

# AAIDD-HUMANIST NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter of the  
American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disorders (AAIDD) Humanist Action Group  
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This newsletter expresses the opinion of members of this subgroup and not necessarily of AAIDD

*All data presented are opinions and alternative opinions may be printed in later issues. Send feedback and submissions to [jrmullin@verizon.net](mailto:jrmullin@verizon.net)*

## Editors notes

I hope everyone had a good summer. Mine was pretty good. I talk a lot in this newsletter and in other forums about how I think same sex marriage is a great idea. I think everyone should be able to marry the person they love. However, in spite of having a half dozen friends involved in marriages to people of their gender, I had never been invited to attend one. That changed this year when my brother-in-law married his lover of over a decade out in Washington state. I live in Massachusetts so it was a bit of a hike but worth every minute of travel. The daughter of his new husband has a comedy show on IFC so there were a couple of stars there too. There was also a very emotional speech by the new husband's brother about how he was never really close to his brother (the groom) until he came out and told his family about his sexual preference. They've been very close since.



Since Halloween is coming soon, I thought it might be nice to write a piece on the Humanist opinion of ghosts. SPOILER: we don't believe in them. After that, a few hints on how to tell others that you are a humanist. Lastly, instead of a reprint of an earlier article, I included a short talk on Living as a Humanist that I gave at my church over the summer. Maybe some of you out there can relate to it. There are a couple of humanist jokes in it.

## Is it okay to believe in ghosts?

As Halloween gets closer, this seems to be a good thing to write about. I have to take the logical view in this matter. There are people that swear they've seen ghosts. However there are never good pictures, the ghosts never come when you want them to,

and just because you saw something weird in the dark, why is it a ghost? The last point is perhaps the most important because there are a lot of good honest people that think they've seen ghosts. The extreme cases of this are those television shows on ghost finders. These guys take electromagnetic field detectors and microphones and deduce that because they got results on these or felt a cold spot in a house that they have found ghosts. Unfortunately there are variations in electronic fields all over the place for a number of reasons like wiring all over the place for the television crew. If you put a sensitive microphone anywhere you are going to pick up odd sounds: buildings settling, noises from outside, television crew walking around, and even a breeze across the microphone. Because the microphones are so sensitive they pick up noises that are there all the time but are just too faint for us to pay attention to. If you get a chance, go into an empty house and just sit down and listen to whatever you can hear. You will hear a lot of different noises and none of it will be from ghosts. You may even hear your own heart beating.

Other people have waking dreams or dreams that continue for a few seconds once they wake up. These happen to the people that are sure they were kidnapped by space aliens too. It feels real and, unlike most dreams, these seem to stay in our memory. Stories of ghosts at the foot of a bed or stories in which the person telling it was paralyzed by a ghost are often of this type. I had one of those when I was a child and I thought I saw a ghost that looked like a small Father Time walk across my brother whom I had to share the bed with. I was sure for months after that that he was going to drop dead any second now because that was what the ghost symbolized. He is still alive, more than fifty years later.

Sometimes there really was something weird there. It could be a swarm of tiny insects, a bird, a light reflected onto smoke or fog or something else. In the dark where you can barely see anything, it's easy to try to make a mistake when you guess what something you can hardly see is. Since we are all familiar with ghosts from movies, television, and books, it's one of the first things we think of. It's easy for good people to be fooled.

I ( and some friends) visited a house once in Salem Massachusetts that was said to be haunted in a book. One of the signs of the ghost that the book mentioned was that the fire alarms went off all the time. We talked to the staff at the house (it was a tourist attraction although that was because it was old, not because of the ghost stories) and they said the once they replace the alarm system they never had another problem. They also said they never had a reason to suspect there was a ghost in the house. The book also had some old photos taken in the house where, if you looked closely, there was a faint image of someone else in the picture. The way they took pictures back then was totally different from how we do it now. The photographer had glass plates he would coat with a light sensitive chemical. He would keep it in the dark until it was in his camera and then the

light that came in through the lens when he took the picture would be printed on the chemical. He then transferred this to paper and there was a picture. The thing to remember is that he reused the glass plates, usually many times. If all of the used chemical was not washed off, there was still a light copy of the first picture there which would be combined with the next picture and we would see something faint behind something much clearer. Since photos were so expensive and hard to do back then, they were usually of people and not of pretty scenery, cats, houses, and other things we take pictures of these days. So you would end up with a faint picture of someone with someone else in front of them. Other ghost pictures in more recent times are usually the light from the flash reflecting on dust, a bug, or something reflective. And now, with Photoshop and similar programs, anyone can fake a ghost picture so a recent picture or even a recent home video has no value as evidence. You can find a lot of ghost videos on YouTube. Some of them are very good and some are so bad they are funny. You can be sure that none of them are ghosts.



Really cigarette smoke

Lastly, some people that think they see ghosts are drunk, taking street drugs, or mentally ill. Unless you know the person well, you might not know this about them. You should probably assume that the person who claims to have seen a ghost does not have one of these conditions unless you definitely know that it is true.

Even though they are scary, people want to believe in ghosts. They want to believe that they will still exist after they die and that they will be able to see people they knew and loved. Some very religious people may even find comfort in believing in ghosts since, if there is life after death, there must certainly be a god.

Anyway, go the ghost movie, get scared, eat popcorn, and have a good time. Just leave the ghosts in the theater when you go home. So far there haven't been any really found. I don't believe in ghosts and I think you should share my belief.

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## Talking to others about our beliefs *(part two)*

*- So you want to tell people about it anyway-*

You may want to review the last issue and the first part of this article. There are a lot of reasons to keep quiet about your religious beliefs. You can gamble, about one in five Americans are “nones” or people who check “none” on an application when asked what

their religion is. They would probably be sympathetic although a good number of them are people who still believe in a god but not in any of the available religions. Some people say we should be bold and proud of our belief. This type of approach helped the gay people a lot. However you still have to be ready to lose friends or get others angry. Whatever the reason, you may want to tell others about your humanist beliefs.

Here are some things that may help. First, try to be funny. Lead up to your confession with jokes and try to be amusing. Second, be quick to change the conversation into things you have in common with your audience in terms of social activities they fulfill through religion and you fulfill through humanism. Third, you can lead up to your “coming out” by talking about responsible activities you did as a humanist. Fourth, have a humanist friend or two with you so you are not alone and outnumbered. Fifth, don’t get into a yelling match, try to direct the conversation back to the earlier suggestions. Sixth, be prepared to walk away particularly if there is yelling and accusations. Just say, “We’ll have to talk about this later, you are too upset”. Seventh, practice at safe sites like a humanist group or a Unitarian Universalist church.

Good luck. Write to me at [jrmullin@verizon.net](mailto:jrmullin@verizon.net) about your successes or problems.

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## Living as a Humanist

a talk I gave recently at my church

You would hope that a typical day for a humanist would go something like this: Wake up in the morning, read the paper, have breakfast, go to work, come home, have supper, watch tv, spend time with the family, putter around the house or visit with friends or do something fantastic, go to sleep.

Nice and straightforward, no rituals, no thanking unseen beings for help they didn’t really give, no weird explanations for natural or low probability events.

My view of the history of humanism is that the earliest sentient people were humanists. But that didn’t last long. The first thunderstorm, earthquake, or even the first death of a loved one would be best explained by a supernatural explanation or solution given their limited knowledge of nature. It made sense then but it makes no sense now. There are people, we all know some, who are failing to abandon the very old beliefs.

I realize that, for the most part, these fundamentally religious people are trying to help me in their own, albeit unwanted, way. I just wish they weren’t as active in that pursuit. Other people can do it to a lesser degree, My day is rarely like that prototypical example I gave earlier.

I get up in the morning. The Attleboro paper has a headline calling a bad situation that could have been worse or even an unexpected good situation a god-given miracle. There may be a letter to the editor on how their god really thinks a progressive idea is a horrible sin and god's payback will be awesome.

At work a humanist viewpoint would be frowned upon so I only share mine with a few people I trust. I work with institutionalized adults with intellectual disabilities. If I am really unlucky there will be a memorial service for someone that died recently. A member of the clergy will talk about how a god blessed us by giving us this person. Sometimes the deceased was barely able to comprehend what was happening around them, could barely move, was dependent upon others for about everything, and was in pain for much of their life. I wonder how the deceased would appreciate knowing that their difficult life was a wonderful gift to other people. There are cookies afterwards and that makes everything better.

At lunchtime I visit a fundamentalist website, [answersingenesis.com](http://answersingenesis.com). It is fascinating for me to see how their minds work and twist to justify their belief in a 6000 year old earth and all the logical and factual inconsistencies that go with such a belief. It's also a bit frightening to see the number of people that take this site seriously.

I cough, the woman in the office across from mine says "God bless you". Now I realize that a lot of god-talk has snuck into common language over the years: good bye comes from 'god be with you', 'god bless you' comes from a superstition that you dislodged your soul when you coughed. I can live with that. It drives me crazy, though, when the woman who said it waits for me to thank her.

I will admit that as a group, we humanists have to work at being funny and sometimes, like with the god bless you, we are too serious about things. It comes with living rationally. Sadly, with that, comes one of our greatest deficits: there just aren't that many good humanist jokes. There are plenty of jokes in which the humanist is the fall guy, I don't mean those. I mean ones in which the humanist prevails or shows humanist characteristics. I had to spend quite a bit of time on the internet to find these few: (if you know others, they can come up during the discussion later)

One that almost made my list was: Dyslexic atheists only have cats as pets because they do not accept the existence of dog. But this is made at the expense of dyslexic people who have enough problems already.

Two that did make my list:

A priest, a rabbi, an imam and a humanist were having a theological debate over tea

"My God is the God of Abraham," says the rabbi.

"My God is the God of Abraham," says the priest.

"Abraham served Allah," says the imam.

The Humanist replies, "There was no god for Abraham to have."

"How can you disagree with so many learned opinions?" asks the rabbi?

The Humanist answers, "I'm comfortable with three against one."

Suddenly the room is filled with an inexplicable glow and everyone is overcome with a sense of perfect love. A quiet voice speaking from everywhere and nowhere at the same time says, "I am the God of Abraham." The presence subsides and the four sit for a moment in silence and three sets of eyes turn to the humanist.

the Humanist says, "OK, four against one."

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Do you know more New Yorkers are atheists than in other parts of the country? That's because they know that the bright light at the end of the long tunnel is New Jersey

One thing I have found enjoyable is to take the American Humanist Association podcasts, transfer them to CD and play them in my car. I have a bunch of them I've already listened to. Grab one if you want on the way out. It's interesting discussion with people like Neil deGrasse Tyson, Bill Nye the science guy, and Andy Rooney among others. I don't think it will convert anyone (I wouldn't want it to, I like people to find their own paths as long they respect mine) but it will give an interesting slice of humanist life.

In closing, life as a humanist is not as smooth as I would hope but it would take something truly earth-moving to make me give it up.

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