

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May 5, 2020

May! ... though maybe not so merry. Again we offer abbreviated humanist news and views for the still locked-down. We condemn New York Democrats, Williamsburg idiots, and “success story” liars. We worry about where we go next, offer poetry old and new, plus advice on disinfecting your TV and controlling your squirrels, and from a cult leader on curing covid-19. But first, humanist readers all, we consider a question of plague-related life-and-death ethics, and beg *your* opinion. —JR

PEW RESEARCH SAYS WE’RE TOUGH-GUY “UTILITARIANS”. WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Stephanie Kramer

(Excerpted from “Americans are divided by religion on who should get critical care if there is a shortage of ventilators”, at pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/24/)

Hospitals have had to make difficult decisions as the covid-19 pandemic unfolds. In the U.S. and elsewhere, questions at the intersection of medicine and morality have arisen, such as who should receive critical care if medical resources are in short supply.

Among the dilemmas that came up as the U.S. raced to increase its supply of ventilators was the question of who should be given priority if some hospitals do not have enough ventilators for all patients who need help breathing. Should it be patients who need the ventilators most at the time, even if that means more lives overall are lost? Or patients with the highest chance of recovery, even if that means some people are denied potentially life-saving care based on their age or health status?

Americans are split on this question, and there are stark differences in opinion based on respondents’ religious affiliation and how religious they are.

Most noteworthy, people with no religious affiliation are the only group with a majority (56 percent) saying that ventilators should be saved for those with the highest chance of recovery in the event that there are not enough resources to go around, even if that means some patients don’t receive the same aggressive treatment because they are older, sicker and less likely to survive.* This view aligns with medical guidelines that typically call for a utilitarian approach — one that prioritizes good outcomes for the greatest number.

Only a minority of the religiously unaffiliated overall (though sizable at 41 percent) say ventilators should go to

those who need them most at the moment the decision is being made.

These findings are consistent with research showing that people who are not religious tend to prefer utilitarian solutions in a variety of moral dilemmas. This may in part be due to a lack of shared, formalized moral rules among the nonreligious, who are more likely to rely on personal philosophy and ethical principles when resolving moral quandaries. Religious believers often rely on deeply ingrained moral rules and on guidance from religious leaders and texts. Religious people also may respond negatively to the idea of doctors “playing God”.

Indeed, most of the religiously affiliated groups covered say ventilators in short supply should go to patients who need them most in the moment, which might mean that fewer people survive but no one is denied treatment based on their age or health status. This view is shared by roughly six-in-ten of both evangelicals (60 percent) and Protestants from historically black churches (59 percent). Only one-third of evangelicals believe that priority should be given to those who are most likely to survive with aggressive treatment.

Catholics aren’t as united in their response, but they also are more likely to say that ventilators should be used on people most in need rather than those most likely to recover. Mainline Protestants are roughly evenly divided.

***Note:** The “Unaffiliated” split 56 percent for “most likely to survive” to 41 percent for “most in need”. But self-identified “Atheists” were even tougher, at 59 for “likely” to 39 for “need”, and “Agnostics” toughest of all, at 68 to 30. —JR

Question: What do you think? First, is the Pew research right about us? And if so, are we right? To whom would you assign the ventilators? Tell us at editor@shsny.org.

Special Plea: Let’s hear from the humanist doctors and other medical experts among us especially.

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BERNIE SANDERS IS RIGHT. CANCELLING THE NY PRIMARY IS WRONG.

Henry Olson

(Excerpted from Washingtonpost.com, 4/28/2020)

Hardcore fans of Sen. Bernie Sanders have long thought that the Democratic establishment would do anything to stop him. Monday's foolish decision to cancel the New York Democratic presidential primary will simply fan those flames. ... Sanders immediately protested, calling the decision "an outrage" and "a blow to American democracy". He's right.

States typically do not cancel their primaries after every candidate but one drops out. Democrats held their regularly scheduled primaries in 2000 and 2004 even after opponents of eventual nominees Al Gore and John Kerry left the race. Republicans held their primaries in 2000, 2008, 2012 and 2016 after their eventual nominees were effectively unopposed. New York's decision is unprecedented in modern history.

The transparently flimsy excuse made the decision even more unpalatable. The state board of elections cited the coronavirus pandemic as a reason not to hold an apparently useless election, but the election will still go forward — largely through absentee ballots — because many other races are on the ballot the same day. ...

The decision also violates the Democratic Party's rules for selecting delegates to the national convention. Those rules require each state to submit a plan for the selection of delegates, and only delegates selected via that plan can be validly seated. New York's plan established that delegates would be selected via the primary, with different numbers of delegates allocated according to the vote in each of the state's 27 congressional districts in addition to a certain number awarded via the statewide vote. If there is no primary, there presumably can be no delegates — unless the state awards all the delegates to Joe Biden since he is, by their fiat, the only candidate on the ballot. ...

Sanders explicitly said he wanted to remain on state ballots despite his decision to suspend his campaign so that he could amass delegates dedicated to progressive causes and thereby influence the party's course. ...

The [cancellation] decision could also boost Trump, who has been courting Sanders voters via tweet, saying that the Democratic establishment is again fixing the race to ensure Sanders's defeat. This gives him something concrete to point to. It also insulates Trump from the charge Biden levied against him last week that he intends to postpone the November election. Trump has denied he wants to do that, and now he can say that it's the Democratic establishment that wants to cheat to maintain power. This is an unforced error that gives Trump a new talking point.

Biden should call for the party to undo that error immediately. He says he's running to restore America's soul. Regular, free and democratic elections are at the heart of that soul.

If Biden can't stand up for democracy within his own party, how can Americans trust him to stand up for it at all?

IT'S ABOUT TIME Jonathan Engel

In New York City, ultra-orthodox Jews are a powerful voting bloc. They tend to vote in high numbers, and they tend to vote as a bloc, taking suggestions, if not outright direction, from their religious leaders. As therefore might be expected, the ultra-orthodox are frequently courted for votes from politicians. Mayor Bill De Blasio is no exception.

His administration has bent over backwards to please religious leaders when he clearly shouldn't have. One example is in education. Virtually all ultra-orthodox children are educated in private religious yeshivas, which, like all private schools, are required to teach the basic New York State curriculum in areas such as math, science, history and English. But there have been numerous reports in recent years that in some yeshivas students were getting short-changed in basic studies in favor of a purely religious education. In a shameless bid for votes, De Blasio dragged his feet in investigating and remedying this problem.

But this time it appears that De Blasio has gotten it right. The mayor and Police Commissioner Dermot Shea broke up a gathering of thousands of people who were packed shoulder-to-shoulder for a rabbi's funeral. There has been pushback in the Jewish community, with some saying the city singled out Jews for distancing enforcement. But to their credit, De Blasio and Shea have held firm. De Blasio said "The amount of danger from that gathering is inestimable. People will die because of it." Commissioner Shea added "You are putting my cops at risk and we won't allow it." Good for them. Religious beliefs do not allow anyone to break the law and endanger their fellow citizens.

DOMESTIC (WHITE) TERRORISM

John Rafferty

On April 30 a couple of dozen armed protesters stormed Michigan's state capitol building in an attempt to intimidate lawmakers deliberating extending Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-at-home order.

Some came with swastika signage and Confederate flags, and some carried signs advocating violence, e.g., "Make treason punishable by hanging."

In spite of this outrageous act of right-wing domestic terrorism, not one of the white men — and they were *all* white men — was arrested. One can only wonder what would have happened if armed "protesters" demanding, say, action on the drinking-water crisis in Flint, and suggesting lynching lawmakers, had been black.

TWO QUESTIONS FOR TRUMPSTERS

John Rafferty

If you were offered an "insider opportunity" to invest in a New Donald Trump business venture, would you put up serious money?

If your attractive teenage daughter or granddaughter were invited to a private party where she'd meet Donald Trump and some of his friends, would you allow her to go?

OF CORONAVIRUS AND CHERNOBYL

Michelle Goldberg

(Excerpted from The New York Times Op-Ed, 4/25/2020)

Today our country, with a little more than 4 percent of the world's population, has almost 32 percent of the world's coronavirus cases. Some countries have had more deaths per capita, but America had the opportunity to learn from their example, and squandered it. ...

America was once the technological envy of the world. Now doctors have to warn the public that, contrary to the president's musings in the briefing room, it is neither safe nor effective to inject disinfectant.

"If you look at why America rose so much after 1945, it was because America attracted the best scientists in the world," Klaus Scharioth, Germany's ambassador to America from 2006 to 2011, told me. "America attracted expertise. You had the feeling that all governments, be they Republicans or Democrats, they cherished expertise." Like many Americanophiles abroad, Scharioth has watched our country's devolution with great sadness: "I would not have imagined that in my lifetime I would see that."

Recently Adam Higginbotham, author of the acclaimed book *Midnight in Chernobyl* ... told me he felt a shiver of recognition when he read about Trump, in January, reportedly calling [HHS Secretary] Azar's concern about the coronavirus "alarmist". A senior Soviet apparatchik used the same word to brush off a call for evacuation after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986.

As the coronavirus crisis has unfolded in America, Higginbotham has noticed other parallels. "The response that I see has followed a very similar trajectory: initial public denials or reluctance to publicly admit that anything was wrong, then attempts to minimize the severity of what was happening, rooted in an institutional inability to acknowledge failure," he said. "The initial response was hampered by a lack of equipment and a breakdown in communication that revealed that despite years of planning, the state was hopelessly ill prepared for such a catastrophe."

Yet one crucial difference also stands out to him. Soviet officials lied about Chernobyl and tried to shift blame but accepted that remediation was the state's responsibility. "There was a lot of disinformation and cover-up, but as far as I know nobody in the Politburo was on the phone to the party leaders in Kyiv and Minsk saying, 'You're on your own — sort it out yourselves,'" said Higginbotham.

Chernobyl is now widely seen as a signal event on the road to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Coronavirus may someday be seen as a similar inflection point in the story of American decline. A country that could be brought to its knees this quickly was sick well before the virus arrived.

"A GREAT SUCCESS STORY"

April 29: "We did all the right moves. If we didn't do what we did, you would have had a million people die, maybe more, maybe two million people die." — Donald Trump

April 29: "The federal government rose to the challenge, and

this is a great success story. And I think that that's really, you know, what needs to be told." — *Jared Kushner*

April 29: The total number of coronavirus cases in the United States exceeded one million. The American death toll (60,000+) surpassed that of the Vietnam War. And the economy was reported to have shrunk by nearly 5 percent.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Garrison Keillor

(Excerpted from "The Writer's Almanac", 4/29/2020)

I'm 77, safely sequestered in a New York apartment under the supervision of my wife who intends to keep me around, so we stay put. The medical troops are doing their duty, and we the people assist them by staying out of harm's way. Men and women are riding the subway into Manhattan in order to do the essential things to support life, bring in groceries, deliver them, take away garbage, run the hospitals and clinics, provide security. When the pandemic is over, our society will need to stop and think about who is essential and why should the delivery truck driver earn a tiny fraction of what is paid to the Executive Vice President for Interactive Synergy & Proactive Metrics? ...

It's been said a thousand times but nonetheless: the nation is in unknown territory. Truly. Nobody knows. The disease is not running a predictable course. Social distancing helps but it is revolutionary and now comes the counterrevolution. Washington is adrift. In a rational world, Mr. Trump would announce that he is canceling his reelection campaign so that he can focus on the job at hand, the two missions are incompatible. Nobody thinks he'd do that. Reimpeachment is not in the cards: is sheer incompetence a "high crime and misdemeanor"? The Founders didn't anticipate this; they associated narcissism with royalty, not democratically elected leaders.

The White House is not sympathetic to the plight of the Postal Service because Mr. Trump never wrote a letter in his life and put it in an envelope and mailed it. The New York transit system is billions in the red but he's never ridden the subway so it doesn't matter. He has run the pandemic response as a reality show off the top of his head, with no acknowledgment of the deaths and suffering it's caused because it isn't real to him.

He is, however, friendly to us Christians though he himself could not recite the Lord's Prayer if you offered him a million bucks. But a goodly percentage of Protestants are Republicans, so he favors us, and nowhere in America are our people being burned at the stake. The judiciary is being repopulated with men who might well favor mandatory memorization of Bible verses in public schools. This would not do much to stop the virus, but it might be enough to reelect the man. ...

Comedians have been feasting on this man. The Clorox/UV episode of the Trump show was huge on social media. But we've come to a strange new place where the president isn't funny anymore. Government is failing. People are dying. Comedy is at the heart of being American. Where do we go from here?

EMILY DICKINSON PREDICTS DONALD TRUMP

A Little Madness in the Spring

Emily Dickinson

A little Madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown—
Who ponders this tremendous scene—
This whole Experiment of Green—
As if it were his own!

ONE MORE WHAT-I-MISS-IN-LOCKDOWN

As a New-Yorker-in-my-heart now consigned to Woodland Park, NJ (you can't even find it on a map), I miss my monthly walk from Penn Station to the High School of Fashion Industries, where I am an Advisory Board member, which takes me past the Fashion Institute of Technology, which always has something wonderful in its windows and painted on its walls ... food stands with buttered rolls ... a menagerie of multi- and mixed-breed dogs ... *and the people: the world's population in eight blocks!*

PS: As a former editor, I envy your freedom, John, to publish a newsletter with an odd number of pages. — *Jack Herschlag*

PPS: In the things I miss about New York I intentionally left out my lunches with you, as I did not want to put you in a tight spot if there are any readers who you avoid having lunch with. — *Jack*

Jack: Only a real New Yorker would think like that. — *John*

THE SQUIRREL PROBLEM

(From The Voice of Reason, newsletter of the Piedmont (S.C.) Humanists, May, 2020)

A band of squirrels had become an infestation problem, so the Presbyterian church called a meeting to decide what to do. After much prayer and consideration, they concluded that the squirrels were predestined to be there, and they should not interfere with God's divine will.

At the Baptist church, the squirrels had taken an interest in the baptistery. The deacons decided to put a water-slide on the baptistery and let the squirrels drown themselves. But the squirrels liked the slide and knew how to swim, so twice as many squirrels showed up the following week.

The Lutheran church decided that they were not in a position to harm any of God's creatures. So, they humanely trapped their squirrels and set them free near the Baptist Church. Two weeks later the squirrels were back when the Baptists took down the waterslide.

The Episcopalians tried setting out pans of whiskey around their church in an effort to kill the squirrels with alcohol. They sadly learned how much damage a band a drunken squirrels can do.

But the Catholic church came up with a creative strategy! They baptized all the squirrels and made them members of the church. Now they only see them at Christmas and Easter.

And not much was heard from the Jewish synagogue. They took the first squirrel and circumcised him. They have not seen a squirrel since.

GIVE ME THAT OLD SLIME RELIGION

Dennis Middlebrooks

Give me that old slime religion,
Give me that old slime religion,
Give me that old slime religion, for idiots like me!
Let's spread coronavirus,
Let's spread coronavirus,
Let's spread coronavirus, from sea to shining sea!
If it's good for Mike Pompeo,
If it's good for Mike Pompeo,
If it's good for Mike Pompeo, it's good for jerks like me!
It was good for the little children,
It was good for the little children,
It was good for the little children, who soon will need IV!
Give me that old slime religion,
Give me that old slime religion,
Give me that old slime religion, for idiots like me!

EXPERTS RECOMMEND DISINFECTING TELEVISION AFTER TRUMP HAS BEEN ON

Andy Borowitz

WASHINGTON (The Borowitz Report)—People should disinfect their televisions after Donald J. Trump has been on, a cross-section of experts confirmed on Tuesday.

"Use disinfectant wipes to clean the television," Dr. Davis Logsdon, of the University of Minnesota, said. "Put any dishes that were exposed to Trump in the dishwasher. This won't eliminate all traces of Trump, but it can't hurt."

Dr. Carol Foyler, of U.C.L.A. advised "If Trump has been on TV, it is possible that Trump has been transmitted to you. I would take off your clothes, put them in the wash, and take a shower."

Logsdon agreed but added, "I burn my clothes."



SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY – JULY 2020

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

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

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

TUES, MAY 12, 7:00 PM

PURPLE HIBISCUS

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

From the bestselling author of *Americanah*, *Purple Hibiscus* is an exquisite novel about the emotional turmoil of adolescence, the powerful bonds of family, and the bright promise of freedom, all seen through the eyes of fifteen-year-old Kambali as her family's privileged life in Nigeria is disrupted by military coup and revolution.

"One of the most vital and original novelists of her generation."

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

The #1 *NYTimes* bestseller, *Little Fires Everywhere* explores the weight of secrets, the nature of art and identity, and the ferocious pull of motherhood – and the danger of believing that following the rules can avert disaster.

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

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

SHSNY BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We're working on creating a Zoom meeting schedule for the Book Club – watch this space in future issues for sign-in info.

Meanwhile, do the reading ...

THURS, MAY 7, 7:00 pm
CULTURE AND COMMITMENT
A Study of the Generation Gap
Margaret Mead

In this classic 1969 study, Mead foretold how the younger vs. the elder generations would become the human agents of change in our society and culture; our grandchildren will teach us, if we can choose to accept change.

Earle Bowers will lead, and thinks that, "in our current polarized era this book seems to me perhaps particularly topical again."

– *Paperback available*

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
To Be Announced

HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

Premiere Meeting:

SUN, MAY 10, 4:00 PM

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

Yes, we were going to do this April 26, then on May 3, but there was a covid-19 death in Jon Engel's extended family, then more sickness. Expect details on Zooming May 10 from Jon via email.

**AHA SPEAKER SERIES
ONLINE**

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

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

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

**SHSNY
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and**

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