



The Enlightenment



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

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The Pale Blue Dot

By Carl Sagan

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.



The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

President's Remarks

The inspiring words of Carl Sagan presented on the first page of this issue of the *Enlightenment* are certainly a fitting expression of the Humanist outlook. Sagan was an outstanding astronomer who, through his popular "Cosmos" TV series and numerous books, promoted a skeptical attitude toward religion and belief in the supernatural, combined with a profound sense of awe and wonder in response to the mysteries of the universe, which can best be described as a secular form of spirituality. According to Sagan, "science is not only *compatible* with spirituality; it is a profound *source* of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual." Elsewhere in this issue, Don Hatch provides an interesting and informative overview of the history of HALA in recognition of the 10th anniversary of our organization. We look back with satisfaction at what has been accomplished, and we look forward to continued growth and success in promoting the cause of humanism in our community. In this regard, we are currently looking forward to our public event at the Wolf Hall in June with Dan Barker speaking on the topic of "Losing Faith in Faith." Barker is a former evangelical Christian preacher who became an atheist and is now a leading proponent of secularism in the U.S. We're hoping to attract a large audience for this talk, and we're asking our members to do all they can to help publicize it. ~ Rod Martin

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Wednesday of the months September to June inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Special issues are published from time to time. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

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New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary, Walter Heywood (519) 434-9237, email wjheywood@yahoo.ca Membership fees are listed below.

	<u>HALA</u> <u>Basic</u>	<u>HALA Limited</u> <u>Resources</u>	<u>HC</u> <u>Basic</u>	<u>Humanist</u> <u>Perspectives</u>
Single	\$20	\$10	\$40	\$25
Family	\$25	\$15	\$50	
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Why?

Why is the world in such a frigten mess when there are so many good things on our miraculous planet? This point is forcefully brought home in Carl Sagan's discourse on the cover of this *Enlightenment*, where he employs a picture of our only home taken by the Voyager II spacecraft, making us ponder why we are unable to live peacefully on this earth that we have been privileged to inhabit, especially considering that it is truly a miracle that we are here at all.

Yes indeed, a miracle! Each of us is here as a result of thirteen and three quarter billion years of fortuitous events. Every atom in our body is the result of stars, planets and chemical elements being formed after the big bang, plus an evolutionary process that in the case of our earthly home, occurred over a period of about four and a half billion years. By some intriguing mechanism that we do not yet fully understand, a single-celled organism with the ability to reproduce itself evolved on planet earth. Then, over the eons, simple life forms mutated to form more and more complex organisms, both plant and animal, until a relatively short time ago, human kind appeared as hunter gatherers. These early humans eventually developed agricultural practices and formed civilized communities about six or seven millennia ago.

Then from about 900 to 200 BCE (Before the Common Era) in different regions of the world, four great transitions came into being that have continued to influence humanity to this day. They are Confucianism and Taoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheistic Judaism in Israel with its scions Christianity and Islam; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This was the period of Confucius, Buddha, Jeremiah and Socrates. It was during this era, which became known as the *Axial Age*, that the religions of the world materialized. All religions purported to foster peace, compassion and concern for fellow humans, but at this they have been colossal failures. As Carl Sagan notes, humans have been eager to kill one another, have developed fervent hatreds (xenophobia) and rivers of blood have been spilled in countless wars, many being religious wars. Why has this been the case and why are these atrocities still occurring today?

Well, apparently it is at least partly because many, but certainly not all humans, have little concern for the miracle and the sanctity of life itself. Little do they consider, or even know about, the miraculous chain of events that has allowed them the privilege of being alive on our planet. Instead they are greedy and will do almost anything, even take the life of fellow humans, to satisfy their desires. How can we help to ameliorate these occurrences? I suggest we might start with children in their formative years. As philosophy professor A.C. Grayling states in his book *The God Argument*, "To put matters at their simplest, the major reason for the continuance of religious belief in a world which might otherwise have been moved beyond it, is the indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason."

Yes, we need to stop filling the inquisitive minds of children with supernatural religious untruths and raise them in a secular environment while imparting sound moral and ethical values. Then we need to inform them about the awes and wonders of the universe, the creative accomplishments of humans and the sanctity and preciousness of all forms of life, including their own. We know this approach works because children raised in prosperous secular Scandinavia sometimes ask, why are there plus signs on churches?

By putting the emphasis on the sacredness of life, and why it is the ultimate sin to destroy the life of other human beings, then perhaps the world will be a better place. (DAH).

The Hidden Hand of Terror

by John K. Nixon

Indonesia, with a population of some 250 million, contains 12.7% of the world's Muslims. It is the largest majority Muslim country in the world, with 88% of its population adhering to that faith. It is however a secular country with a reputation as a tolerant and pluralistic society. Far from the Arabian heartland of Islam, Indonesian women have long played an important role in society, being well represented in most professions and in the work force. A former president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, was a woman.

I first visited that country in 1961, for a wedding reception for my Javanese-born bride and myself. We had married the year before in Montreal. Since then I have visited Indonesia at least six times at intervals of several years. I have always found the people charming and friendly and have been captivated by the tropical beauty, the enticing cuisine and the gentle art and culture of the country.

During my last extended visit in 2007 I was struck by the number of new mosques and Islamic schools sprouting in many small towns and villages through which we travelled. My host explained that the funding for the construction of these was coming from Saudi Arabia, with one condition attached. The Indonesian imams would be sent to Saudi Arabia to be trained, before returning to officiate at the new mosques.

I have also sensed a distinct increase in religious conservatism in the country over the past 15 years or more. This is most obvious in the way that women dress. Photographs taken at my wedding reception in Yogyakarta in 1961 showed some 150 guests, roughly evenly divided between men and women. Not a single woman had her hair concealed. From my most recent visit in November this year, and in recent photographs that I have seen, a significant number of women now cover their hair with a jilbab (head scarf).

There has been much recent publicity in the Western Press of the role played by Saudi Arabia in contributing to the rise of militant Islam throughout the world. Over more than four decades it has been estimated that that country has spent over \$100 billion of its vast oil revenues on promoting worldwide the violent, intolerant and crudely puritanical Wahhabi version of Islam espoused by the ruling royal family. Jonathan Manthorpe in the Vancouver Sun reports that from 1983 to 2003 Saudi oil money had financed the construction of 210 Islamic centres, 1500 mosques, 202 colleges and 2,000 madrassas (Islamic schools). During the 1979-1989 Afghan war against the Soviets, Saudi charities contributed to the founding of scores of madrassas on the Afghan-Pakistan border. These turned out the foot soldiers of the Taliban, who preached the vitriol of war on the infidels (at that time the atheistic Russian Communists, but later on the Western countries).

It appears the role of Saudis in spreading this poisonous message has been deliberately downplayed in the West, particularly in the USA. The relationship between the West and Saudi Arabia is a complicated one. The West up until now has needed access to the vast oil resources of the kingdom, and of other conservative Gulf States. The Saudis on the other hand need Western technology to unlock those resources, and they depend on the ravenous market for oil-based products provided by the West. In return the Saudis have turned a blind eye to the presence of American bases on their soil (anathema incidentally to the late Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida).

Today we see the spread of militant Islam throughout much of the world. Taking advantage of turmoil created in many Muslim countries, (often religious strife between Sunnis and Shias), the Wahhabi message has expanded through a swath of middle-eastern countries (Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen,

Iraq and Lebanon) to Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Mali and Northern Nigeria. In consequence, the voice of the majority of so-called moderate Muslims has been largely drowned out.

Comparisons have been drawn with the rise of the Nazis in Germany before the Second World War. At first the few Nazis were regarded as a lunatic fringe by the rest of the German population who were too busy with other problems in their lives to take notice, until it was too late.

Fortunately there are two courageous women who are speaking out openly in the West against the atrocities committed in the name of Islam.

Somali-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali has written two best-selling books (*Infidel* and *Nomad*) detailing her escape from an Islamic tribal society and an arranged marriage to an older man, to a career as a politician in Holland and her current position as a public lecturer in the U.S. Similarly Syrian-born Dr. Wafa Sultan emigrated to the USA after she became disillusioned with the rise of Islamism in Syria. As a medical student she had witnessed the machine-gunning to death of her professor in front of a class of students by Islamic fanatics. Both women have renounced their faith and have denounced particularly the treatment of women in Islam, including honour killings, public death by stoning for adultery, forced marriage of child brides and female genital mutilation. Both have received death threats and Hirsi Ali, at least, is under constant bodyguard protection.

Samuel Huntington, in his controversial 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations*, predicted that, in the post-Cold War world, conflicts would no longer be motivated by ideology or economics, but would be along cultural and religious fault lines. He and others before him had forecast a clash between Islamic societies and the Western democratic states. Today, with the siren call of Islamic extremism echoing around the globe, many would say his predictions are now being realized.

What can be done to stem this rising tide of evil? Obviously, the sooner that the rest of the world can wean itself off Middle-Eastern oil in favour of other sources of conventional oil or of alternative energy, the better. Some would argue that is akin to closing the barn door after the horse has bolted.

Eventually the long silent voice of the presumed moderate Muslim majority worldwide must speak out forcibly against the barbaric practices and diet of hatred being preached by the Islamists who have effectively hijacked their faith. Whatever the pretext, violence committed in the name of religion can never be justified.

Meanwhile, since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, the influence of Islamic radicals in Indonesia has been growing. Under President Suharto, religious extremism was not tolerated in a country whose constitution guaranteed freedom of religion. Since the various Islamic political parties suffered major defeats in the 1999 elections, there has been a proliferation of Islamic extremist groups that have turned to acts of violence.

On 25 December 2000, bombs exploded at 11 Christian churches across Indonesia, killing 19 people. In 2002, 202 people died in two massive bomb attacks in a Bali nightclub, many of them foreign tourists. Another bombing in Bali in 2005 killed 20 more. In 2003 and again in 2009 two tourist hotels in Jakarta were bombed, killing 21 people in total. Most of these incidents were traced to the banned Jem'ah Islamiyah network.

In 2011 suicide bombers wounded 30 people in a mosque on a police compound in Cirebon, West Java, and wounded another 22 Christian churchgoers in Solo, Central Java. There have also been outbreaks of

violence against the Ahmadiyya Muslim sect which is regarded as heretical by the Sunni Muslim majority.

There has been criticism in some quarters that the police and government agencies have been slow to react to such incidents for fear of offending Islam. At the same time the Indonesian legal system has become increasingly influenced by Islam. In 1991 Sharia law pertaining to family rights was introduced across the nation. In the province of Aceh in Northern Sumatra, Sharia law was appended to the penal code in 2001. This was considered a concession to the Acehnese who had long been the most devout Muslims in the country and had agitated for separation from the rest of Indonesia.

In a survey published by the Pew Research Center in April 2013, 72% of Indonesian Muslims favoured having Sharia as the official law of the land, while 93% agreed that a wife is always obliged to obey her husband.

Currently Indonesian lawmakers, led by a team of conservative Muslim scholars, are considering a new criminal code that will impose up to five years in prison for premarital sex, and prison terms for adultery.

My concern remains that Indonesia, a country with which I share a personal and enduring bond, may eventually fall victim to the message of violent jihad broadcast by Saudi-trained imams, and lapse into the turmoil and chaos that have convulsed so many other Muslim countries. (Printed with permission of John K. Nixon and Humanist Perspectives).

John K. Nixon is a professional engineer living in West Vancouver. Most of his career has been devoted to consulting engineering in mining and metallurgy. He holds a B.Eng degree from McGill University and an MBA from York University.

HALA History – Celebrating Ten Years

January 2014 marked the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA). At the 2013 HALA Solstice celebration held on December 14th, Don Hatch gave the following account of the history of HALA as it occurred over this ten-year period. It is printed below for the benefit of those who were not at the Solstice event.

The entity that evolved into HALA began as a small study group at the Unitarian Fellowship of London (UFL) on January 6th 2000, with about a dozen people participating. The prime mover was Harold Koehler who served as secretary until he passed away in November of 2007. Most meetings consisted of a speaker on a topic related to humanism, followed by a discussion. The discussions were considered to be of particular importance because it was during those early years that discussions after the sermon ceased at UFL. These discussion periods were missed by a considerable number of UFL members and subsequently some of them began to attend the humanist meetings. By 2003, as many as twenty people were attending these sessions. A few of the attendees were also members of the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC) and some of these people suggested that it would be worth investigating the possibility of becoming an affiliate of this organization. A set of Bylaws was drawn up and the group became the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA) in January of 2004. The first president was Derek Kaill, who was really the instigator of becoming an affiliate of HAC.

With the formation of HALA, the executive at UFL informed us that we were no longer considered to be a UFL study group, and therefore we would have to pay a nominal rental fee for use of the meeting room. This was completely understandable and we went along with this arrangement for a short while until we

moved to the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, a more central location, on September 8th 2005. The format of our meetings remained the same, as attendance grew to forty or more at each monthly session. Our membership grew as well and now as we complete our tenth year as HALA, membership stands at 78 people.

In the autumn of 2009, Goldie Emerson and Don Hatch went through the fairly complicated process of applying to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) requesting charitable status for HALA. We were elated to learn early in 2010 that charitable status had been granted. In order to qualify, we had to draw up a Constitution outlining the purpose of HALA among other things. In that document it is stated that:

“The purpose of the Association shall be to educate and increase the public's understanding of the principles of secular worldviews, including humanism, through the provision of seminars, conferences, and newsletters.”

We consider our regular meetings to be seminars, and our special events to be conferences and we deem the *Enlightenment* to be our newsletter. Because we operate in the CRA category of education, we must always keep this in mind as we plan our activities.

Throughout the years, we have had a wide variety of speakers expounding on a variety of topics at our meetings. Many have been from the faculty at UWO and some have been our own members. Others have come from out-of-town. Many topics in addition to those related directly to humanism and secularism have been presented and discussed. These topics include cosmology, the existence or non-existence of god, multiculturalism, justice, dying with dignity, the economy, politics, ethics, philosophy, and global warming. A number of meetings have concerned various health matters. Why should health be a topic of discussion at humanist meetings? Well, one of the aims of humanists is to strive for a happy and contented lifestyle, and it is hard to be happy when you are sick. In other words, prevention of sickness should be of prime concern not just to humanists, but everybody. In particular, I remember Dr. David Spence telling us that strokes can be prevented by not smoking and by adhering to a proper diet. A couple of years ago we asked three members to tell us how they became a humanist at one of our meetings. This proved to be a successful and enjoyable evening and since then we have had two more of these meetings. At our AGM in January 2014, two other members related their experiences in becoming humanists.

In addition to regular meetings, there are other HALA activities. These include special events, social gatherings, our web site and *The Enlightenment*. The special events are usually held at the Wolf Performance Hall. The first, held in 2009, was a four-part presentation celebrating Charles Darwin's 200th birthday and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Two of the four presenters were our members, André Lachance and Don Santor. The topic at the two 2011 events was the “Evolution of Belief,” and presenters were Gretta Vosper and our own Rod Martin. In 2012 Tarek Fatah spoke on multiculturalism. The 2013 special event was a debate held at UWO. The topic: “Be it resolved that the public funding for Roman Catholic Schools in Ontario be abolished.” On the pro side was Justin Trottier of CFI in Toronto, and on the con side was Patrick Dunn, formerly of the London Catholic School Board. Of course we concurred that Justin won the debate. In June of 2014, Dan Barker from the Freedom from Religion Federation will be the speaker at the Wolf Performance Hall.

Our social gatherings entail potluck summer picnics in July and Solstice Celebrations in December. Delightful summer picnics were held at the Chefurka's rural location for a number of years, then at the Schmall's in Woodstock in 2012 and at Walter and Laurie's residence in London in 2013. We very much appreciate the hospitality of these members. Solstice Celebrations have been held at UFL, Tollpuddle meeting room, 427 Wing, and in 2011 at the home of Alison and Jon Hore. We are grateful to Alison and Jon for opening up their home on this occasion.

The HALA web site was first developed and maintained by John Pope, who has since moved to Victoria. For a few years, the site was maintained by Alison Cunningham, but was recently revised and upgraded by Rod Martin who is also maintaining it. We now have a world-class site and we very much appreciate Rod's efforts in this regard.

The first issue of *The Enlightenment* was published in April 2005, a little over a year after HALA was officially formed. The aims as stated at that time were:

1. To inform members of up-coming meetings and events.
2. To present interesting and sometimes provocative articles that invite comments, discussion and criticism.
3. To present articles written by our members, and others, that will be of interest to humanists.

As things have turned out, *The Enlightenment* has evolved to be not so much a newsletter, but more of a mini-journal containing articles of a philosophical or academic bent on subjects that hopefully will be of interest to humanists. Instead of using *The Enlightenment* to advise members and friends of up-coming meetings and events, we issue separate monthly notices and posters advising of these activities. Meeting notices are also listed on the HALA web site. We have been fortunate that a significant number of our members have contributed articles in various *Enlightenments*. They include Goldie Emerson, Jackie Emerson, Derek Kaill, Tony Hewitt, Don Santor, Rod Martin, Catherine Campbell, Jim Cranwell, Bob Harrington, Kate Balogh, You-Sheng Li, Joyce Orchard, Maria Stuhlemmer, Marianne Nyhof, Garth Santor, and the author of this commentary. Non-members who have contributed are Reverend Felicia Urbanski, Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova, and John K. Nixon. We encourage all members who like to write articles for the purpose of expressing their views and opinions, to send them in.

Like all non-profit organizations, HALA could not exist without dedicated volunteers to serve on the Board of Directors and work at other positions as well. At this time I would like to recognize the following: Presidents have been Derek Kaill, Don Hatch, and Rod Martin. Vice Presidents have been Don Hatch, Rod Martin and Jon Hore. Secretaries have been Harold Koehler, Kate Balogh, Don Hatch, and Carolyn Rowland. Treasurers have been Richard Gibbens, Claire Van Daele-Boseret, Olive Porter, and Brian Prachar. Other Board Members have been Goldie Emerson, Bill Chefurka, Walter Heywood, Charlotte Kurn, Terri DeCaire, André Lachance, Peter Evans, Ed Ashman, Dave Mabee, Jim Cranwell, and John Pope. In other roles, Bill Chefurka, Goldie Emerson, and Jon Hore have served on the program committee, and Bill and Goldie along with Marianne Nyhof have served on nominating committees. For a time Camile Van Daele provided classical music before our meetings and for many years Jackie Emerson dutifully provided coffee, tea and cookies. This important task is now being managed by Marianne Nyhof. Finally, I want to make special mention of Jackie Emerson's contribution in proof reading and improving my *Enlightenment* articles over the years. (A hearty vote of thanks was given to all these volunteers).

While anniversaries are certainly times for looking back and reminiscing about the past, they are also times for looking ahead. Late in 2013, members and friends filled out a questionnaire for the purpose of providing the executive guidelines as to how members would like to see HALA grow and prosper in the future. The results (published in the previous *Enlightenment*) will definitely enable HALA to accomplish even greater things in the next ten years, as we continue on our humanist journey. (DAH).

After the presentation of the HALA history, everyone dug into our special ten-year anniversary cake.