



The Enlightenment



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Amazing Life

1. Amazing life, how great the code
That carves a course through me,
To futures yet uncharted from
Some long forgotten sea.
2. No master hand defined my fate;
No gods created me.
Stardust and ocean current sparked
The genes that led to me.
3. O'er eons of uncounted time,
Like shifting dunes of sand,
From grasping paw on groping limb,
Evolved the human hand.
4. Amazing hand, how great the tools
That human kind could wield;
How wide the world that hitherto
From animals was sealed.
5. But symbols were the crucial key
That opened culture's gate;
For language carried consciousness
And knowledge in its wake.
6. Amazing power of human thought
that carves a course through me;
To futures yet uncharted from
Some long forgotten sea.

Amazing Life by sociologist and author Dr. Pat Duffy Hutcheon, humanist of the year in 2000, has appeared in one or two previous Enlightenments. It is printed again because recently, a few people have remarked how much they have enjoyed reading this poem that cleverly describes evolution in six stanzas. I had the privilege and good fortune to get to know Pat quite well, and visited her in her remarkable condo overlooking Burrard Bridge in Vancouver once a year before she passed away in 2010 at age 84. She called her condo, "a little bit of heaven on earth." The picture to the right is of Pat and me standing by a marina on False Creek in Vancouver. (DAH).



Humanism and the Challenges of Our Times: e.g., mass extinction

By Rosslyn Ives*

STORIES of humans causing species to go extinct are well known. They include the dodo, Tasmanian tiger [thylacine] and the North American passenger pigeon. All are examples of anthropogenic extinction. But it is not just an occasional species that has gone extinct: the Earth is losing species at an alarming rate, mostly due to human activity.

Mass extinction, along with human-caused climate change, is among the most challenging issues of our times. We now live in a world so hugely altered by human activity that Earth-system scientists have officially named the current epoch the Anthropocene. What they mean by this name is that the most significant agent affecting the Earth as a total system is *Homo sapiens*. That human activities are capable of altering Earth systems like climate patterns, ecosystems, and air and water composition seems incomprehensible to many people. Yet this is the reality.

Overwhelming evidence shows that the growth in greenhouse-gas emissions is raising the Earth's temperature and making the oceans more acidic, with the result that the global climate patterns are changing, and icecaps and the permafrost are melting. An Australian example of the effect of rising temperatures is widespread coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef. Why is human activity driving vast numbers of species to extinction?

Clive Hamilton encapsulates this seemingly unstoppable trend in his latest book, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*, where he compares the relative biomass of humans, domesticated animals and wild species. "Humans account for 30 per cent of the total mass of all animals on Earth, and animals domesticated for human use account for 67 per cent. That leaves all of the wild animals on the Earth's surface accounting for no more than 3 per cent."

Herein lies the reason humans are sending other species extinct at an alarming rate. Our livelihood and our interests are so predominant there is scant space left for wild species to exist, let alone successfully thrive. If we also add the effect of human activity on aquatic species, the dismal story continues. Over-fishing has made species extinct and pushed many others into serious decline, while pollution of waterways and the ocean with human-created wastes, including plastics, is having devastating effects on aquatic species.

What do Humanists have to say about the loss of the Earth's biodiversity, i.e. mass extinction? Not enough. For example, the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration contains just one phrase about other species: "Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world."

This final phrase leaves a potential opening for Humanists to agitate for effective action, as does another statement from the same Declaration: "Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and *revision*" (my italics).

In the light of accumulating evidence Humanists clearly need an urgent "revision" in our stance towards the well-being of other species and how we utilise the Earth's resources. Our survival as a species may very well require radical changes in how we organise our economies and lives on a daily basis. It is therefore

encouraging to know that Humanists here in Victoria have developed policy on Biodiversity and the Environment. Our HSV Policy Statement includes the following:

6. BIODIVERSITY

6.1 Humans have evolved over many years in biological interdependence with the other organisms which occupy planet Earth. These biological relationships are essential for human well-being and survival as a species. Human knowledge does not allow us to fully comprehend the range and level of these various relationships; therefore maintenance of biodiversity requires leaving sufficient regions of the globe excluded from exploitation by advanced technologies.

7. ENVIRONMENT

7.1 Humanism affirms that we must live in harmony with other species and protect our environment from damage.

7.2 Over-population of humans presents one of the greatest threats to our planet and measures of control are urgently needed.

7.3 The development of non-exhaustible energy sources should be a high priority. Problems of pollution and toxic waste disposal need to be solved before irreversible damage occurs.

7.4 The quality of life of present and future generations depends on the careful and sustainable management of our environment.

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BUDDHA IN THE BIBLE BELT

There must be a lesson here...but what is it?

By Duncan Watterworth

In the American Bible Belt they say: "Everything happens for a reason," and "God works in mysterious ways," Okay, but why would He send me on a tour of the competition?

I can see why He would send me to that Bible-thumping rural backwater at the east end of the Florida Panhandle – for the third winter in a row. There are umpteen little churches, with delightful names like Deliverance Tabernacle and Friendship Primitive Baptist Church. Lawn signs declare, "Prayer: America's Only Hope."

Of the multitude of factions in the Christian assemblage, these folks are way out in right field. During our visit, Kentucky Pentecostal Pastor Jamie Coots made headlines by dying from snakebite while handling rattlers in his church service.

I'm not complaining about the place; Barb and I like it there. It's a nature lover's dream, and we get along fine with the people. They are small-town friendly, with an old-fashioned courtesy. But the religious landscape of my vacation took a sharp left turn when I read a book by Richard Dawkins, the poster boy for Atheism. I didn't choose the book myself. It was a Christmas present, for God's sake.

And after my detour into Atheism, I was promptly propelled in another religious direction. In the Coastal Corner variety store I noticed a small book titled *Zen In a Wild Country: Solo Wilderness Meditation* by Anne Rudloe. I bought it because I recognized her name. Dr. Rudloe and her husband were marine biologists in nearby Panacea, and operated the Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory and Aquarium that we had visited a couple times. Like Dawkins, she had been a professor of biology. She was also, I was surprised to read, a devout Buddhist.

Dr. Rudloe's book is a primer on the Gulf ecosystems, and also on Buddhism, gracefully interwoven. It is lovingly written, but with a scientist's need for as much clarity and precision as each subject will allow.

Since Buddhism is not a "faith" requiring belief in a dogma, it does not view science as a threat. "Science is a powerful method for understanding the reality in which we live", she wrote.

Buddhism and Atheism have some points of compatibility. Many Atheists live principled lives based on Buddhist and/or Humanist tenets, such as treating others with respect and compassion.

Of the various versions of Buddhism, Dr. Rudloe followed a traditional Korean Zen Buddhist path. It holds that through rigorous meditation, one may see and experience that the universe is "alive, compassionate, and responsive". That may sound fantastical, but consider her speculation that this insight is at the core of all major religions. That would be before the initial insight was subjected to millennia of reinterpretations, cultural lenses, anthropomorphism, and political hijack.

Toward the end of her book, Dr. Rudloe mentions that she has been treated for cancer for six years. She describes how her neighbours in Panacea, well aware of her religious peculiarities, have rallied to support her the best way they know how – with compassion, food and prayers. I happened to see Dr. Rudloe's husband eating alone at the counter of a local seafood restaurant, and I told him how much I was enjoying his wife's book. He told me she had died two weeks after finishing it. So, was God teaching some lessons? And if so, what were they?

The mystery never ends, but I am reminded of a quote from another Buddhist author: "In all truly sacred traditions there is an essential resolve to cherish life and treat others ethically and kindly...compassion is compassion...and a good heart is a good heart."

A Personal Odyssey

Each weekday the *Globe and Mail* publishes a column entitled "Facts and Arguments." Subscribers are invited to send in an essay describing significant events in their life that could be of interest to readers. I sent in the following article, being fully aware that they might not publish anything dealing with the subject at hand. So far, they have not published it. (DAH).

Achieving the Peace Which Surpasses All Understanding

"And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your health and minds in Jesus."
Philippians 4:7 RSV.

One Sunday morning while attending a non-denominational religious service at the college I was attending in the early 1950s, the college Padre quoted the above passage in his sermon. Being a practising Christian at the time, I reasoned that having faith in the prescribed Christian doctrines should lead to, or at least assist, in achieving this wonderful peace of mind. Did it? Please read on.

After graduation, I became busy establishing a career in the Canadian industrial milieu as well as entering into marriage and raising a family. I did many of the things I was expected to do in the community in which I lived. This included leading a Boy Scout troop, teaching Sunday school, becoming a church elder and joining a service club. But as time went on, I became less involved with church work and my attendance fell off. Then, for some reason, I began to question the basic articles of the Christian faith, partly because this faith did not entirely bring about the promised "peace which surpasses all understanding." There were nagging doubts. Was there really a God and was there really an afterlife?

My career prospered reasonably well, and I was able to comfortably retire at age sixty. My wife was active in her career as a professional musician and composer and my two children were well established and happy in their chosen careers. So, what to do with my time? I have always had a keen interest in aviation and though it would be great to get a pilot's licence. I took flying lessons, obtained a private pilot's licence and enjoyed flying light aircraft for close to fifteen years. I also had a long-time interest in electronics and helped form a club consisting of members who collect and restore antique radios. One member belonged to a humanist group (the precursor of HALA) as well as a small group that met monthly to discuss books on philosophy. I joined both groups and began reading widely on philosophy and the history of Christianity.

I soon discovered that the actual history of Christianity was not what I was taught in Sunday school. From my readings, I concluded that Jesus of Nazareth was an intelligent charismatic fully human Jew who formed a cult to promote his message of salvation. The Jewish leaders in the Temple considered him a threat and arranged to have him crucified. His message was strictly for Jews, most of whom did not accept his teachings and the sect eventually died out. That should have been the end of it, but a Pharisee named Saul (later Paul) picked up on the salvation message and successfully established a number of Churches in the eastern Mediterranean area. These Churches promoted the new Christian message, stating that while life has many difficult challenges, those who accept Jesus' message of salvation will be rewarded with life in an everlasting idyllic heaven. The beginnings of this new religion were precarious, but through the aid of Emperor Constantine, Christianity eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The rest, as they say, is history. Christianity gradually became a firmly established religion in the West and elsewhere. In my view, however, it is not based on reality. Instead, it is based on human concoctions.

My conclusions after extensive reasoning and discussions with other like-minded people are:

- All gods are human inventions.
- Jesus of Nazareth was fully human, not the supernatural son of God.
- The enigmatic Trinity is also a human invention.
- There is no afterlife. This life is all there is.

Yes, we are born, we live and we die. We develop in our mother's womb from elements and compounds derived from air, water and soil. We live for a period and then we die, being recycled back to air, water and soil. That's the end!

Surely then it follows that each life should be lived to the fullest, while adhering to a secular life philosophy of ethical and moral behaviour, guided by the principles of rational thought, scientific inquiry, responsibility, compassion, fairness and equality, without belief in supernatural phenomena. This is the credo that has finally given me “the peace which surpasses all understanding.”

Before concluding, in fairness I must mention that despite numerous shortcomings, Christianity also has positive attributes. Over the centuries, Christianity has provided moral guidance for many and it provides a welcomed sense of community for church members. As well, some of the world’s greatest music has been composed for religious celebrations. And outreach to the under-privileged is offered by many churches. But despite these attributes, many of today’s youth are rejecting supernatural dogma and are leaning toward a secular lifestyle. The decline of religiosity in most democratic countries in the West will most likely continue as older generations are replaced by the new. Finally, this discourse is intended mainly for those individuals who may be having doubts about the tenets of the religion they were brought up in, and who may be looking for more plausible alternatives. It is not intended to dissuade those who get great satisfaction, solace and yes, the peace which surpasses all understanding, from their comforting Christian beliefs. (DAH).

In Pursuit of Inclusive Economic Growth

How do we achieve optimum income equality in today’s economy?

One of President Bill Clinton’s most famous quotes was, “it’s the economy, stupid.” By concentrating on economic conditions, he was able to balance the U.S. budget by the time he left office. Yes, in the end, it is the state of its economy that determines the health of a nation. And from a humanist perspective, it is well established that in most democratic countries, prosperous economic conditions with high income equality and a thriving middle-class, will lead to less religiosity and more desirable secularism.

Today, however, in the emerging digital economy, income equality is getting harder and harder to maintain, as automation and other factors cause various jobs to disappear. At the same time, the middle-class is shrinking while the top one percent is getting richer. So, under these conditions, is it possible to halt the declining income equality and cause the middle-class to grow again?

In an article in the June 20th Globe and Mail entitled, “In pursuit of inclusive economic growth,” OECD chief of staff, Gabriela Ramos, makes the case for moving toward prosperity that is more fairly shared across societies. Can it be done? Can an economic policy be devised that can maximize growth and maximize inclusiveness at the same time? Although it is easier said than done, Ramos believes that by putting people at the centre of policy making and teaching children at all levels of society, the skills needed to succeed in the new economy, more inclusiveness will be the result. She states that the OECD forecasts that 9% of jobs will disappear because of technical progress and another 20% are going to be transformed, but admits the transition will not be easy. She says, “you should not protect jobs, you should protect people, by investing in their skills and looking at ways that they could make the transition.” She repeats several times that the issues are very complicated, but employment services in OECD countries must strive to find ways to help increase inclusiveness.

She mentions Canada ranks fifth out of 38 OECD countries in “The Better Life Index,” but improvements are needed in several areas including child-care services and better inclusion of indigenous people. Yes, the tasks ahead are challenging. Can we meet them by putting people at the centre of our decisions?