



The Enlightenment



**The Newsletter of the
Humanist Association of London and Area**
An Affiliate of Humanist Canada (HC)

Volume 8

Number 6

October 2012

My Kind of Heaven

by John K. Nixon

In the late 1890s, I probably would have joined the Klondike Gold Rush. It is not just the lure of gold, but the idea of adventure, of exploring the unknown and the realization that a small fortune could be had at the expense of some hard work, that did not require any lengthy training or special expertise. Furthermore the opportunity was available to any fool with the necessary degree of reckless fortitude without regard to background, education or social standing. That, together with a generous slice of luck, appeals to me.



The Grand Canyon – Overpowering Awe and Wonder

I never did become a gold miner; in fact I have yet to visit the Yukon. In the meantime I have been content to seek my jollies in other areas of human activity. In my youth it was music that seemed to move me more than anything. I can recall as a callow 18-year-old sitting by myself in the Royal Festival Hall in London, listening to the haunting strains of Dvorak's New World Symphony, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra. As I sat there, with the music washing over me, it was not long before I found myself weeping unashamedly at the sheer beauty of the experience.

Music still has the power to move me deeply. Any time I hear snatches of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2, of Sibelius' Finlandia, or almost anything by Tchaikovsky, Mozart or Beethoven, I am wont to stop whatever I am doing to immerse myself in the soaring sounds of the strings, or the plaintive notes of a tremulous flute. On a more primeval level, the sounds of Flamenco music will have an instant effect on me, causing me to lose the thread of any conversation I am having to concentrate on the hypnotic rhythm of the guitar. Many would dismiss me as an incurable romantic, a description that I would not actively dispute.

Recently I listened to a radio discussion in which an eminent theologian expounded enthusiastically on the reality of Heaven. He then famously declared that being in Heaven would be similar to enjoying an endless and uninterrupted orgasm. Personally I would find that a trifle exhausting after a while!

Each of us searches for a path to ‘spiritual’ fulfillment. For some it is through the solace offered by organized religion. For others it may come from meditation, from the satisfaction of helping others less fortunate, in the adrenaline rush of hang gliding, from seeking an important scientific discovery, executing a painting or sculpture, or from the love that infuses the bond between a man and a woman. Still others may seek fulfillment in drugs, alcohol, sex, or the thrill of pulling off the perfect crime. A friend of mine once declared that the only thing better than good sex was skiing in fresh powder snow! Personally I have never been a good enough skier to test the veracity of that statement!

It seems to me that all of these goals are transitory in nature. Over time some people become disenchanted with religion. Even a loving relationship can sour over the long haul, and the endless repetition of Gray’s inspiring *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, or the hypnotic strains of Pachelbel’s *Canon* will eventually pall.

Over the years I have come to realize that it is in Nature, in its most pristine form that I find my own sense of spiritual fulfillment. How can you stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon gazing in awe at the mile deep chasm and not feel an overpowering sense of wonder at the scene before you? I have been fortunate enough to have had my share of such experiences. Admiring the jagged thrust of the Matterhorn towering above Zermatt, watching waves pounding a rocky outcrop off the Chilean coast, scanning the endless untrammelled sweep of white sand on a Cuban beach, squinting at the dying rays of the setting sun off a beach in Bali, or staring in open-mouthed wonder at the achingly beautiful mountain vista from the top of Whistler Mountain in British Columbia; all of these constitute my version of Heaven. Not only is it humbling, as one contemplates the meaning of one’s modest existence in the presence of such timeless grandeur, the fact is that one can never tire of such an experience.

Whenever I feel down, all I have to do is look out of my living room window at Howe Sound, with the afternoon sun reflected in the water, the wooded islands dotting the Sound, with the snow-mantled peaks of the Tantalus Mountain Range in the background. Almost instantly I feel a soothing sense of relief and the realization that my worries, however daunting they may sometimes appear, are meaningless in the grand sweep of Nature.

Perhaps Robert Service, unofficial Poet Laureate of the Klondike Gold Rush, said it best when he wrote in his epic poem, *Spell of the Yukon*:

There’s gold, and it’s haunting and haunting –
It’s luring me on as of old –
Yet it isn’t the gold that I’m wanting
So much as just finding the gold.
It’s the great, big, broad land ’way up yonder;
It’s the forests where silence has lease;
It’s the beauty that thrills me with wonder;
It’s the stillness that fills me with peace.

John Nixon is a professional engineer living in West Vancouver. Most of his career has been devoted to consulting in mining and metallurgy. He holds a B. Eng. Degree from McGill University and an MBA from York University. This article first appeared in the Summer 2012 issue of Humanist Perspectives and is reprinted with the kind permission of John and Humanist Perspectives.

Editors Note One of my most memorable spiritual fulfillment experiences was also when I stood on the rim of the mile-deep Grand Canyon. I just stood in awe of this natural wonder. It was heavenly indeed.

President's Remarks

As I write this, it is officially the first day of autumn. The days are getting shorter, the nights are growing colder, and the leaves are starting to change colour. The hot, carefree days of summer are becoming a dim memory, as we return to the routines of daily life. One of my warm memories from the past summer is the HALA picnic in July at the home of Ellie and Reinhardt Schmoll in Woodstock. The threatened rainclouds stayed away, the food was plentiful, and we all had a very enjoyable time of fellowship and conversation. Looking ahead, we anticipate another good year for HALA. Our programming committee (Goldie Emerson and Jon Hore) have been hard at work lining up what promises to be a very interesting and informative series of speakers for our monthly meetings. We are also making plans for a public event in January at Western University that will take the form of a debate about government funding of Catholic schools. We're hoping this will generate a lot of interest and will increase awareness of Humanism among university students as well as the broader London community. In this present issue of the *Enlightenment*, our editor Don Hatch has once again brought together several very interesting and thought-provoking articles. The piece by John Nixon, on the awe-inspiring beauty and wonder of nature as the basis of Humanist spirituality, reminds me of my own "peak experiences" while enjoying the breath-taking majesty of the mountains of western Canada this past summer. Don Hatch continues the theme of the wonders of nature in his article about the recent discovery of evidence for the Higgs boson, and the importance of continued support for scientific research, not just for the technological products it makes possible, but for our ability to understand more of this amazing universe. Goldie Emerson's thoughtful essay on the ethics of war reminds us that humans still have a long way to go in overcoming cruelty, bloodshed and folly, much of it abetted by religious extremism. Don Hatch ends with a review of a book by Susan Jacoby on freethinkers which is of particular interest to all Humanists. ~ 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.

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A Momentous Breakthrough – Discovering the God Particle

Early in July of 2012, scientists at Europe's CERN research centre announced that they have found a new subatomic particle that appears to be the one predicted by theoretical physicist Peter Higgs forty-eight years ago, and named after him. It is called a boson and is considered to be a basic building block of the universe. The discovery also provides evidence of the invisible Higgs field. The Higgs theory explains how particles clumped together to form stars, planets and life itself. Without the Higgs boson, the theory goes, the universe would have remained a formless soup of particles shooting around at the speed of light.

Eighty-three year old Peter Higgs was on hand at the scientific seminar when the announcement was made. He said, "I had no expectation that I would still be alive when it happened. For physics, in one way it is the end of an era in that it completes the Standard Model." The Standard Model is the basic theory physicists currently use to describe what they understand so far of a cosmos built from twelve fundamental particles and four forces.

Scientists are slightly embarrassed that the Higgs boson is sometimes referred to as the God particle. The inference is that since the boson allowed for matter to be created, there is no longer a need for a creator God. As Stephen Hawking has said, "I believe the simplest explanation is, there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization that there probably is no heaven and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe and for that, I am extremely grateful."

Yes indeed, we all should be exceedingly grateful that we are living during a period when scientists are unraveling many of the mysteries of the universe. And I can imagine that no one has experienced a higher level of elation than the physicists who worked so tirelessly to prove the existence of the Higgs boson, with virtually 99.99 percent certainty. Now it is time to move on to solving other mysteries of the universe, including the nature of dark matter, dark energy and the true nature of gravity.

As a person who has always been intrigued by the intelligence and perseverance of people in the top echelons of the scientific community, it concerns me that some governments and industries are cutting back on the financing needed to insure that basic scientific research can continue. Instead, their priorities seem to be directed more toward research that will bring immediate results, with accompanying financial benefits. Perhaps worst of all, some of this research is directed toward the military. It is amazing that there always seems to be money available from somewhere to fight wars, but never enough to adequately finance academic research, education, and social safety nets. Nevertheless, we are blessed that in this world there are dedicated selfless people with brilliant minds wishing to discover new things that can lead to a better understanding of the universe. Surely these great minds need to be supported. Who knows what their new discoveries might lead to?

If we look back to the early 1800s, we can get an idea of the effects the discovery of another field had on the way we live today. This is the electromagnetic field, discovered by the Danish chemist and physicist Hans Christian Oersted in 1820. Almost immediately, the great English chemist and physicist Michael Faraday began experimenting with this phenomenon, and he succeeded in achieving electromagnetic rotation leading to the invention of the electric motor, the dynamo and the generator. In 1830 Faraday discovered electromagnetic induction, resulting in the invention of the transformer. Thus began a whole series of discoveries and inventions culminating in industrial and home electrification, radio, television, computers, the internet and iphones. In a like manner, the proving of the existence of the Higgs boson and the Higgs force field could well lead to equally fabulous discoveries and inventions in the future. Again the research required should receive the necessary support. (DAH).

The Ethics of War

By Goldwin Emerson

The reason that countries, tribes, ethnic groups, religions, and those who hold varying political or philosophic ideas fight wars with each other are complex. Nevertheless, it is a common aim of war to assert one group's power and ideology over those with whom they disagree. These disagreements may be over the acquisition of land, property, resources or ideas, and ironically over convictions concerning which course of action is more ethically correct.

Civilized societies try to resolve arguments through logic, reasoning and persuasion. Whenever opposing sides have a good measure of respect for their fellow human beings, they stand a reasonable chance of resolving their disagreements. In one sense, going to war often means that more peaceful methods have broken down or have not been tried. In most cases, it is when better ways of behaving toward others have failed that we consider war as a last resort. Sometimes leaders talk about preventive wars. That is, wars that if they were not fought would lead to more injustices. But those who know war well remain hesitant, as did President Eisenhower. In his words, this military commander of the Allied forces in World War II said, "When people speak to you about a preventive war, you tell them to go and fight it. After my experiences, I have come to hate war. War settles nothing".

Because wars involve suppression, violence and killing, making one side winners and the other side losers, wars often include secrecy, intimidation, lying, deceit, and cruelty. War is a blunt ineffective means of persuading dictatorships to adopt democracy or improve education or religion, or develop a more inclusive political system.

Some thoughtful people say that war is not justified when the initiators stand to gain at the expense of the defenders. They claim that war can be justified only when one is fighting to defend oneself. But the situation can be more complicated than that. Sometimes countries start wars in order to assist other countries to defend democracy, promote freedom of speech, support citizens facing harsh dictatorships, or to change extreme religious beliefs that have gone astray. In these cases the perpetrators of war believe they are defending an ethical path towards justice.

I have two brothers who have served in the military. When I ask them or their comrades about the ethics of war they state that, for the most part, soldiers follow strong ethical principles. They cite examples of courage, determination, bravery, trustworthiness, duty, self-discipline, responsibility and camaraderie as the essential qualities of good soldiers, even though they know that their opponents feel they too are on the side of justice. They may not fully understand or agree with the principles of their enemies, but they know that people do not willingly put their own lives at risk without believing that what they are fighting for is a just cause.

So what are some conclusions about war that rational, caring, ethical people can accept? One is that war is a very blunt, brutal and expensive way to solve disputes. If we can find other ways to resolve disagreements the world would be a better place.

Also, it is a very easy mistake for countries that have the strongest armies, the most sophisticated military equipment, and the belief that they are well-prepared for war, to find reasons to use their military might against weaker countries whose customs and cultures are different from their own. Countries that are most likely to win a war, are the most likely to start a war. When one country is much stronger than another it is easier for the stronger country to believe that they are on the side of justice. They feel they are acting out of pure ethical principles. For them, might makes right. On the other hand, militarily stronger countries

such as China, United States, or Russia are more willing to tolerate the differences they have with their formidable adversaries.

When we think about going to war, let's first make sure that we are considering it as a last resort. In conclusion, I very much agree with the words of another United States President, Barack Obama: "War is never glorious. It's a manifestation of human folly."

Book Review

Free Thinkers: A History of American Free Thinkers

By Susan Jacoby

The essence of this book is that the affairs of human beings should be governed not by faith in the supernatural, but by a reliance on reason and evidence from the natural world. In this book, Jacoby documents the lives and thinking of American free thinkers from pre-revolutionary days up to the present time. The first person mentioned is Thomas Paine, whose polemical pamphlets on behalf of independence, including his well-known treatise *Common Sense*, were instrumental in aiding the cause of the American Revolution. His later publication, *The Age of Reason*, a critical examination of Christianity, resulted in his being labeled a "filthy little atheist." The next individuals considered are the free thinking founders of the American Constitution; Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington, who fought hard to keep the words God and Jesus out of the Constitution, thus establishing a firm wall separating church and state.

Among the free thinkers of the 1800s were the abolitionists, including Abraham Lincoln, and the women suffragettes including Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ernestine L. Rose, Susan B. Anthony and Emma Goldman. A full chapter is devoted to the trials and tribulations of introducing Darwinian evolution into American society as well as long chapter devoted to the "Great Agnostic" Robert Green Ingersoll, the most famous orator of the late 1800s. Ingersoll is Jacoby's hero (along with Paine) and she laments that since Ingersoll's death, no free thinker has been his equal. Other free thinkers mentioned in this era are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Mark Twain.

Names of freethinkers that come up in the 1900s are Clarence Darrow, defense lawyer in the Scopes trial, the journalist H.L. Mencken, birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, and feminists Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. One chapter is devoted to the increasing influence of the Catholic Church, beginning in the 1930s, promoting opposition to birth control, abortion, divorce and later, gay marriage. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement is also covered. Of great concern today is the increasing influence of the religious right, particularly as it applies to government.

The last chapter is appropriately entitled Reason Embattled. Jacoby laments the lack of reason and common sense in so many areas of American life. She also regrets the fact that secularists do not have a spokesperson of the stature of Robert Ingersoll. She states, "secularists must stop pussyfooting around the issues of harm that religion is capable of doing, and speak up in defense of the Constitution. They must defend the Enlightenment values that produced the legal structure crafted by the framers." In conclusion, she notes that secularists need a new name to identify themselves, because the term secular humanist has been so denigrated by the right. She says, "It is time to revive the evocative and honorable *freethinker*, with its insistence that Americans think for themselves instead of relying on received opinion. The combination of *free* and *thought* embodies every ideal that secularists still hold out to a nation founded, not on dreams of justice in heaven, but on the best human hopes for a just earth." (DAH).