



# The Enlightenment



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## **Humanist Canada Essay Contest - William Kirk Takes Second Prize**

Earlier this year Humanist Canada sponsored an essay contest for the purpose of encouraging high school students to learn more about humanism. First prize to be \$1000, second \$750 and third \$250. We are pleased to report that HALA member William Kirk won second prize. William's essay is printed below. William certainly deserved to win a prize with this well-thought-out essay. Congratulations William!

### **The Right to Knowledge: Using Literacy as Defense Against Tyranny**

*By William Kirk*

Should countries around the world guarantee the right to literacy and the right to keep and own books in their respective constitutions to defend against tyranny and autocracy?

The question on whether countries around the world such as Canada, the US, the UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, and others should guarantee the right to literacy and the right to keep and own books is a question that has been popping in my head for quite awhile now. Time and time again we've seen autocrats throughout history target and assault literacy and education, and unfortunately this is a trend that continues today in the 21st century. In this essay I will lay out the reasons why I think the right to literacy and the right to keep and own books is an absolutely essential right for Earth's citizens today in the 21st century.

Autocrats and demagogues really do not like an educated or literate public. Usually when they first assume power the first thing they attack is education and the intelligentsia. They like a public that can easily be controlled and whose thoughts can easily be mended to suit their agendas. One of the first signs that a country or region is descending into autocracy/tyranny is when leaders attack freethinking intellectuals and artists who either disagree with them or might potentially disagree with them and vehemently criticize them. Under this type of rule, books that might contravene the leader's ideology are banned and destroyed and the authors of them attacked, imprisoned, killed, or placed under heavy watch by the government. No matter who is the tyrant/demagogue, the formula is always the same, and it is this type of rule that poses a danger to all of us that profess to be atheists, agnostics, free thinkers, and secular humanists.

In the pre civil war antebellum US south, it became illegal to educate and teach slaves how to read in several states like Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Laws were drafted in these states to punish people who taught slaves how to read so that slaves would not learn how to think for themselves and decide to run away to free states and Canada where slavery was illegal. Slave owners preferred uneducated illiterate slaves who could not think for themselves and would just accept that their lives were miserable and that was the end of it. Fredrick Douglass was not one of these slaves. Born in 1818 to plantation slaves in Maryland, Douglass was sold to several slave owners throughout the state of Maryland. When he was 10 years old, he taught himself how to read with the help of his Master's wife by reading the books off his owner's shelf and sounding out the words in them. Not satisfied with his lot in life, Douglass escaped to Massachusetts and later became a famous abolitionist, advisor to President Lincoln, and a celebrated author. Douglass' story and the story of other formerly illiterate slaves like him really shows how literacy is a powerful tool for freedom and freethought. If he had not been taught how to read, he probably would never had run away and become a famous abolitionist, slavery may not have ever been abolished, and we may have not got to know his famous name.

One of the autocratic regimes most notorious for censorship of literature and the persecution of freethinkers and intellectuals was the regime of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945. If any dictatorship exemplifies the hatred of literature and ideas by tyrants, it is Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. Although other regimes such as the Soviet Union, Maoist era China, and Khmer Rouge era Cambodia also hated the intelligentsia and literature that presented opinions contrary to their own, none hated literature and the intelligentsia on the scale of Nazi Germany. Immediately after taking power in 1933, Nazi students and professors made a huge list of which books should be declared "un-German" and should not be read by "Aryan Germans". Most of these books were books written by Jewish German intellectuals like Einstein and German anti Nazi leftists. Also banned were American and British authors like Ernest Hemingway. The Nazis regularly raided bookstores and threw these types of "dangerous" books into bonfires so that they couldn't be read by anyone and give them the ability to question Nazi ideals. Although not strictly literature, the Nazis were also notorious for raiding art museums during WW2 and stealing artwork by Jewish artists. Basically, they were trying to ban any book that went against their ideals or that criticized their ideas, showing once again the power of books as a tool for freedom against tyranny.

I've often wondered why governments around the world haven't declared the right to literacy and keep and own books, given that literacy and reading are so essential for democracy. The U.S. has the right to keep and bear arms in their Constitution to supposedly protect against government tyranny even though an educated citizenry "armed" with knowledge is a much larger threat to tyranny than an uneducated citizenry that is heavily armed with weapons. In Venezuela for example, the tyrannical government of Nicolas Maduro is allied with these armed gangs of uneducated left-wing thugs called colectivos who go around torturing and murdering political opponents of Maduro while the pro democracy protestors led by Juan Guaido are largely from the educated classes. If arms really did protect a country from tyranny, the heavily armed colectivos of Venezuela would have overthrown Maduro right away. Also, arms haven't really protected America from tyranny given that the US has some of the harshest counter terrorism laws in the world and the highest per capita imprisonment rates in the world.

The ideal literate republic in my view would revere books and literature like the US now reveres guns. In this republic it would be considered your patriotic duty to read and keep books in your house and an obligation to give your child a good education where they could gain an appreciation of science and the arts. In this republic lobbying groups like the NRA (National Readers Association) would have a lot of power over the

government and would lobby the government to provide funds to promote literacy and public education. This I believe, would be the best defence against tyranny for countries across the world.

## Conveniences

Having edited and published *The Enlightenment* for almost fifteen years, I am asking readers to indulge me while I do a bit of personal reminiscing. As I recline in my Laz-e-boy in my family room in the house I have lived in for forty years, I can't help but marvel at just how my day-to-day living is so convenient, compared to eighty years ago when, at ten years of age, I lived for a time in a house in the country with no electricity, no running water, no central heating, and no indoor plumbing.

In those days in my home, water came from a well with a hand pump, heat came from a coal burning stove, light from coal oil lamps, and of course there was the ubiquitous outhouse. Hot water came from a reservoir on the stove. Weekly baths were held in a large metal tub with hot water from the reservoir or heated on the stove. Washing machines were powered by a small air-cooled gasoline engine for those who had one. Clothes were dried on a line. Radios were operated by batteries. Vegetables and small fruits came from a large garden that required a lot of tending to by hand with planting, hoeing, and picking. Despite all the effort required, believe it or not, this style of living was quite normal and acceptable for families living in a rural area with no hydro.

But things began to change during the 1930s when the Ontario Hydro Electric Power Corporation, as it was known in those days, embarked on a program of rural electrification. As can be imagined, as soon as the wires were strung, drastic changes occurred. Electric lighting replaced coal oil lamps, and electric pumps provided running water allowing for the installation of indoor plumbing. And for housewives, life became easier in the kitchen with the addition of electric stoves, refrigerators, electric toasters, etc. Laundering became easier with the addition of an electric washing machine and an electric iron. As General Electric proclaimed in advertising on radio, and later on TV, we were "living better electrically."

And over the decades, improvements and new gadgets kept arriving. Washing machines became automatic, electric driers replaced clothes lines, microwave ovens came on the scene, central air conditioners made life more bearable in the hot weather, and natural gas replaced wood, coal and oil in central heating systems. Today we are, indeed, enjoying a lifestyle of ease with conveniences made possible by a series of technological breakthroughs in the relatively short time of just over two hundred years. This new era of technical progress ushered in the Industrial Revolution about ten millennia after the dawn of the Agricultural Revolution and brought great changes into the lives of humankind for better or for worse. (The better and worst is explored in the following article, *What Hath Technology Wrought?*).

An early major technical breakthrough was the improvement of the steam engine by James Watt. Later Nikola Tesla's invention of three phase alternating current led to the electric age. Then Heinrich Hertz's proof that electromagnetic signals could be transmitted through the atmosphere fostered radio and TV. Nikolaus Otto's invention of the internal combustion engine resulted in today's huge automotive industry and the Wright brothers' invention of powered flight eventually resulted in global travel with ease. And now of course, we are living in the early stages of the digital age with personal computers (PCs), the amazing internet, robotics, and looming artificial intelligence.

Yes, we now live amidst a plethora of conveniences requiring very little physical effort on our part. With my remote I don't even have to get up to change the channel. Practically all the world's knowledge is available

on Google, and books ordered on Amazon appear the next day. With a printer attached to my computer, I can print issues of *The Enlightenment* and send them out by email. All this and much more is wonderful but is it all positive? Mostly positive, I reckon, but there are some negatives too. Keep reading.

## **What Has Technology Wrought? – And What About Science?**

At the outset it must be mentioned that in the interest of simplicity, the word science does not occur in the previous article about the many conveniences that have been made possible by technological inventions and innovations. But as often as not, many technological breakthroughs would not have occurred without previous scientific discoveries. Therefore, it is necessary to bring science into the picture.

To illustrate this point, the electrical appliances we have today would not be available without the work of early scientists exploring the intricacies of direct current and discovering the relationship between electricity and magnetism among other things. These men include Volta, Ampere, and Ohm. Their names are honoured in the electrical units of Volts, Amps, and Ohms in use today. Later, Michael Faraday discovered electrical induction that led to the development of the transformer, the dynamo and the electric motor, resulting in the gargantuan electric grid we have today. So, it is no coincidence that we so often hear the expression “science and technology” because they go hand in glove.

And there are two other important words or subjects that must be brought in the picture. They are engineering and mathematics. Today we often hear or read about the STEM subjects in Universities. STEM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Again, they all go together like hand in glove in influencing the way we live.

The various disciplines of engineering, including civil, electrical, chemical and aeronautical, provide designs for infrastructure, factories and aircraft. And the importance of mathematics can not be overestimated. It is an invaluable tool for scientists, engineers and technologists alike.

At the present time we often read or hear about the financing of the STEM subjects in universities, at the neglect of the liberal arts. An interesting topic indeed, but one for a future article.

After answering the second question in the title, back to the first question, “What Hath Technology Wrought?” Without question it has brought tremendous progress in reducing manual labour. I would not ever want to go back to the days of coal oil lamps and boring chores that had to be tended to. Yes, machinery and appliances have made life a lot easier. Another benefit that seldom gets mentioned is the establishment of a sizable middle class for the first time in history as a result of the Industrial Revolution. While small groups of hunter-gatherers may have had a form of egalitarian society, ever since the start of the Agricultural Revolution there has been a small number of well-off rulers and aristocracy and large numbers of poor peasants living lives of drudgery, right up until the beginnings of the mercantile system and the early years of capitalism in the eighteenth century.

The middle class reached its zenith in the period beginning after the end of WW II in 1945, lasting until about 1980. At least in the Western world, this was a period of prosperity for most as real incomes continued to rise. I was fortunate to have had a career and able to raise a family in this era, eventually being able to retire in relative comfort. My children will also soon retire in comfort, but my grandchildren may never own a home in which to retire. What has happened? More on this later.

In any discussion about the fruits of science and technology it would be remiss not to mention advancements in the medical field. Ever since the invention of the microscope and the stethoscope there has been steady progress as can be illustrated by statistics on life expectancy. World average life expectancy in 1900 was 31 years, rising to 48 in 1950 and to 72.2 in 2017. Average life expectancy in Canada in 2017 was 82.3 years. This remarkable advancement is the result of improved hygiene, pasteurization, vaccines, antibiotics, and a huge variety of medications for all types of illnesses. All due to the work of dedicated scientists. On the technology front, x-rays, Cat scans, MRIs, and other diagnostic tools have been helpful. Lasers and laparoscopic techniques have become commonplace in operating rooms. Another contributing factor to longer life expectancy has been government sponsored Medicare for all in many countries. Continuing to finance this level of care will be a challenge in the future.

I think it can be safely stated that the most undesirable manifestation of science and technology is using modern discoveries and inventions to increase the destruction and killing power of wars. The prime example of course is nuclear fission, that can be used to generate needed electricity or make unbelievably powerful bombs. A means of destroying the world is now available. For many years this threat was a deterrent for wars, but now with a rogue nation possessing nuclear weapons, the threat is of great concern. Surely now is the time to resort to negotiations to solve disputes rather than war.

Another concern is that the proliferation of conveniences has brought about much less physical effort resulting in people getting less exercise. With fast foods and lack of exercise, obesity is becoming a problem for some people, while others pay money to go to a gym to get physical exercise. In my youth we had chores to do that were necessary in order to live from day to day while automatically keeping us in shape. Unlike today's youth who spend so much time indoors playing video games or experimenting with drugs, we spent a lot of time outside playing with friends making up our own fun. Our parents never worried about us and we always came home at night.

Yes, it is enjoyable to muse a bit about days gone by, but we must face reality and concentrate on the future, because if there is one word to describe the future, that word in my view, is uncertainty. We have a world where populist governments are emerging in some countries, threats of returning to cold war days are festering, trade wars are causing grief for exporters, and Islamic jihad is still around. And we are in the early years of the digital age with uncertainties in how the middle class will fare with increasing use of robotics and the largely unknown manifestations of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Old jobs will disappear, but will there be meaningful employment for a majority in the days ahead? Or will the middle class continue to shrink and only a small wealthy elite prosper as society reverts to pre-industrial revolution days?

Not necessarily so, says Dutch author Rutger Bregman. In his recent book, *Utopia for Realists*, Bregman makes a case for Universal Basic Income, a 15-hour week, ending poverty, and open borders as a way toward a thriving future. But how do we get there?

## **Evolution or Revolution**

It took about 150 years from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution until the establishment of a sizable prosperous middle class. Unfortunately, the middle class is shrinking as more and more wealth is garnered by a greedy minority of multi-millionaires and billionaires. If these trends continue, societies will revert, as already mentioned, to pre-industrial revolution days, where a small minority of well-offs existed along side

a large majority of not-so-well-offs, with few in between. If conditions ever get to this state, there would almost certainly be a revolution as occurred in France in 1789.

It took WW II to end the Great Depression and usher in the creation of a thriving middle class. WW III is not impossible, but hopefully unthinkable because humanity could be destroyed.

A hallmark of the era after WW II was increasing economic equality. The wealthy were paying their share of taxes with the top Federal tax rate in the U.S. at 90% until 1963, reducing to 70% until 1982, declining to 30% in 1990 and sitting at about 40% today. In addition, the wealthy have stored billions and billions – maybe even trillions – in tax shelters overseas. Helping to bolster the amount of money in tax shelters is the unconscionable rise in executive salaries from 20-30 times that of workers in 1965 to over 250 times today. All this contributing to increasing economic inequality. So, what is the solution for better times in the years ahead? Bregman offers his solution in *Utopia for Realists*:

It is not technology itself that determines the course of history. In the end it is we humans who decide how we want to shape our destiny. The scenario of radical inequality that is taking shape in the U.S. is not our only option. The alternative is that at some point during this century, we reject the dogma that we have to work for a living. The richer we as a society become the less effectively the labour market will be at distributing prosperity. If we want to hold on to the blessings of technology, ultimately there's only one choice left and that's redistribution. Massive redistribution.

Redistribution of money (basic income), of time (a shorter work week), of taxation (on capital instead of labour), and of course robots. Technological progress may make society more prosperous in aggregate, but there's no economic law that says everyone will benefit. Not long ago, the French economist Thomas Piketty had people up in arms with his contention that if we continue down our current path, we will soon find ourselves back in pre-industrial revolution age conditions. Barring high taxation on capital, inequality could develop to frightening proportions once again.

What Bregman and Piketty are saying is that greed must be replaced with compassion for all of humanity. It may have been noticed by some that presidential candidate Marianne Williamson is advocating just that. She has correctly identified many of the current problems in the U.S. including control of Congress by the NRA, big business, and big finance, festering white nationalism, racial inequality, global warming, deteriorating infrastructure and increasing inequality, not to mention a lying, egotistical autocratic President. Williamson says the solution is more love, but the right words in my view, are more compassion.

Love is a very powerful word that I feel should be limited to love for one's family members and very close friends, or for love of country, love of nature, love of the arts, or love of life in general. When talking about the well-being of society as a whole, I think compassion for fellow human beings is a better word than love. If the world envisioned by Bregman is ever to come about, the wealthy will have to replace greed with compassion and be willing to share their wealth. Will this ever occur? If so, will it be through some kind of disruptive revolution, or for the sake of all our great-grandchildren, through a quick evolution (not 150 years as in the past) to societies where everyone gets a fair shake? A good start in the U.S. would be the defeat of Trump in the next election. But this is by no means a certainty.