



The Enlightenment



**The Newsletter of the
Humanist Association of London and Area**
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Journey's End

Life is often described as a journey with a beginning, a middle and an end. We have no control over the beginning, variable control over the hopefully extended middle and little control over the end. This issue of the *Enlightenment* will centre on the final phase of life's journey because at the present moment, the subject of death is occupying some prominence in the news. Two of the issues receiving attention are euthanasia and palliative care, both connected to the subject of "Dying With Dignity," a matter of interest to most humanists.

As I compose this *Enlightenment*, a case is underway in the British Columbia Supreme Court where Gloria Taylor, age 63, who has ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) is challenging the law that prohibits assisting a terminally ill person to end their life. This issue is one that our legislators have cowardly avoided ever since 1992 when the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 against Sue Rodriguez in a similar scenario. After the negative court ruling, Sue died with the assistance of an anonymous physician in 1993. The current penalty for assisting a suicide is a jail term up to 14 years, but charges were never laid. There is every possibility the Taylor case will end up in the Supreme Court of Canada, and even though 75% of Canadians are in favour of liberalization of the law, an outcome that would allow some form of sensibly monitored euthanasia to occur is uncertain. In any case it will behoove humanists to press for a positive outcome in any way possible.

Another topic currently in the news is palliative care. One concern is the looming increase in the population of older citizens as the baby boomers grow older. Will there be a sufficient number of affordable palliative care beds and nurses available, when even now there are problems in this area? A four page article in a recent *Globe and Mail* details the challenges that lie ahead. First there is the reality that, due to lack of funding, many palliative care patients are not getting the care and attention they deserve, and second, medical science has advanced to the point that patients can be kept alive much longer than in times past. This often presents families with the problem of deciding just how long to maintain a life that has lost any semblance of quality, although some people, when fully alert, have left instructions not to prolong their life if it is devoid of any meaning. Here again dying with dignity enters the picture.

Beginning on page three of this issue is a sensitive and thoughtful article on the subject of aging and death. This article by HALA member Goldwin Emerson, appeared recently in the *London Free Press* on the Saturday Spirituality and Ethics page. Goldwin has received a number of emails from readers stating that they found the article to be both helpful and comforting. (DAH).

President's Remarks

Another year has passed, and a new one has begun. Looking back, 2011 was a good year for HALA. Our membership has grown to a record high, we had a number of very interesting and informative speakers at our monthly meetings, we put on a successful two-part public speaker series at the Central Library, and we got together for two very enjoyable social events, celebrating the summer and winter solstices. As we move forward into 2012, we anticipate another year of rich opportunities for learning, growing, reaching out to the community, and deepening our friendships with one another. I want to take this opportunity to thank all the Board members who have worked hard to make the past year a success, and particularly Claire Van Daele-Boseret, Ed Ashman, and Peter Evans, who are moving off the Board this year. I also welcome our new Board members, Olive Porter, Carolyn Rowland, and Jon Hore (see the full Board membership below). I'd also like to remind all our members that it's time once again to renew your membership for the coming year. We're very excited to have Tarek Fatah as the speaker for our public lecture at the Wolf Performance Hall this May. Mr. Fatah is well known as a progressive Moslem who has written several books and is a popular speaker. He will no doubt attract a large audience. Just a reminder that we rely entirely on donations from our members to put on these lectures, and tax receipts will be issued for all contributions over \$10.00. If possible, please consider making a donation to help sponsor this event. ~ 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 July 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. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

Visit our web site at www.humanists-london.org

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

	<u>HC</u>	<u>Humanist</u>	<u>HALA</u>	<u>HALA Limited</u>
	<u>Basic</u>	<u>Perspectives</u>	<u>Basic</u>	<u>Resources</u>
Single	\$40	\$22	\$20	\$10
Family	\$50		\$25	\$15
Life	\$700			

Aging With Optimism

By Goldwin Emerson

From the moment of our birth we begin to age. And with aging comes an inevitable and inescapable progression towards death. For those who think about it at all, and many prefer not to, death becomes a part of our lives. The reality of death reminds us that we have limits upon our activities, our hopes and our dreams. Death circumscribes our lives and thoughtful people include the reality of death in our outlook about life.

Of course, there are many ways of dealing with the fact of death. Usually when we are young, death seems so far away that we don't give it much thought. For most young people, their own individual death seems so many years into the future that it is difficult to contemplate even if one tries hard to do so. Unless a classmate or a friend of our own age dies, the idea of death doesn't touch our lives very much. For many children, the death of a grandparent or a favourite aunt or uncle may force them into an abrupt encounter with death. They might wonder, perhaps for the first time, how could it be that their friend who was so very much alive yesterday is no longer with them today. Where could she/he be? Thus a limited number of young people are forced into recognizing the death of a friend. However, even this recognition falls far short of thinking about one's own death. If I am a teenager and my friend is killed in a traffic accident or an accidental drowning, I could be shocked and saddened, but I am still unlikely to think much about my own personal death. I will leave that thought for another day and a future time.

When we are middle-aged we will have had more time to encounter the deaths of friends, colleagues, parents or relatives. These experiences may have given us reason to think about the reality and finality of death. But we are also likely be busy in the ongoing matters of developing our career plans, paying off our house mortgages, raising and educating our children, establishing good relationships with our spouses or partners or any number of other things that we will encounter in the daily business of living. If we are adherents of a traditional religion, we may possibly be comforted by the hopes and promises of an eternal afterlife. These religious promises can help to alert us to the inevitability of death but the everyday demands on our time and energy might convince us that thinking about death is something that we will choose to defer until a later time.

As we become senior citizens the question of our own death emerges more eminently. By this time in our lives more friends, relatives, former colleagues and acquaintances will have died. Our physical and health problems will be more frequent and prominent. Perhaps we will take longer to think through fairly simple problems as clearly and as accurately as we once did. Our energy levels will decrease, and learning to operate new inventions and electronic gadgets becomes more challenging. Hooking up a new digital video disc player, or installing a new program on our computer may turn a half hour job into a half day project. Since we are probably retired we will have more time by ourselves to contemplate our achievements and our disappointments.

As seniors, we may have a traditional religious faith. But once again, we may not be comforted by the thoughts and promises of an afterlife, especially if these hopes are balanced against the possibility of eternal damnation. Our increasing age could cause us to hope more enthusiastically that such religious promises are well founded, but the urgency of questions about death might demand more certainty than our reasoned scepticism will permit us to accept.

It is possible that even after adhering to such traditional religious answers for many years of our lives we cannot bring ourselves to hope and believe in such ethereal promises.

If we are humanists, and seniors at that, it is unlikely that we will find much comfort or value in the religious promises of an eternal and glorious afterlife. We will find that too many mental gymnastics are required in order to convince ourselves. Our tradition of using our reasoning and common sense will not permit us to be comforted by religious faith that promises so much on so little evidence.

So what can we do, or more importantly, what can we think that will help us to fit the reality of our personal death into this life? What will provide our lives with fullness and meaning given the fact that we, and everyone else whom we know, and don't know, will die? What will permit us to say, "I know I am getting older, and I know that I will die, but that's okay"?

These are hard questions to answer. They are even difficult questions to ask in the first place. I suppose that in the long run, each person must find her or his own answers to this most personal event of our lives, our very own deaths. So the answers that follow are given with the full recognition that they are my answers and they may not make sense or give comfort to others although I hope that many of them can resonate favourably with fellow humanists.

1. Practise using your past strengths and talents to create a better world in the here and now. Use your senior years to improve society, and you will feel better about your own accomplishments. This will help you from becoming discouraged about modern events and ongoing changes in society. You will feel more valued as you become more useful to others.
2. Recognize your own talents, but equally important, be aware of your own limitations. As you notice more demands upon your energy, be willing to set realistic goals about what things you can achieve well and which tasks are too taxing for you to succeed in the way that you and others would like. If you can afford to do so, let others help you with difficult jobs such as outdoor painting or mowing the lawn or housework.
3. Enjoy each day to the fullest. Consider it a true gift each day that you are free from pain or worry or poverty or calamity. If you are religious then thank God for life. But if you are not religious be equally thankful for your life and happiness and for the universe we live in. Remember that every atom in your body was once inside a star.
4. Change your interests and activities in keeping with your energy and abilities. If you used to run a couple of kilometres a day, it's okay to walk instead, even if you do so only a few times a week. If you are tired after you baby-sit your grandchildren for one day don't be surprised or disappointed in yourself. It's a normal feeling for grandparents to experience.
5. As we age, problems with our health or our finances or our relationships may develop. Try not to burden others unduly with our own problems. When people ask, "How are you?" they are not asking for a long recital of all the aches and pains we have daily. As Dr. Andrew Mason observed, "Sainthood emerges when you can listen to someone else's tale of woe and not respond with a description of your own."

6. Try to remain flexible both physically and mentally. Don't alienate yourself from your family and from best friends by insisting on doing things in the same way that you have become used to. Be willing to consider new ideas, attempt new approaches or visit new places.

7. Be happy in the achievements that you have already accomplished. Let younger people take on some of the responsibility for the tasks that you have been doing even if they will do these activities and tasks in a way which is different from your own.

8. Accept less. That is, be willing to become a little less demanding of yourself. With this more relaxed approach comes more peace of mind and an acceptance of the finality of life. Avoid the desperate belief that the future success of society or of your family depends upon you.

9. Let reasonableness and not blind faith or fantasy be your guide. Having a clear mind and an acceptance of the inevitability of death is important in the understanding of the nature of life. This realization actually helps you to get more out of daily living as each day becomes more precious.

10. Be comforted in the thought that, although you are personally not immortal, much of what you accomplish in your life can live on in the lives of your family and your acquaintances. Others can learn from your examples of good living, good attitudes, and constructive actions. There is a meaningful kind of immortality to the good things that you have accomplished during your life because these attitudes and achievements will live on in all the people whose lives you have touched. "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is wasted". (Aesop)

11. Be happy in what you can do. Don't be afraid to downsize your activities according to your energy and abilities. If you can do any one of the following things, such as write a letter, phone or visit a friend, read a book, take a daily walk, or engage in your favourite hobbies, be content.

12. To the extent possible, forgive others. It is damaging to ourselves to dwell on the offences of others. Parents, siblings, spouses, and fellow workers were not likely perfect in all things, but on balance, they probably did the best they could. And even if they didn't, hanging onto old grudges and feelings of unfair treatment will eat away at our own happiness. Even more important, forgive yourself for your own mistakes. After you have done the best you can to remedy your own errors and to learn from them, put these concerns behind you and move on.

13. There is a built-in acceptance of death that automatically comes about with down-sizing of abilities and ambitions. As we become less capable there is, psychologically, less life to give up. This feeling occurs in a natural way, and it can be found in younger people as well. For example, a child who is starving to death, as many thousands do daily, will have less desire to live and less resistance to death. Similarly, patients who have terminal illnesses come to a natural and rational conclusion that death is a welcome event. Of course, these two examples are much more extreme than what normally happens in our old age, but the principles involved are the same. In other words, death becomes less feared and less traumatic as we age.

14. People fear the process of dying more than they fear being dead. This phenomenon has often been talked about throughout history. One of the most notable examples is that of the death of Socrates who according to Plato, said, " There is great reason that death is a good; for one of two things.... either there is not consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams..... (If so) death will be an unspeakable gain.... for eternity is then only a single night; Or death is a journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead

abide... what good can be greater than that? ” In a lighter vein, Mark Twain expressed a similar idea in these words: “I do not fear death in view of the fact that I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born and not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.” It is often the process of dying, and in particular the possibility of pain while dying, that people fear. This is a fear that is just as likely to be present among those who believe in eternal life as among those for whom death is regarded as the end of life.

15. Traditional religion offers the hope of eternal bliss in heaven, but it counter-balances this happy promise with the ominous threat of eternal damnation, as stated in Matthew 7, verse 13, “Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” In its most literal sense, the alternative to heaven is eternal burning in hell, and in its most fundamental interpretation this dual package of promises can hardly offer much comfort, even to its adherents, without assurance as to which route one’s own soul is headed. Many people who have converted from traditional religion to humanist thinking find a great sense of relief when they are able to put such starkly contrasting promises behind them.

16. We can be comforted in the thought that we have lived a good life. There is joy and happiness in being able to look back on the events of living and the decisions we have made, which on balance, have been more positive than negative. If our families, our places of work, our communities, or perhaps even the world, have been made even a little better because of us, this is cause for satisfaction and hope. This is cause for believing that our life has been worthwhile.

17. Rejoice in the thought of our own unique lives. It could very easily have happened that we had never been born. What a wonderful opportunity it has been to have the chance to be alive. It was not a decision of our own doing that we came into existence. Our life is a gift from our parents, or more accurately, from nature. The fact that we exist at all means that we are truly children of the universe.

18. There are few aids to healthy aging that are more important than an optimistic attitude and a sense of humour. Finding humour in the normal frustrations of life can help to keep us from dwelling too much on the discouraging aspects of aging. Humour may actually lengthen our lives and increase our enjoyment of the relatively brief time we have in this wonderful experience of living. Finally, in the words of Mark Twain, “there is no cure for birth or death except to enjoy the interval”.

February HALA Meeting

The speaker at the February 8th meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area held at 7:30 at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street, London will be Meg Westley, President of Dying With Dignity Canada. Her topic will be Medically Assisted Dying and the Law.

Now to end this *Enlightenment* on an upbeat note, on page 7 is a **Book Review** on the fortuitous discovery of the Roman poet Lucretius’ poem *On the Nature of Things*, containing the philosophy of the Greek scholar Epicurus, who is generally regarded as the world’s first humanist. This is followed on page 8 by a listing of the Principles of Humanist Canada.

Book Review – The Swerve – by Stephen Greenblatt.

Sometime around the year 50 BCE, the Roman poet Lucretius composed a lengthy poem entitled *On the Nature of Things*. This poem, consisting of six books written in Latin, is mainly about the humanist-like reflections of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who is often regarded as the world's first humanist. After the establishment of the Christian religion in the Roman Empire, attempts were made to destroy all literature that was considered to be of a pagan nature. So we would never have heard of *On the Nature of Things* were it not for a papal apostolic secretary named Poggio Bracciolini who discovered a copy of Lucretius' poem in a monastery in southern Germany in 1417 CE. The events concerning this fortuitous discovery are well documented in a recent book by Stephen Greenblatt entitled *The Swerve*. Greenblatt also summarizes the humanist philosophy of Epicurus that is recorded in *On the Nature of Things*, with the following headings.

- Everything is made of invisible particles.
- The elementary particles of matter – the seeds of the things – are eternal.
- The elementary particles are infinite in number but limited in size and shape.
- All particles are in motion in an infinite void.
- The universe has no creator or designer.
- Everything comes into being as a result of a swerve.
- The swerve is the source of free will.
- Nature ceaselessly experiments.
- The universe was not created for or about humans.
- Humans are not unique.
- Human society began, not in a Golden Age of tranquility and plenty, but in a primitive battle for survival.
- The soul dies. There is no afterlife. Death is nothing to us.
- All organized religions are superstitious delusions.
- Religions are invariably cruel.
- The highest goal of human life is the enhancement of pleasure and the reduction of pain.
- The greatest obstacle to pleasure is not pain; it is delusion.
- Understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder.

Poggio was considered to be the greatest book hunter of early Roman classic literature during the Italian Renaissance, but he also possessed one further gift that set him apart from other book hunters. He was a superbly well-trained scribe with exceptional handwriting. With these talents he became apostolic secretary to several popes. On the occasion of a confrontational papal succession being held at Constance in southern Germany, the pope he served was ousted and he had time to search for ancient manuscripts in monasteries in this alpine area. It is uncertain exactly where he found *On the Nature of Things*, but find it he did. He had it copied and made it available to the world. Greenblatt avers that this revelation changed the course of history, shaping the thoughts of Galileo, Freud, Darwin, Einstein and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson had five Latin copies of the poem along with translations into English, Italian and French. Humanists everywhere owe Lucretius an enormous debt of gratitude for recording the humanist philosophy of Epicurus, and we owe an equal debt of gratitude to Poggio Bracciolini for discovering and copying *On the Nature of Things*. *The Swerve*, by Stephen Greenblatt, is highly recommended reading.

Declaration of the Principles of Humanist Canada

1. Humanism aims at the full development of every human being.
2. Humanists uphold the broadest application of democratic principles in all human relationships.
3. Humanists advocate the use of the scientific method, both as a guide to distinguish fact from fiction, and to help develop beneficial and creative uses of science and technology.
4. Humanists affirm the dignity of every person, and the right of the individual to 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 resolutions of conflicts between individuals, groups and nations.
9. The humanist 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 only be resolved by means of human reason, intelligent effort, critical thinking joined with compassion, and a spirit of empathy for all living things.
12. Humanists affirm that human beings are completely a part of nature, and that our survival is dependent on a healthy planet which provides us and all other forms of life with a life-supporting environment.

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