



The Enlightenment



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A Timely Reminder of Humanist Principles

Amsterdam Declaration of IHEU

1. Humanism aims at the full development of every human being.
2. Humanists uphold the broadest application of democratic principles in human relationships
3. Humanists advocate the use of the scientific method as a guide to distinguish fact from fiction.
4. Humanists affirm the dignity of every person and the right of the individual to the maximum possible freedom compatible with the rights of others.
5. Humanists acknowledge human interdependence, the need for mutual respect, and the kinship of all humanity.
6. Humanists call for the continued improvement of society so that no one may be deprived of the basic necessities of life, and for institutions and conditions to provide every person with opportunities for developing their full potential.
7. Humanists support the development and extension of fundamental human freedoms, as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and supplemented by UN International Covenants comprising the United Nations Bill of Human Rights.
8. Humanists advocate peaceful resolution of conflicts between individuals, groups, and nations.
9. The humanistic ethic encourages development of the positive potentialities in human nature and approves conduct based on a sense of responsibility to oneself and to all other persons.
10. A fundamental principle of humanism is the rejection of beliefs held in absence of verifiable evidence, such as beliefs based solely on dogma, revelation, mysticism, or appeals to the supernatural.
11. Humanists affirm that individual and social problems can be resolved by means of human reason, intelligent effort, and critical thinking joined with compassion and a spirit of empathy for all living things.
12. Humanists affirm that human beings are a part of nature, and that our survival is dependent upon a healthy planet which provides us and other forms of life with a life-supporting environment.

President's Remarks

Once again, we come to the end of a year. On the world stage, 2016 turned out to be a year of jarring surprises and mounting uncertainty. The decision by British voters to leave the European Union, the increasing strength of right-wing nationalist parties in many countries, the violent attacks on large groups of innocent people by fundamentalist Muslim extremists, and the election of an erratic reality TV celebrity and inveterate narcissist to lead the most powerful country on earth, have all sent shivers of apprehension through those of us who hold dearly to liberal democratic values. As the world lurches into an uncertain and ominous future, we can do little more than hold tight and hope for the best.

Closer to home, however, the past year has been more positive and heartening. Here at HALA, we look back on a year of further growth in our membership, deepening friendships and new initiatives, varied and interesting meetings, and increased involvement in the broader community. Our monthly meetings this year featured a variety of topics and formats. These included interesting talks on political science and clinical psychology, as well as a presentation by the imam of a local mosque strongly repudiating Muslim extremism and violence. A highlight of the year was the public presentation at the Wolf Hall by Hemant Mehta, the "Friendly Atheist", about why many young people today are leaving religion. The meeting was well attended, attracted some attention in the local media, and resulted in several new members joining us. At a couple of meetings, we experimented (very successfully, I think) with a directed group discussion format, with lively and thoughtful discussions about religion in general and Islam in particular, and how a Humanist finds purpose and meaning in life. We also got to know each other better at our summer picnic and winter solstice party, and took part in the Pride Parade in July.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the board members and other volunteers who helped to make this year such a success. I especially thank Wendy Kennedy, who is leaving the board this year, for her cheerful and unassuming help at all our meetings and social events and her always thoughtful and wise input into our board deliberations. I also warmly welcome our two new board members, Carl Goldberg and Sherry Keddie. Looking ahead to the coming year, we have exciting plans for another varied series of meetings and activities. Despite our concerns about broader world events, we look forward with optimism to what 2017 holds for HALA. ~ Rod Martin

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	HALA Standard	Limited Resources	Humanist Canada	Humanist Perspectives
Single	\$20	\$10	\$40	\$25
Family	\$25	\$15	\$50	

Comments on the Humanist Principles Displayed on Page 1

While most humanists will subscribe to Principle 10 rejecting belief in supernatural phenomena, take note that this is only one of the twelve. And notice that the other eleven cover a wide spectrum of topics including democracy, science, human rights, resolving conflicts with reason, improving society, treating others with respect, protecting the environment and more. This wide range provides a variety of subjects, all related to humanism that can provide topics for future meetings.

How a Humanist Finds Purpose and Meaning in Life

By Dr. Rod Martin

If we stop to think about it, most of us want our lives to have a sense of purpose and meaning. To begin this discussion, it's useful to recognize that *purpose* and *meaning* are two closely related but somewhat distinct concepts. When we talk about *purpose* in life, we're thinking about having a reason for our existence, an overall goal or plan that goes beyond our mundane day-to-day activities, and gives our life a sense of direction. On the other hand, having *meaning* in life refers to a sense of significance, importance, fulfillment, value, or worth. It involves feeling that one's life makes sense, is worthwhile, and makes a difference in some way. Some authors have suggested that meaning precedes purpose: you need to have a sense of meaning before you can find a purpose to live for. But I would argue that things can also go in the opposite direction: finding some activity that gives us a sense of purpose can also lead to enhanced feelings of meaningfulness. The two go hand-in-hand and build on each other.

The Importance of Having Purpose and Meaning in One's Life

Humans appear to be the only species that questions the meaning of its own existence. Ever since our ancestors evolved larger brains with higher cognitive abilities that allow us to reason and solve problems, to be aware of our own conscious minds and the minds of others, and to think about motives, goals, and purposes, humans have naturally asked questions about why we are here and what is the meaning of it all. True enough, before the invention of modern conveniences such as electrical appliances, automobiles, and machines to do our work for us, life for most people was a constant daily struggle for survival, leaving them with little time to sit and ponder the meaning of it all. Nonetheless, since ancient times all cultures seem to have had a strong need for religious beliefs and rituals to provide a meaningful framework that gave people assurance of some greater significance, value, and purpose in the midst of the daily grind.

Philosophers and psychologists point to the importance of a sense of meaning for mental health and well-being. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl wrote about his experience of surviving the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. He described how important it was for prisoners to have a sense of meaning, even in the most brutal circumstances, to give them reason to continue living and not to lose hope. He told of how, for many, this sense of meaning came from feelings of solidarity with others and the cherished memories of loving relationships, highlighting the importance of interpersonal connectedness for meaning.

Recent psychological research has provided further evidence of the importance of purpose and meaning for mental and even physical health. Across a number of studies, research participants who reported

having a greater sense of purpose were subsequently found to have a reduced risk of depression and suicidal thoughts, Alzheimer's disease, heart attack and stroke, and increased longevity. In addition, studies of the alarmingly elevated rates of suicide among indigenous young people in Canada's First Nations reserves point to the important role of a lack of meaning and purpose due to the loss of cultural cohesiveness and traditional ways of life.

Religious Claims about Meaning and Purpose

Theistic religions such as Christianity and Islam teach that, without God, it's impossible to have genuine purpose and meaning in life. If the universe is nothing but a cosmic accident, they say, our existence has no ultimate meaning or value, and our lives are fundamentally hopeless and empty. How we live makes no difference in the long run: we'll eventually die and be forgotten. All those we care for and love, and who care for and love us in return, will also die and be forgotten. Eventually the sun will burn out and the planet will be destroyed, and all living things will be exterminated. No one will be left to remember that humans ever existed. Such a bleak prospect, they claim, can only leave us with a profound sense of nihilism, despair, and hopelessness.

Having consigned unbelievers to such a hopeless existence, religious teachers then hold out an attractive alternative to entice us to believe. If instead there is a God who created us for a divine purpose, they declare, life *does* have ultimate purpose and meaning. By living today in God's service and pleasing him, our lives can be filled with purpose. And the confidence that we will have a continued eternal existence in heavenly bliss after we die gives our lives ultimate meaning. A truly meaningful and purposeful life, they claim, is impossible without God and the hope of eternal life.

These claims may seem rather strange and foreign to many non-theistic Humanists, but I think it's important for us to understand that this is a very serious issue for most religious believers, with deep emotional as well as intellectual significance. These ideas are drilled into them from an early age and become part of their core assumptions, which colour their emotions. In public debates about whether or not God exists, this issue is often the final, supposedly clinching argument made by those who take the theistic side. Even if you're not convinced by logic, reason, or evidence, they argue, you should believe in God anyway, because otherwise your life will be empty and meaningless.

For many believers, even if they are able to acknowledge intellectually that there is no strong objective evidence for the existence of God or an afterlife, the idea of the ultimate meaninglessness of life without God is so anxiety-arousing and intolerable that they cannot bring themselves to consider giving up their faith. They may occasionally have doubts, but the fear of meaninglessness is what most often drives them back to their beliefs. This profound anxiety is the reason why religious believers often have such a defensive, angry, and even hostile reaction to atheists. Atheism threatens their inner sense of security, and when you feel threatened, the natural response is to lash out in anger. I think it's important for us to understand this if we wish to engage our religious friends or relatives in meaningful conversations.

Purpose: Two Definitions

In his book *Life driven purpose: How an atheist finds meaning*, former evangelical Christian preacher Dan Barker points out that there are two different dictionary definitions of *purpose*, and he argues that religious people mean something different than atheists do when speaking about it. In the first

definition, purpose refers to the reason for which something has been made. We use the word in this way when we ask, “What is the purpose of this tool?” This definition applies to a created object or instrument such as a hammer, which is constructed in a particular way to be useful for some goal such as driving nails. In this sense of the word, purpose comes from *outside* the object, which is a passive tool that is used by an external agent. Non-manufactured things such as rocks don’t have an inherent purpose in this sense.

In the second definition, purpose refers to an intended or desired result; an aim, end, or goal; or a reason for doing something. We use this meaning of the word when we ask, “What is your purpose in taking this action?” This definition can be applied to any action or activity that someone engages in, such as working, building, creating, traveling, teaching, helping, and so on. In this meaning of the word, purpose comes from *within* the person doing the action, who is an active agent with a desire to achieve a particular goal.

The Religious View: Purpose *OF* Life

Barker points out that religious believers use the first definition when they speak about the purpose of life. In this view, humans are passive tools that were created by God for some divine purpose that is fully known only to him. Life has no purpose in itself: we are just tools for God to use for whatever his purposes may be. If you want to have purpose, according to this religious view, you need to lose your own selfhood and personal agency, and submit yourself to God as a tool or slave to be used by him. Barker points out that the imagery of slavery is very common in religious thinking. For example, the postures of prayer are symbolic of slavery – kneeling or lying prostrate before the master, with eyes closed, hands together as though shackled, and head bowed in submission. The Bible explicitly refers to believers as “slaves of Christ.” This is also true in Islam, which literally means “submission” or “surrender.” Barker notes that, using this definition of purpose, when religious people ask, “If there is no God, then what is the purpose of life?” what they really mean is, “If there is no divine Master, then whose slave will I be?” Thus, the religious view is based on the idea that we can’t have any purpose unless we relinquish our own selfhood and become slaves of some imaginary heavenly master who controls us to achieve his own goals. If we were not created for some divine purpose, then we have no one to serve and we’re no different than a rock or other natural object that has no inherent purpose.

The Humanist View: Purpose *IN* life

From a Humanist perspective, purpose in life involves the second definition, which relates to the purpose of an action or activity. Instead of thinking of ourselves as a slave or an actor in someone else’s play, Barker argues, we can throw off the chains of superstition, take charge of our own lives, and find our *own* purpose in life. We are active, autonomous agents, freely choosing to act. The good news of atheism, says Barker, is that there is no purpose *of* life. However, that doesn’t mean that there is no purpose *in* life. What a difference a preposition makes! Rather than viewing purpose as something that comes from *outside* ourselves, we can find purpose *within* ourselves. This sort of inner purpose comes from becoming engaged in some life activity that is important to us, striving to achieve goals and solve problems. Each one of us is different, and we each have different interests, abilities, values, opportunities, and challenges, so we will each find different purposes for our lives. Your purpose is how you decide to live your own life, not something that someone else forces on you. This view of purpose is liberating, invigorating, and empowering. Instead of constantly worrying about whether we are serving

God adequately, we can courageously take control of our own lives, finding our own way of living a good life and finding fulfillment.

For some of us, that sense of purpose may come from dedicating ourselves to combating negative things in the world such as disease, prejudice, injustice, poverty, pollution, or global warming. For others, it may involve positive pursuits, developing one's talents or personal interests, striving to achieve in any number of areas, such as parenting (or grandparenting!), education, science, technology, health care, business, history, politics, art, music, literature, poetry, theatre, athletics, travel, cooking, gardening, and so on. Having purpose in life may involve perfecting one's skills and developing one's character, learning new things, and striving in big or small ways to make the world a better place for oneself and for others. "How do you find purpose in your life?" asks Barker. "You create it yourself by your intention to keep living your life as fully as possible, overcoming any obstacles in your way."

Meaning in Life without God

For the Humanist, life has no "ultimate" meaning; we must create our *own* meaning in life, by living purposeful lives. The concept of meaning implies *communication*, as when we speak of the meaning of a word, symbol, gesture, or action. Meaning arises in human *minds* that internalize the physical and social world around them, make sense of it, and seek to communicate that understanding to someone else through words or symbols. Thus meaning is something that is shared between people. When we think of meaning in this way, we see the importance of interpersonal relationships for creating meaning in our lives. We humans are social animals, and much of life's meaning is created in the context of close, caring relationships with others with whom we share our lives and passions.

Meaning also implies *value*: a meaningful life is a life of value or worth. Value is subjective and personal, not something that is objective or comes from outside the person. Whether our lives are meaningful to *us* depends on how *we* evaluate them, not on some cosmic plan. That sense of value comes from being engaged in meaningful activity, whether in paid or volunteer work, leisure activities, or personal relationships. The knowledge that we are valued and cherished by friends and loved ones also contributes to our own feelings of worth.

Countering Religious Claims

In the preceding paragraphs I've argued that a non-theistic Humanism can provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life without the need to believe in imaginary supernatural beings. In this section I'll discuss some Humanist counter-arguments to a few specific claims that are often made by religious believers.

1. "If life ends with death and is not eternal, then it has no meaning."

As many non-theistic thinkers have pointed out, contrary to the religious view that life has meaning only if it lasts forever, the *brevity* of life is what makes it truly precious. The law of supply and demand tells us that things that are scarce are more valuable than things that are plentiful. To quote Dan Barker, "if life is eternal, then life is cheap." Knowing that we have only a short time to live and explore the wonders of this universe, with no reasonable expectation of life after death, we are all the more motivated to make the most of it, to live the best life we possibly can, and to make it as meaningful as possible.

Another point that can be made is that, even if life lasted forever, that would not necessarily mean it would have particular value or meaning. The duration of a life doesn't tell us anything about its quality. In fact, an eternal existence could consist of utter meaninglessness and drudgery. Just think of the story of Sisyphus, who was doomed to an eternity of rolling a heavy stone up a mountainside over and over again. His life is eternal, but his existence is meaningless.

We can also point out that, even though our lives may be pointless from the perspective of a million years in the future, why should that make any difference to us? As I've already noted, "meaning" is subjective: to have a sense of meaning, our lives need to be meaningful to *us*, regardless of what others may think of us or what happens far in the future. As Thomas Nagel has pointed out, it just doesn't matter *now* that in a million years nothing we do will matter – we won't be there to care!

2. "If there is no God who created us and has a plan for us, then life has no purpose"

Religious believers claim that meaningful purpose can only come from outside the individual, from the creator. In response to this claim, several non-theistic thinkers have pointed out that, if this is true for us, then it must also be true of God. Does God sit around and fret about what *his* purpose is, and ask "Why am I here? What's the meaning of my existence?" Where does God get *his* purpose and meaning from? If God can find purpose and meaning in what he does without needing a creator, then so can we!

Another point to be made is that, even if there were some cosmic plan that makes sense of our lives from God's perspective, that wouldn't really make life any more meaningful or purposeful for *us* in our daily lives. This is why religious believers don't actually have it any easier than the rest of us when trying to figure out how best to live their lives. It may give them some consolation to believe that there's a divine being up there who knows what it all means, but they still have to muddle through life just like everyone else. In the end, whether or not we have a sense of meaningfulness depends on how we live our own lives from day to day, not on some unknown divine plan.

3. "What's the use of trying to live a good life if we just die in the end?"

Religious believers argue that, if there's nothing after death, then we have no reason or motivation to live a good life, because how we live makes no difference in the end. In response to this claim, we can point out that, regardless of how long or short our life turns out to be, it's worthwhile to try to have a good life and make the most of it. We obviously have every reason to try to live well, because that's the best way to be happy. Being honest and decent, living with integrity, trying to get along with others and care for them – all are worthwhile because that's the best way to have peace and stability in our lives and relationships. Seeking to develop one's character, to grow as a person, and to learn new things brings satisfaction and peace of mind. What we do with our lives makes a huge difference to our own life satisfaction, regardless of how long our lives last or whether there is a continued existence after death.

Cultivating a Sense of Purpose and Meaning in One's Life

The more we think about these sorts of religious claims, the more they are revealed to have no validity. They are merely ways of rationalizing and justifying faith. Yes, the religious world-view may provide

believers with a subjective feeling that their lives have some sort of meaning and purpose. But that's simply because it gives them something to live for and motivates them to become engaged in a cause, even though it may all be based on an illusory belief system. Non-believers can also have the same degree of meaning and purpose, or perhaps even more so, by seeking to live a life of engagement and value that is based on reason and reality.

Logically, there are plenty of solid arguments showing that a life of meaning, purpose, and value does not depend on belief in gods or an afterlife. However, this doesn't mean that all atheists actually *experience* a sense of meaning and purpose in their own personal lives. For this, I think we need to go beyond logic and reason, and take steps to put it into practice. This involves actively *cultivating* a sense of purpose and meaning in our own lives.

As a Humanist, I think it's a very worthwhile exercise to pause from time to time and think about these issues and look at the big picture of our own lives. It's beneficial to re-evaluate our lives, think about our activities, our relationships, and what it is that we value most. This means thinking carefully about what is important to us personally; what we want to achieve in work, leisure activities, and relationships; and how we desire to grow and change over time in developing our skills, talents, and personal qualities. It means re-evaluating our values and goals, making thoughtful choices, thinking carefully about the various obstacles that may stand in our path, and seeking ways of overcoming them in order to achieve those goals. Mindfully taking stock in this way can help keep us on track and foster a greater personal sense of purpose and direction.

Additionally, I think it's very valuable to actively cultivate a sense of gratitude and wonder, in order to develop a greater sense of meaning and value. Amid the demands and disappointments of life, I need to remind myself from time to time of how lucky I am to be alive, to have this brief chance to experience this amazing universe that we live in. No matter how long or short our lives may be, we're incredibly fortunate to have this mind-boggling opportunity. Think of it: for billions of years you didn't exist, while the universe with all its stars and galaxies developed, and life on earth evolved – all without you. Then an incredibly unlikely chance event occurred when you were conceived. A million sperm raced to fertilize an egg, and only one of them won the race, resulting in you. If that particular sperm hadn't beaten the others, some other person with a different combination of DNA would have been born, and you would never have come into existence. You've won the lottery of life! After you die, the universe will go on without you, just as it did for billions of years before you were born. But in this short span of time, you have the awe-inspiring opportunity to experience life and all its wonders.

There is no ultimate meaning to life. That simple fact gives us *all the more* reason to be fully engaged; to take every opportunity to live fully, to grow, love, and thrive; to learn all we can about this incredible universe with all its stars and galaxies, and the amazing process of evolution that resulted in us. To contemplate the beauty of nature, becoming enrapt by the sight of a sunset over the ocean, a majestic mountain scene, or a newborn child. These experiences create in us a sense of wonder and awe, which contributes to a meaningful life. Life doesn't last forever, there's no ultimate purpose to it, but that doesn't diminish the joy, awe, and wonder we can experience in the here and now. Instead, it makes our lives all the more precious, purposeful, and meaningful.

(This talk was presented at the November 9th, 2016 HALA meeting)