

IDD-HUMANISTS NEWSLETTER

Originally Named Awl Weave Ghat

The Newsletter of the *American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disorders'* (AAIDD)
Humanist Action Group – April, 2007 v.1 no.2

This newsletter expresses the opinion of this subgroup's members and not necessarily of AAIDD

In this issue we will discuss some basic philosophy on this group. All data presented are opinions and alternative opinions may be printed in later issues. Send feedback and submissions to jrmullin@verizon.net

Why have an AAIDD Humanist Action Group? (and Opening Reflections)

The definition of Humanist used with this group is discussed elsewhere in this newsletter. It is likely that half of the small current membership is Humanist. Other members are from organizations that buy into *all* the interest groups when they renew their memberships. Perhaps some of them didn't even realize what they had signed up for. That is understandable because this is the first year this group has been on that list. So let's take this first "formal" issue of this newsletter to discuss what this group is and what are good immediate goals for this group.

A concise mission statement is as follows: *To be a source of information on life activities (e.g., weddings and funerals) appreciative of a Humanist lifestyle and for a Humanist perspective on issues relevant to AAIDD members.* Since proposing that idea in the original proposal for the Humanist Action Group, it has become apparent that this also involves a bit of self-

What are the plans for the group?

For the time being, the quickest way to disseminate this information is through a website. Right now www.AAMR-Humanists.org is being built and hopefully www.AAIDD-Humanists.org will also reference that site. Three megs of

promoting and advertising. It is one thing to offer information but it's another for unfamiliar people to know where they can find it. There are a number of Humanist or non-religious groups that offer information. It would be useful to skim off and offer the specific information that people with IDD and their families might be able to use. This can be resources like sobriety groups or celebrants for weddings, funerals, and baby naming ceremonies. It can also be information like reviews of controversial issues like facilitated communications. Humanist researchers from organizations like CSICOP (the *Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal*) were at the forefront in the critical review and debunking of that sadly popular form of self-delusion. To this writer's knowledge, there were no religion-based organizations critical of that movement



web space this writer gets from Verizon with his DSL service should suffice for hosting a low volume website. The last time it was checked, search engines had not picked up our site. It may be useful to pay the search engines for that recognition

at some point unless repeated access from this group and others alerts the search engines to our site.

Other advertising may prove more difficult. Humanist magazines may give us some short notices but perhaps not since this group is relatively new and unproven. Members could distribute materials at IDD-related conferences although generally the costs of booths and admissions might prove prohibitive. If anyone has experience at handing out materials at conferences they've attended, already attend, sharing those experiences with the membership would prove useful

When we get closer to 100 members, there will be a formal meeting, elections of officers, etc. Until then, Jim Mullin will act as the head of this group. This does not mean that help will not be deeply appreciated. Help would be useful in preparing materials for the website, preparing this newsletter, and publicity. Feedback would also be useful since this writer, as much as anyone else, cannot be expected to understand the full ramifications of

What is a Humanist?

Here are some descriptions of humanism along with their sources. As noted in another document, there appears to be more to humanism than just "being an atheist". Additionally, there can be Humanists who are deists or believe in afterlife(s). That being said, almost all Humanists are atheists.

“. . . Humanism is the viewpoint that people have but one life to lead and should make the most of it in terms of creative work and happiness; that human happiness is its own justification and requires no sanction or support from supernatural sources; and that in any case the supernatural, usually conceived of in the form of heavenly gods or immortal heavens, does not exist; and that human beings, using their own intelligence and cooperating liberally with one another, can build an enduring citadel of peace and beauty upon this earth.”

what he writes without it.

There are some things that this group is *not* intended to do:

- Primarily, we are not intending to directly challenge someone's religious beliefs. It would be nice if someone found Humanist ideals interesting and worthy of further review but that would be incidental
- We are not intending to challenge or compete with the Religion and Spirituality special interest group although we may, when the opportunity arises, present alternative views on specific issues. Hopefully we can complement each other based on the reader's specific needs.
- At this point we cannot do research but at some point in time we may. We can certainly direct others to relevant research in controversial areas.

From *The Philosophy of Humanism* by Corliss Lamont

Presented by the Humanism Study Group, October 19, 1997

“Humanism is a philosophy of reason and science in the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, when it comes to the question of the most valid means for acquiring knowledge of the world, Humanists reject arbitrary faith, authority, revelation, and altered states of consciousness.”

by Frederick Edwords
Executive Director, American Humanist Association

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“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality”

[International Humanist and Ethical Union \(IHEU\)](#) 2005

Reviews of current Literature

This newsletter is about Humanism and Intellectual Disabilities and the following articles have nothing to do with the latter of these subjects. However, they are a good overview of the breadth of opinion of what constitutes a Humanist which, coincidentally, is the monthly topic of this months issue. Because of that, I felt it appropriate to review these articles.

Crews, Frederick, 2007, Follies of the Wise, *Skeptical Inquirer* 31(2):27-31

Dennett, Daniel, 2007, Thank Goodness! *Skeptical Inquirer* 31(2):42-44

Johnson, George, 2007, A Free-for-All on Science and Religion, *Skeptical Inquirer* 31(2):24-26

Ruse, Michael, 2007, Fighting the Fundamentalist- Chamberlain or Churchill? *Skeptical Inquirer* 31(2):38-41



I have to admit I feel strongly that *Skeptical Inquirer* is a must-read magazine. The *Skeptic* is probably its equal and *Skeptic*'s editor, Michael Shermer, has frequent articles in many publications including a monthly article in *Scientific American* so you may be familiar with some of his work. If you are not familiar with either, they investigate and evaluate claims of the “paranormal” like UFO's, Bigfoot, bleeding religious icons, ghosts, ESP, and so on. They deal

with current paranormal claims and are very reliable, thorough, and usually great reading. In fact they are always much better than the so-called balanced articles on these usually fraudulent events in newspapers and magazines. They were among the first and loudest critics of facilitated communication outside of the our field. Debunking is what they do best and I am always somewhat dismayed when they digress and look at bigger philosophical issues. This examination of bigger issues is what filled most of the most recent issue (March/April 2007) with a series of articles on the Science/Religion debate.

Johnson's article is a summary of a November 2006 La Jolla conference sponsored by the Science Network. Video of the conference (in total and selected clips) is available at <http://beyondbelief2006.org/> and background information is available at <http://www.tsntv.org> . It is a synopsis with a collection of quotes from speakers at the conference, often with a comment by Richard Dawkins added on. In spite of this conference comprising a number of humanist scientists, the article gives an impression of the world vs. Dawkins since most speakers apparently didn't hold up to Dawkins no-compromise opinion in the debate.

The other three articles are personal opinion articles on the debate. Dennett is the most conservative of the three and Ruse is the most liberal. I must admit I identified the most with Ruse. Here are some quotes from each of the writers:

"It suits my temperament to study indefensible pretensions and note how they cause intelligent people to shut off their critical faculties and resort to cult-like behavior. Sometimes amusing, sometimes appalling, such deviousness strikes me as quintessentially human behavior." (Crews, 2007 p.30)

"The second subgroup contains those who have no religious belief but who think that one should collaborate with liberal Christians against a shared enemy, and who are inclined to think that science and religion are compatible. Members include Eugenie Scott... the late Stephen J. Gould . . and me" (Ruse, 2007 p.40)

"The best thing about saying "thank goodness" instead of "thank God" is that there really are lots of ways of repaying your debt to goodness – by setting out to create more of it for the benefit of those to come. Goodness comes in many forms, not just medicine and science."(Dennett, 2007 p.44)

As I said before, this is a deviation from the normal topics of this magazine. Still, it is thought-provoking and worth reading.

On Cultural Differences

We are extremely fortunate to have an article by a guest writer, Valerie White. Valerie is very busy in Humanist activities. She is a former Vice-President of the American Humanist Association and on the board of directors of the Secular Organization for Sobriety additionally contributing a regular column to their newsletter. Valerie is a Humanist Celebrant and President of the Unitarian Church of Sharon (MA) and is a frequent speaker across the country on polyamory. And the list goes on! She is also a valued friend and one of the most authentic people I know.

Once in a while, as I bumble my oblivious way through life, I bump up against a hard, surprising fact which makes me notice cultural differences. The first such incident I remember happened on my morning commute to a battered women's shelter in the inner city. The bus I took was used almost exclusively by people of color; often mine was the only white face on the bus. No one ever gave me a hard time, and I soon relaxed into my journeys, reading my book and staying just aware enough to notice when my stop was getting close.

One morning, as the bus pulled away from a stop, there was a loud report. Before I could even think, "Was that a shot?", everybody on the bus dived for the floor. People were screaming, "Go, go, get out of here!" I crouched on the floor too.

So when the driver laughed, I was surprised. "It's okay, folks," she said. "I just ran over a basketball." The incident brought home to me what a sheltered and privileged life I have led, never before having been in a situation where the response of ordinary people going about their daily lives, when they hear a loud sound, is to hit the deck.

A couple of weeks ago, I was on another Boston bus, this one heading out the Mass. Pike to Newton. On this bus, almost all the ridership is white and white collar. As we rolled along, there was suddenly another loud report. The bus had had a blowout. People looked up from their books and newspapers. A couple pulled headphones off their ears. Nobody said anything and nobody moved.

Last night, I had another one of these epiphanies, at a prison fellowship program I attend. As we sat in our discussion circle, twelve black and two white inmates and three white



"outmates", including me, we were all recounting who had taught us to tie our shoes, and whom we had taught to tie theirs. One man of color, who had previously disclosed that he had fetal alcohol syndrome, explained that his mother had taught him to tie his shoes, and that she wouldn't let him go outside until he had tied them to her satisfaction. He was having trouble and tried over and over, getting more and more frustrated.

"I felt like I belonged on the yellow bus," he said. There was an affirming murmur and many nods. I was confused. "What yellow bus?" I asked. They tried to explain. The bus which picks up special needs kids is yellow, they told me. You know, the retarded ones, the ones wearing helmets because of autism. I subsided, still confused. All school buses are yellow, I thought. What's the point?

I was on my way home before it dawned on me. For me, raised in affluent, white, geographically large suburban school districts, the yellow bus was the way almost all the kids got to school, including me. In the inner city, many kids walk to school, or use a student pass on a city bus (like the one which ran over the basketball). Only the kids with special needs, who have to travel farther to a special school or who can't handle public transportation, take the yellow bus.

I had just run smack up against another cultural difference.

How can a Humanist be defined? (and closing thoughts)

A personal definition of a Humanist is
"someone who does not believe that any-

thing more than Science and Nature is
necessary to explain all of existence."

This definition allows people to believe in the supernatural as long as they don't think it affects the natural realm. This view has softened as this writer has aged. For a while Humanist was synonymous with Atheist to him but now that he has met more people who gather with Humanists and who could still maintain a Humanist perspective in spite of a smattering of superstition, he has expanded his definition. Such supernatural beliefs could include a passive impersonal god or Buddhist-type beliefs.

What is your definition? Share it and we can print it. Also, ideally, each issue of our newsletter should have a specific theme. The next theme: *How do you talk to a person with IDD about Humanism in light of their friends' beliefs?* Please share your thoughts about that issue.

It is likely that a number of us read IDD-related books or magazine articles that others might find useful. These need not be specifically about Humanist approaches but only need to be non-reli-

gious. Submit your reviews of this literature for us to share and it's an easy way to help this newsletter.

Lastly, what should this newsletter be named? If you haven't figured it out, the



current title is a meant to sound like "All we've got" in the sense that what's here and now is *all we've got* for certain. This writer admits that it's not the cleverest thing he ever wrote. He doesn't mind keeping it but he is also open to alternatives.

Jim Mullin

Annual Meeting

With only 8 members, there won't be a 2007 meeting of the Humanist Action Group this year at the AAIDD Annual Meeting in Atlanta.

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