by the children of quarantine who’ve been homeschooled by day-drinking alcoholics.

True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country.

– Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Jonathan Engel

What comes next for the U.S.A.? Right now we’re all wondering what our communities will look like post-pandemic. Will our old favorite shops and restaurants still be there? How many familiar faces will be missing? Will we ever feel “normal” again, and if so, how long will it take? Those are immediate questions, but there are also long-term issues that face us as a country and as a society.

The pandemic has laid bare some of our greatest challenges. For example, this crisis has demonstrated in sharp relief that our healthcare system doesn’t work. Too many people lack health insurance during the best of times. But as our insurance system is (mostly) employment-based, it completely falls apart during the worst of times. This is the second time in less than fifteen years that we’ve had a mass unemployment event. That people should lose access to healthcare at the same time they lose their jobs is unconscionable and unsustainable. Will we have the strength and compassion to reform this system so that access to healthcare is a given for all Americans?

Some of the heroic figures that have sustained us during this crisis have been people at the lower end of the pay-scale. Supermarket and fast-food workers, custodians in hospitals, orderlies in nursing homes, etc.. Shouldn’t these people make a living wage, get paid sick leave, have access to healthcare and all the other perks of working that the middle class and the upper-middle class take for granted? Do we have the will to make it so?

What about our democracy? Will we defend it, or will we let it die of self-interest and neglect? The recent election in Wisconsin has illuminated the dark path we are on that takes us away from representative government. For years Republicans, seeing that the country’s demographics are trending away from them, have engaged in all manner of voter suppression. They’ve made it harder to vote, especially for urban dwellers, racial minorities, and young people, who all tend to vote for Democrats. But the Wisconsin election showed just how far these bastards are willing to go. Instead of easing the mail-in voting process in order to facilitate maximal democratic participation during the pandemic, Republicans in the state legislature and on the Wisconsin Supreme Court forced people who wanted to vote to risk their lives standing on line at polling places. Can we put an end to all of this anti-democratic, anti-American voter suppressing mendacity? Will we?

The foundational issues surrounding a post-pandemic America are not limited to public policy. Magical thinking has hamstrung our ability to manage the pandemic crisis, just as it has clouded our thinking on so many other issues. Fanatical religionists think that they can ignore medical advice because their gods will protect them from harm. During a highly contagious pandemic their ignorance represents a profound danger to us all. And then, of course, we’re treated to the president’s own special brand of magical thinking. “I believe the virus will miraculously disappear,”

he tells us. Based on what? Trump “believes” this and Trump “thinks” that, all based on his unwavering belief in his own greatness, evidence of which is in short supply, to say the least. Will reason ultimately prevail, or will we continue to allow magical thinking to lead us down the rabbit hole?

So America, who are we, and most importantly, who do we want to be? Will we live up to our ideals of democracy, fairness and equality? Or will we live down to our base greed and prejudice? This is truly the test of our generation.

WILL THERE BE A NEW NEW DEAL?

Michelle Goldberg

(Excerpted from “The New Great Depression Is Coming. Will There Be a New New Deal?” Op-Ed in The New York Times, 5/2/2020)

Several candidates campaigned for the Democratic presidential nomination on what Senator Elizabeth Warren called “big structural change”, and lost. Yet in a hideous historical irony, the end of the primaries has coincided with a calamity that necessitates an enormous federal response.

Covid-19 has killed more Americans than died in the Vietnam War and led to unemployment numbers that are likely worse than those during the Great Depression. Implicit in Joe Biden’s campaign was a promise of a return to normalcy. That may have always been illusory, but now it’s been revealed as an impossibility.

As we approach this year’s election, we’re looking at an abyss. The question is what will fill it. Societal disaster can have horrific political consequences: Around the world, despots are using the pandemic as an excuse to grab ever more power. But the need to rebuild the country comes with opportunities.

At this point, even many Republicans acknowledge that the era of small government is over. (“Big-Government Conservatives Mount Takeover of G.O.P.,” said a recent Politico headline.) In such an environment, ambitious progressive ideas that once seemed implausible, at least in the short term, start to become more imaginable.

“I do think there’s an F.D.R. moment,” said Senator Edward Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts and co-author of the Green New Deal resolution, which calls for a huge new public works program to build environmentally sustainable infrastructure. “Like 1933 — which would be 2021 — we can see that it is now time to discuss universal child care, universal sick leave and a guaranteed income for everyone in our society.”

Unsurprisingly, mass unemployment — a particular catastrophe in a system in which most people’s health insurance is tied to their jobs — seems to have made Americans more supportive of New Deal-like policies. Figures from the left-leaning polling firm Data for Progress show that support for a Green New Deal has risen from 48 percent last May to 59 percent this spring. Backing for “Medicare for all” went from 47 percent in November to 53 percent in March, when layoffs were just starting. ...

But cultural shifts pave the way for political reform.

“When little children are making signs that say, ‘Thank You,’ and taping them up in the window for the mail carriers and UPS delivery folks, the world has changed,” Elizabeth Warren told me. (Disclosure: my husband consulted on Warren’s presidential campaign.)

Warren and Rep. Ro Khanna, D-CA, recently released a proposal for what they’re calling an “Essential Workers Bill of Rights”, which folds many longtime progressive labor priorities into a plan to address our current emergency. The proposal includes a mandate for free adequate personal protective equipment, hazard pay, universal paid sick leave and paid family leave, a crackdown on employers that misclassify full-time employees as independent contractors, and protections for union organizing.

That last part is important, because Warren believes we’re on the cusp of a new wave of labor mobilization. There have already been strikes, walkouts and other demonstrations across the country by workers forced to expose themselves to potential infection, including bus drivers, Amazon warehouse workers and employees at fast-food restaurants. Nurses have taken to the streets. “Whether it is slog-it-out bargaining over safety measures or bold legislative moves, unions see their coronavirus activism as the beginning of a new era for the labor movement,” said a *Los Angeles Times* article.

If so, it will echo what happened during the Great Depression. “This is what shocked everyone,” Warren said. “All of the economists thought the Great Depression in the 1930s would be the end of unions because so many people were unemployed and there was such a large labor supply, and unionization was going down during the 1920s. But that’s not what happened. In a time of great stress, more workers decided their only chance of survival was to come together and exercise their power through a union.”

Mass unemployment also makes some version of a Green New Deal seem like more of a near-term possibility, at least if Biden wins the presidency. During the primaries, Biden’s environmental proposals were generally more modest than his rivals’, but with the pandemic ravaging the economy he’s called for a trillion-dollar infrastructure program focused on green jobs. That’s a lot less than what Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, who co-sponsored the Green New Deal in the House, has demanded — but it’s more than the entire cost of the stimulus bill Barack Obama signed at the height of the Great Recession. ...

Now, with so many of our assumptions about the way our country works collapsing, it’s progressives stepping forward with answers they’ve been refining for years.

“We are going to be faced with a national rebuilding project at a scale that has never existed in our lifetimes,” said [former presidential hopeful Andrew] Yang. The biggest battle in politics now is over who will control that project, and whom it will prioritize.

Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be tough. — Franklin D. Roosevelt

WE NEED NATIONAL SERVICE. NOW.

David Brooks

(Excerpted from NYTimes Op-Ed, 5/8/2020)

There is now a vast army of young people ready and yearning to serve their country. There are college graduates emerging into a workplace that has few jobs for them. There are more high school graduates who suddenly can't afford college. There are college students who don't want to return to a college experience. This is a passionate, idealistic generation that sees the emergency, wants to serve those around them and groans to live up to this moment.

Suddenly there is a wealth of work for them to do: contact tracing, sanitizing public places, bringing food to the hungry, supporting the elderly, taking temperatures at public gathering spots, supporting local government agencies, tutoring elementary school students so they can make up for lost time. ...

[Editor: Brooks reviews national-service ideas at too-great length for this newsletter. To read the entire column Google "David Brooks + National Service". – JR]

There's no reason this shouldn't happen. Eighty-eight percent of Democrats and 74 percent of Republicans support voluntary national service. According to a Columbia University study, every dollar invested in national service produces about \$4 in benefits. The number of young people who want to take part in national service always vastly exceeds the number of slots.

And as we all know, the benefits of the program accrue not only to those being served but also to those doing the serving. What would it mean to the future social cohesion of this country if a large part of the rising generation had a common experience of shared sacrifice? What would it mean to our future politics if young people from Berkeley spent a year working side by side with young people from Boise, Birmingham and Baton Rouge?

On the other hand, has any nation prospered that did not encourage in each new generation the habits of work, the taste for adventure, a sense of duty and a call to be of use to neighbors and the world?

We Americans suck at regimentation and blindly following orders from the top down. But we're pretty good at local initiative, youthful dynamism and decentralized civic action. We need a Covid response that fits the kind of people we are. National service is an essential piece of that response.

As my mentor William F. Buckley once put it, "Materialistic democracy beckons every man to make himself a king; republican citizenship incites every man to be a knight." We have a generation of knights in waiting.

True patriotism springs from a belief in the dignity of the individual, freedom and equality not only for Americans but for all people on earth, universal brotherhood and good will, and a constant and earnest striving toward the principles and ideals on which this country was founded.

– Eleanor Roosevelt

A PRO-TRUMP CONSPIRACY IS BECOMING A RELIGION, AND Q IS ITS PROPHET

Caroline Mimbs Nyce

(Excerpted from "The Prophecies of Q" on The Atlantic Daily online newsletter, 5/14/2020)

To believe in QAnon is to believe, among other things, that a cabal of global elites are secretly harming children (think: 2016's Pizzagate), that their behavior is propped up by members of the deep state, and that President Donald Trump is working to bring their crimes to an end. Adherents learned all this from Q, an anonymous figure who they believe has high-level military ties, who periodically leaves clues on the internet. He is their prophet.

QAnon is a pro-Trump conspiracy theory, yes, but it's also more important than you might think. ...

Here are three ways to understand QAnon:

1. *It's a real-time participatory conspiracy theory.*

The eventual destruction of the global cabal is imminent, Q prophesies, but can be accomplished only with the support of patriots who search for meaning in Q's clues. ... Surely there are people who know that Q is a fantasy but participate because there's an element of QAnon that converges with a live-action role-playing game.

2. *It's a mass rejection of reason and Enlightenment values.*

In the face of inconvenient facts, it has the ambiguity and adaptability to sustain a movement of this kind over time. For QAnon, every contradiction can be explained away; no form of argument can prevail against it.

3. *It's not going anywhere. In QAnon, we are witnessing the birth of a new religion.*

Among the people of QAnon, faith remains absolute. True believers describe a feeling of rebirth, an irreversible arousal to existential knowledge. They are certain that a Great Awakening is coming. They'll wait as long as they must for deliverance.

"I AM THE CHOSEN ONE"

(Excerpted from Thefreethinker on patheos.com, 5/13/2020)

Last year a poll showed that 29.6 percent of white Protestants in America believed that Trump was appointed by God. That figure, according to a fresh poll published by Religion in Politics, has risen to 49 percent. ...

Last August, during a press conference Trump pointed skyward and said, "I am the chosen one."

And on the same day, he retweeted a comment by conservative radio host Wayne Allyn Root, comparing him to the "King of Israel" and "the Second Coming".

READERS RESPOND

Having been a minister's wife in a small town in South Dakota, I particularly enjoyed "The Squirrel Problem" (May 5 PIQUE), as the town's citizens had firm views of the mores of the various denominations. Have copied it to some friends who need a laugh during this lockdown.

Hope y'all are doing OK during it. So far I am getting through it. – Nan Owens, Humanists of Florida

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY – AUGUST 2020

FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club meets online via Zoom, and will continue so for the duration of our enforced isolation.

To be included and notified of each meeting's link and password, email your address to Sharon Krutzel at sharonkrutzel@rcn.com

TUES, JUNE 9, 7:00 pm **LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE** Celeste Ng

A #1 *NYTimes* bestseller – and named a “best book of the year” by NPR, *Esquire*, Amazon, *The Washington Post* and on numerous other lists – *Little Fires Everywhere* explores the weight of secrets, the nature of art and identity, and the ferocious pull of motherhood – and the danger of believing that following the rules can avert disaster.

TUES, JULY 14, 7:00 pm **THE SHADOW KING** Maaza Mengiste

Set during Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, *The Shadow King* takes us back to the first real conflict of World War II, casting light on the women soldiers who were left out of the historical record.

TUES, AUGUST 11, 7 pm **DOUBLE WHAMMY** Carl Hiaasen

Just for fun, follow the adventures of a news-photographer-turned-private-eye as he seeks truth, justice, and an affair with his ex-wife. A hilarious caper with unforgettable characters, including the lunatic ex-governor of Florida whose diet is roadkill.

HUMANIST BOOK CLUB ONLINE

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

THURS, JUNE 4, 7:00 pm **MIND FIXERS:** *Psychiatry's Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness* Anne Harrington

A clear-eyed, evenhanded, and yet passionate tour de force, *Mind Fixers* recounts the past and present struggle to make mental illness a biological question.

Mind Fixers makes clear that psychiatry's waxing and waning biological enthusiasms have been shaped not just by developments in the clinic and lab, but also by a surprising range of social factors, including immigration, warfare, grassroots activism, and assumptions about race and gender.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

THURS, JULY 2, 7:00 pm **BELIEVERS** *Faith in Human Nature* Melvin Konner

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

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

THURS, AUGUST 6, 7:00 pm *To Be Announced*

HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

SUN, MAY 24, 5:00 pm
(Yes, that's a new scheduled time!)

Let's get together even when we can't get together – in a virtual Humanist Happy Hour (or longer), via Zoom. Get comfortable at your computer with your beverage of choice, or Cheetos, or cookies, or M&Ms – whatever makes you happy – and join (we have no idea how many) fellow humanists in our Humanist Happy Hour!

Zoom in at ...

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/7996660379?pwd=SC9pb2lhdTQ4VWJzZzhZOVlzbFYwZz09>

Meeting ID: 799 6666 0379

Password: 2uwzxW

AHA SPEAKER SERIES ONLINE

WED, MAY 20, 6:30-8:00 pm
HUMANISTS IN THE HOOD
Unapologetically Black, Feminist, and Heretical
Dr. Sikivu Hutchinson

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

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

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