



# The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the Humanist Association of London and Area

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## Getting Off Our Humanist Derrières

**What is Humanism?** Here is a fairly comprehensive definition: Humanism is a philosophy or life-stance based upon a profound respect for human dignity and the conviction that human beings are ultimately accountable to themselves and to society for their actions. It is a deity-free worldview that affirms our ability to lead ethical and meaningful lives without reliance upon a belief in the supernatural. Humanists are guided by reason and scientific inquiry, inspired by music and art, and motivated by ethics, compassion and fairness. **What do humanists envision?** Here is the Vision of Humanist Canada: Our vision is a world where reason and compassion guide public policy, and beliefs are respected – provided that they are compatible with the rights of others.

Both are well-worded plausible statements, but motherhood-like and devoid of action. Yes, humanists are very good at organizing interesting conventions, and publishing great books and academic articles, but really doing very little more than preaching to the converted. Recently, however, I discovered an article by Andy Norman in the December 2015/January 2016 *Free Inquiry* magazine reviewing a book entitled *Creating Change through Humanism*, which is a call for action. The author is Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association.

Speckhardt is concerned that in America the well-funded religious right's assault on church-state separation is gaining momentum, and he urges humanists to "come out of the humanist closet" and take responsibility for leading progressive change. Real humanists, he implies, take action to change the world for the better. He paraphrases Edmund Burke: all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that the relatively well-educated do nothing.

Unfortunately there are few details on specific concrete courses of action mentioned in this review, but I would like to make some suggestions. Surely it is the desire of all peace-loving people to live in a prosperous society with optimum freedoms and adequate social safety nets. These conditions can occur under democratic governments that are concerned with the welfare of all citizens, and are able to help businesses generate economic prosperity. Under these situations, religiosity declines and threats from the religious right are much less likely to occur. Therefore, I submit, humanist-minded people must become political and support candidates that will strive for, and bring about the desirable conditions outlined above. This will be difficult at times, but as Bill Clinton said, "it's the economy that matters." Let's stop navel gazing and get off our behinds. (DAH).

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### The Board of the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA)

President – Dr. Rod Martin - (519) 673-6635 – email – [ramartin@uwo.ca](mailto:ramartin@uwo.ca)

Secretary – Dr. Elizabeth Bright-See - (519) 471- 3963 – email – [ebright@uwo.ca](mailto:ebright@uwo.ca)

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Member at Large – Don Hatch – (519) 472-6167 – email – [dahatch@rogers.com](mailto:dahatch@rogers.com) - Enlightenment

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## **Equality for Women**

In the whole time line of human civilization, concern about equal rights for women is a rather recent phenomenon. One of the first male advocates for women's equality was the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who stated, "the suppression of women has severely impeded the progress of humanity." But it was really women themselves who began the uphill battle for equality, and one of their first grievances was being denied the right to vote in elections. Thus began the suffragette movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Names that come to mind in the United States are Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. In Canada there was the famous five, Nellie McClung, Emily Edwards, Irene Parlby, Louise McKenny and Henrietta Edwards. These brave ladies are cast in bronze in identical memorials in Calgary and Ottawa. The work of these women, and others, paid off with the granting of female voting rights in Canada in 1918 and in the U.S. in 1920.

During the 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir in France began pushing for greater female equality. In the 1960s in the U.S., the feminist movement got underway with women such as Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem in the limelight. Their mantra was that women were more than housewives and were quite capable of having successful careers in business, in government, and in professions such as medicine and law. Fortunately, much has changed as many women now have great careers in various spheres. There have been a few women CEOs and there have been numerous political leaders including Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, and Angela Merkel. In Canada we had Kim Campbell and there have been ten Provincial or Territorial women leaders. And half of Justin Trudeau's Cabinet is made up of women. Yes, there has been much progress, but the battle for equal pay for equal work continues.

One of the purposes of this preamble is to set the scene for Adriaan Mak's article on Mary Wollstonecraft. As Adriaan says, she was truly the forerunner for women's rights, and by extension, for humanism. (DAH).

### **Mary Wollstonecraft: (1759 - 1797)** **Forerunner for Humanism and Women's Rights** *By Adriaan Mak*

Many 18th century thinkers whose ideas opposed the religious/political establishment of their age were labelled atheists; yet, few of them really were. More often, they were "deists" who might believe in the existence of a deity on rational grounds, while rejecting the miraculous, supernatural accounts found in Holy Scriptures. Although Mary Wollstonecraft had misgivings about religion, she was very much more concerned about the present human condition.

Her abusive father had been a tyrant and wife beater, wasting the family wealth, thus forcing his daughters to live in genteel poverty. Wollstonecraft tried being a teacher and a governess. While she proved very capable in those areas, she aspired at age 28 to be a writer.

She had written *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and presented it to Joseph Johnson, a Unitarian, who became her publisher and advisor. In spite of its subtitle, the book contains much autobiographical material about

her youth. She moved to Johnson's neighbourhood and soon became a member of his regular meetings of artists, religious dissenters, and radicals, among whom were Tom Paine, William Blake, Joseph Priestly, and other supporters of the American and French Revolutions, such as journalist William Godwin, the first anarchist philosopher. Johnson had served time in prison on charges of "seditious libel" (expressing criticism of government policies, or the king) after he had distributed a political article containing such criticism written by a fellow Unitarian. Seditious libel, while no longer in effect in British law, is still a criminal offence in Canada.

When Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which contained defences of the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the established (Anglican) church, Wollstonecraft soon responded with *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), attacking Burke's justifications of an unequal society where only a few thousand wealthy males, of the Anglican persuasion, had the right to vote, and where privilege was based on tradition, custom, and the passivity of women. Instead, Wollstonecraft argued for secular, republican virtues, and equal rights, invoking an emerging middle-class ideology in opposition to what she viewed as vice-ridden aristocratic principles.

Her book sold out quickly because it was written by a female. Critics soon derided it as being based on female emotion rather than sound reason. Wollstonecraft answered their critiques with a work that firmly reinforced her essential humanism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). In a famous quotation from this work she stated: "[Any] being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority, but that of reason."

What followed next in Wollstonecraft's life is both bitterly ironic and humanly tragic. In spite of all that she knew so well from history and had experienced as a young girl with a child- and wife-beating father, she fell several times too deeply, romantically in love, even well into her thirties. One lover (Gilbert Imlay) was a real "cad". No modern expression such as "louse" or "rat" will do. After she gave birth to their child, she discovered that he had been seeing other mistresses. After this detection Imlay deserted both Mary and their new-born infant, Fanny. Feeling very betrayed, she tried to commit suicide twice by overdosing with an opiate and in 1795 by jumping into the Thames at night. This time she was rescued by mere chance.\*

Nevertheless, in 1796 she started another romantic relationship, fortunately with a man she had known well, an author sympathetic to her ideas, the aforementioned William Godwin. Mary died a year later after severe difficulties resulting from childbirth. The child, also named Mary Wollstonecraft, survived, and became the author of *Frankenstein* and the live-in partner of the poet Percy Shelley. Although both Mary and Godwin had opposed the laws about matrimony, Godwin did arrange a secret marriage in order to protect the legal rights of the as yet unborn child. He also adopted her first child, Fanny.

Because of her opinions and lifestyle, she was not mentioned by later fighters for women's rights from Victorian times on, until finally she was recognized by a wave of modern feminism beginning in the 1960's.

\* These experiences resulted in her last attempt at fiction. Although it was left unfinished, Godwin had it published posthumously: *Maria: The Wrongs of Woman*.

Source: Emily Sunstein, *A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1975)

## Sunday Assembly

The first Sunday Assembly, organized by Sherry Keddie, was held in London at the Masonville Library on Sunday, December 6, 2015. About 50 people attended. There was an interesting program consisting of singing, poetry readings, an excellent speaker, and refreshments. The theme of the event was “the Universe.” UWO astronomy professor Dr. Pauline Barmby spoke about her work at telescopes on mountain tops, accompanied by exciting pictures of galaxies. Londoner Alan Leangvan gave readings of two of his works, *Where Do We Go?* and *She Used to Sing*. *Where Do We Go?* is printed below.

Sherry Keddie is a dynamic leader full of enthusiasm, and will no doubt be organizing more very interesting and entertaining Sunday Assemblies in the future. The next one is on Sunday, February 7, at The Masonville Library, 30 North Centre Road at 11:00 a.m. The speaker will be Claire Halstead, and the topic “Children in England during WWII.”

## Where Do We Go?

*By Alan Leangvan*

A very young boy once asked a very old question. “Where do you go when you die?” I remember being 8 years old at my grandparents’ house, playing with my action figures, making my own little sound effects, and enjoying the bliss that came with the ignorance that came with being so small, and so new to the world. As an 8 year old boy my observable universe extended only as far as the carpet did before it met the walls that I called home, the letter C was nothing more than the 3<sup>rd</sup> letter of the alphabet, and - as far as I was concerned - the centre of the galaxy was the star that made sure I ate breakfast every morning, reminded me to brush my teeth, and drove me to school every day. My only concerns were cartoons and homework, and my only questions were about how my ninja turtles and transformers would team up to defeat “the bad guys”. Life was simple. Until the night I decided to look out the window. And I mean **really look**.

I caught myself just standing there, silent, staring up at infinity wondering how big it was. An odd question to ask, I know, standing on a giant spinning rock that has birthed every smile, tear, and memory in human existence. The world was already so big... yet there I was. Two tiny feet stood beneath two tiny hands frozen in mid-air as two tiny eyes opened as wide as they could to take in the majesty, the sheer impossibility, an ocean of stars crashed against my mind with the mind-numbing probability that everything I thought was everything was, relatively, a fraction of nothing. As an 8 year old boy I never learned to swim, but for the first time in my life, an ocean didn’t terrify me.

A very young boy once asked a very old question. “Where do you go when you die?” I was never the type of child to be haunted by ghost stories or enchanted by tales of wizards but I would get goosebumps every time I grabbed another book off the shelf and read about a new planet. Every letter flew off the page at the speed of light, and my eyes would crystalize reading about the age and size of our solar system. Between the “how’s” and “why’s” my gaze would fall into the skies, trying to summarize all of the knowledge that ended up turning into more questions. I took all the lies from those unwise who claimed to advise and **laughed** at their surprise when I jettisoned them into the sun and flew off in my spaceship toward yet another book on the shelf. So many questions, they collapsed under their own weight to form an interrogative black hole, but general relativity took pity on a young child

and allowed me to climb over the event horizon. Maybe Einstein felt that “curiosity had its own reason for existing”. Maybe Planck sympathized whenever I felt like the tiniest measurement. Maybe Newton understood what it’s like to sit under trees only to end up scratching your head, and maybe Carl Sagan was trying from beyond the grave to teach me how to make an apple pie from scratch. All I had to do first was create the universe. As an 8 year old boy, a flaw of genetics left my body permanently weakened, constantly broken, and I was always smaller than the other children. But for the first time in my life, being small didn’t terrify me.

I caught myself just sitting there, silent, reading about infinity, wondering how big it was. In a small room on a giant spinning rock that has birthed more questions than answers in all of human history. A very young boy once asked a very old question. “Where do you go when you die?” I don’t think we go anywhere, because we are made of the universe itself, and the universe never dies.

## The Silver Rule

I have heard of the Golden Rule all of my life, but I had never heard of the Silver Rule until I read a review by Dale DeBakcsy, in the December 2015/January 2016 *Free Inquiry*, of the recent re-issue of Walter Kaufmann’s book *The Faith of a Heretic*. Much of the book is about what Kaufmann calls the gerrymandering of the Old and New Testaments. Or putting it another way, the cherry-picking of the Bible in order to eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive. Kaufmann lays out the moral shortcomings of Christianity, both in its original form and as it is mundanely practiced in America, using as one example, the difference between the Golden Rule and the Silver Rule. The Golden Rule of Jesus states: “Do unto others as you would have done to you.” The Silver Rule of Confucius states: “Do not do unto others what you would not have done to you.”

Kaufmann points out; “the negative version (the Silver Rule) can be put into practice while the positive version (the Golden Rule) cannot; and anyone who tried to live up to Jesus’ rule would become an insufferable nuisance. For example, try to derive a sexual ethic from Jesus’ rule.”

I Googled “Silver Rule” and the Golden Rule came up, but the negative version was listed alongside the positive version, although it was not labeled as the Silver Rule. Obviously the term Silver Rule is not in wide-spread use, but Kaufmann is right: the negative version can be put into practice whereas the positive version has its shortcomings. (DAH)

## Doubt

Many humanists were raised in a religious household and at some point doubted what they were asked to believe. Then, rejecting the supernatural, they called themselves humanists. But rejecting the supernatural is not new. In ancient Greece, priests sacrificed vast numbers of animals to appease dozens of gods, but a few philosophers, including Thales, Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Protagoras, and of course Epicurus, rejected the existence of supernatural beings. In Rome there was Lucretius. However, the arrival of Christian dominance in the 300s CE suppressed such thinking, and atheism was criminalized. This is just another example of how the early Catholic Church impeded the progress of the Western world toward secularism. Source: Review of *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* by Tim Whitmarsh. *Free Inquiry* December 2015/January 2016 (DAH)