

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2011

Some face-offs this month: Orwell v. Huxley; Dawkins v. Perry; Kitcher v. Dawkins; Bachmann v. science, and Robertson v. mindless fundamentalism (really!). We evaluate the dangers of literature, the ubiquity of handguns, the scarcity of fresh water, and the punctuation of American English. We celebrate our own celebration of humanist ethics in August, and invite all to our annual Freethought celebration this month. But first, we consider high-speed vertical conversations. – JR

YOU NEED AN ELEVATOR SPEECH

John Rafferty

What is Secular Humanism?

You're in an elevator and someone you've just met asks you, "What is secular humanism?" You're already at the third floor and you know he/she, waiting for your answer, is getting off on nine. You have about fifteen seconds. What do you say?

That's the question with which Lori Lipman Brown, Founding Director of the Secular Coalition for America, and the freethought community's first lobbyist in the halls of Congress, challenged an August morning session of Class 17 of the Humanist Institute's three-year graduate study program in Humanist Leadership.

Well, what *do* you say? How many times, like me, have you fumbled away an opportunity, and wound up regretting that, "Damn, what I *should* have said was ..."?

"You need an elevator speech", Ms. Lipman Brown advised, a simple and direct statement that you can use anytime, anywhere. In true humanist fashion, she did not dictate one, but advised each of the five students (including me) and our two mentors, Jeff Tate and Gretchen Robinson, to write and memorize our own.

Here, therefore, are my own, in 15-, 30-, and 60-second versions. Future issues of PIQUE will offer my suggestions for short answers to other questions frequently asked of humanists ... as well as, I hope, *your* suggestions.

What is Secular Humanism?

(15 seconds)

Secular humanism is an ethical philosophy based on reason and science. It's a way of life for modern humans who want to live ethical, meaningful and happy lives without superstition, religious dogma, or guilt.

Sound good to you?

(30 seconds)

Humanism is a rational philosophy without gods or superstition that goes all the way back to the Renaissance and even to the ancient Greeks. Today's secular humanism is based on reason and science, is dedicated to individual freedom and democracy, and is an ethical way of life for many, many modern men and women who want to live lives that are moral, meaningful, and happy – without religion and dogma.

Is that what you want?

(60 seconds)

Secular humanism is an ethical philosophy based on reason and science, a way of life for modern humans who want to live moral, meaningful and happy lives without gods or superstition. We believe in the same virtues as the truly religious – honesty, fair dealing, respect for others, helping the poor and the afflicted – but we reject dogma, intolerance, and bigotry. Secular humanists are also dedicated to individual freedom and to the ideals of democracy. And we believe that, as science discovers more and more about humans and the universe, that everything in life, including humanity, can or will be explained in real terms, without magic or pie-in-the-sky. We believe that our lives—here and now—are the only ones we will ever have. So we accept, embrace and celebrate life.

Does that sound good to you?

Don't miss it!

SHSNY'S 3RD ANNUAL FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH

Pete's Tavern, Sunday, October 16.

Details: Page 7

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *Vice President*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Lee Loshak, *Secretary*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Elaine Lynn; Carl Marxer; Irv Millman; Carlos Mora; John Wagner

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SHSNY is an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

ATTENTION GOVERNOR PERRY: EVOLUTION IS A FACT

Richard Dawkins

(Excerpted from "On Faith", The Washington Post, 8/23/11)

Q: Texas governor and GOP candidate Rick Perry, at a campaign event this week, told a boy that evolution is "just a theory" with "gaps" and that in Texas they teach "both creationism and evolution*." [Ed: *Texas schools do not.*] Perry later added, "God is how we got here." According to a 2009 Gallup study, only 38 percent of Americans say they believe in evolution. If a majority of Americans are skeptical or unsure about evolution, should schools teach it as a mere "theory"? Why is evolution so threatening to religion?

A: There is nothing unusual about Governor Rick Perry. Uneducated fools can be found in every country and every period of history, and they are not unknown in high office. [Ed. Note: *I have here excised a long anti-Republican fulmination by Prof. Dawkins. Readers interested in the full text can go to washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/post/ and type Richard Dawkins into the Search box.*]

A politician's attitude to evolution is perhaps not directly important in itself. It can have unfortunate consequences on education and science policy but, compared to Perry's and the Tea Party's pronouncements on other topics such as economics, taxation, history and sexual politics, their ignorance of evolutionary science might be overlooked. Except that a politician's attitude to evolution, however peripheral it might seem, is a surprisingly apposite litmus test of more general inadequacy. This is because unlike, say, string theory where scientific opinion is genuinely divided, there is about the fact of evolution no doubt at all. Evolution is a fact, as securely established as any in science, and he who denies it betrays woeful ignorance and lack of education, which likely extends to other fields as well. Evolution is not some recondite backwater of science, ignorance of which would be pardonable. It is the stunningly simple but elegant explanation of our very existence and the existence of every living creature on the planet. Thanks to Darwin, we now understand why we are here and why we are the way we are. You cannot be ignorant of evolution and be a cultivated and adequate citizen of today.

Darwin's idea is arguably the most powerful ever to occur to a human mind. The power of a scientific theory may be measured as a ratio: the number of facts that it explains divided by the number of assumptions it needs to postulate in order to do the explaining. A theory that assumes most of what it is trying to explain is a bad theory. That is why the creationist or "intelligent design" theory is such a rotten theory.

What any theory of life needs to explain is functional complexity. Complexity can be measured as statistical improbability, and living things are statistically improbable in a very particular direction: the direction of functional efficiency. The body of a bird is not just a prodigiously complicated machine, with its trillions of cells – each one in

itself a marvel of miniaturized complexity – all conspiring together to make muscle or bone, kidney or brain. Its interlocking parts also conspire to make it good for something – in the case of most birds, good for flying. An aero-engineer is struck dumb with admiration for the bird as flying machine: its feathered flight-surfaces and ailerons sensitively adjusted in real time by the on-board computer which is the brain; the breast muscles, which are the engines, the ligaments, tendons and lightweight bony struts all exactly suited to the task. And the whole machine is immensely improbable in the sense that, if you randomly shook up the parts over and over again, never in a million years would they fall into the right shape to fly like a swallow, soar like a vulture, or ride the oceanic up-draughts like a wandering albatross. Any theory of life has to explain how the laws of physics can give rise to a complex flying machine like a bird or a bat or a pterosaur, a complex swimming machine like a tarpon or a dolphin, a complex burrowing machine like a mole, a complex climbing machine like a monkey, or a complex thinking machine like a person.

Darwin explained all of this with one brilliantly simple idea – natural selection, driving gradual evolution over immensities of geological time. His is a good theory because of the huge ratio of what it explains (all the complexity of life) divided by what it needs to assume (simply the nonrandom survival of hereditary information through many generations). The rival theory to explain the functional complexity of life – creationism – is about as bad a theory as has ever been proposed. What it postulates (an intelligent designer) is even more complex, even more statistically improbable than what it explains. In fact it is such a bad theory it doesn't deserve to be called a theory at all, and it certainly doesn't deserve to be taught alongside evolution in science classes.

The simplicity of Darwin's idea, then, is a virtue for three reasons. First, and most important, it is the signature of its immense power as a theory, when compared with the mass of disparate facts that it explains – everything about life including our own existence. Second, it makes it easy for children to understand (in addition to the obvious virtue of being true!), which means that it could be taught in the early years of school. And finally, it makes it extremely beautiful, one of the most beautiful ideas anyone ever had as well as arguably the most powerful. To die in ignorance of its elegance, and power to explain our own existence, is a tragic loss, comparable to dying without ever having experienced great music or literature, or a beautiful sunset.

There are many reasons to vote against Rick Perry. His fatuous stance on the teaching of evolution in schools is perhaps not the first reason that springs to mind. But maybe it is the most telling litmus test of the other reasons, and it seems to apply not just to him but, lamentably, to all the likely contenders for the Republican nomination. The "evolution question" deserves a prominent place in the list of questions put to candidates in interviews and public debates during the course of the coming election.

SO, HOW DID RICK PERRY'S CHRISTIAN PRAYER RALLY WORK OUT?

John Rafferty

(Based on "First Amendment: Texas Governor Convenes A Christian Revival," on Bob Park's *What's New?* 9/ 9/2011.)

Texas Governor Rick Perry doesn't believe in evolution or climate change, but he is certain of one thing, at least: the power of prayer. Presidential hopeful Perry*, who is also confused about who persecuted Galileo (he thinks it was other scientists, not the Church), led a prayer meeting of 30,000 evangelical Christians in a Houston football stadium in August, calling on Jesus to guide us out of our national travail, and to put an end to the severe drought devastating his state.

How did God respond? It didn't take long to get an answer. The crowd had scarcely left the stadium when God set Texas on fire. It's still burning.

Then, in a stunning example of divine insult added to political injury, when God sent Tropical Storm Lee ashore He had it dump record rains on the other Gulf states, while the Texas wildfires continued to burn.

"God helps those who help themselves", the proverb cautions, and perhaps the Almighty concluded that the governor was relying too mightily on heavenly intercession when earlier this year he cut \$23 million from Texas's volunteer fire department budgets (most of Texas is served by volunteer departments), from \$30 million to \$7 million.

Here's a lesson in the simple arithmetic of governing, Governor: 23 million dollars will get you more done than 30 thousand prayers any old day of the week.

*At the early-September Reagan Library "debate" during which he questioned climate change, evolution, and history, Perry basked in the glow of the biggest applause line of the evening, as the hand-picked right-wing audience cheered the record number of executions he approved in Texas – 234 state-sanctioned deaths.

Sweet Jesus (as he might say), is America going to elect another swaggering, macho know-nothing?

JESUS AND MO EXPLAIN RELIGION'S EDGE OVER SCIENCE TO THE BARMAID

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/2011/08/17/edge2/)

Jesus: Science is fine as far as it goes, but it cannot answer the big questions, such as "Why are we here?" or "What is the purpose of beauty?"

Mohammed: "Who created the laws of physics and logic?"

Jesus: Those are questions for theologians to answer.

Barmaid: Do theologians really have answers to those questions? I thought they just made answers up.

Jesus: Exactly. Science is limited by its refusal to make stuff up.

Mo: That is what gives religion its edge.

BEYOND "NEW ATHEISM"

Gary Gutting

(Excerpted from "Beyond 'New Atheism'" in The New York Times *The Stone* online forum, 9/14/2011.)

Led by the biologist Richard Dawkins, the author of *The God Delusion*, atheism has taken on a new life in popular religious debate. Dawkins's brand of atheism is scientific in that it views the "God hypothesis" as obviously inadequate to the known facts. In particular, he employs the facts of evolution to challenge the need to postulate God as the designer of the universe. For atheists like Dawkins, belief in God is an intellectual mistake, and honest thinkers need simply to recognize this and move on from the silliness and abuses associated with religion.

Most believers, however, do not come to religion through philosophical arguments. Rather, their belief arises from their personal experiences of a spiritual world of meaning and values, with God as its center.

In the last few years there has emerged another style of atheism that takes such experiences seriously. One of its best exponents is Philip Kitcher, a professor of philosophy at Columbia. (For a good introduction to his views, see Kitcher's essay in *The Joy of Secularism*, perceptively discussed last month by James Wood in *The New Yorker*.)

Instead of focusing on the scientific inadequacy of theistic arguments, Kitcher critically examines the spiritual experiences underlying religious belief, particularly noting that they depend on specific and contingent social and cultural conditions. Your religious beliefs typically depend on the community in which you were raised or live. The spiritual experiences of people in ancient Greece, medieval Japan or 21st-century Saudi Arabia do not lead to belief in Christianity. It seems, therefore, that religious belief very likely tracks not truth but social conditioning. This "cultural relativism" argument is an old one, but Kitcher shows that it is still a serious challenge. (He is also refreshingly aware that he needs to show why a similar argument does not apply to his own position, since atheistic beliefs are themselves often a result of the community in which one lives.)

Even more important, Kitcher takes seriously the question of whether atheism can replace the sense of meaning and purpose that believers find in religion. Pushed to the intellectual limit, many will prefer a religion of hope if faith is not possible. For them, Tennyson's "'the stars', she whispers, 'blindly run'" is a prospect too bleak to sustain our existence. Kitcher agrees that mere liberation from theism is not enough. Atheists, he maintains, need to undertake the positive project of showing how their worldview can take over what he calls the ethical "functions" of theism.

There are those—Dawkins, for one example; existentialists like Sartre, for another—who are invigorated at the very thought that there is no guiding power in the universe. Many others, however, need convincing that atheism (or secular humanism, as Kitcher prefers) has the resources to inspire a fulfilling human life. If not, isn't the best choice to



retreat to a religion of hope? Why not place our bet on the only chance we have of real fulfillment?

Kitcher has a two-part answer. First, he offers a refined extension of Plato's famous dilemma argument in *Euthyphro* to show that contrary to widespread opinion, theism is not in fact capable of grounding the ethical values that make life worthwhile. Second, to show that secularism is capable of grounding these values, he offers a sophisticated account of how ethics could have evolved as a "social technology" — a set of optimally designed practices and norms — to satisfy basic human desires.

Kitcher's case is open to serious objections, but it has the conceptual and logical weight that is lacking in the polemics of the scientific atheists. It also lets Kitcher enter into genuine dialogue with believers like the philosopher Charles Taylor, whose defense of religion in *A Secular Age* offers an essential counterpoint to almost everything Kitcher says.

For a long time, meaningful engagement between believers and nonbelievers was, especially in the United States, blocked by an implicit mutual agreement: religious belief was exempted from challenge, provided it remained within a private sphere of religious life, and was not asserted as relevant to any issues of public concern. Over the last few decades, however, conservative Christians have rejected this agreement, particularly over issues like abortion and evolution. The scientific atheists, led by Dawkins, rightly responded with their aggressive insistence that militant believers justify the claims they wanted taken seriously in the public sphere.

The resulting polemics cleared some murky air but now have little use except to keep assuring each side of the other's perversity. Kitcher's secular humanism reanimates the debate, promising much needed serious reflection on whether the divine can or should be eliminated from our moral lives.

Such a debate may not result in a victory for secular humanism. But even if it does, secular humanists would still face the much greater practical task of embedding their convictions in secular versions of the religious institutions, rituals and customs that even today remain vital fixtures in our social world. But Kitcher's challenge, unlike Dawkins's, is one that reflective believers have no easy way of evading, and meeting it may well seriously revise their understanding of their faith.

WELL, IT'S BETTER THAN ETERNITY IN HELL

Franciscan friars at the 15th century church of San Salvatore al Monte in Florence, which was a favorite of Michelangelo, furious at the theft of bibles from their church in Florence have taken the unusual step of praying for the thief to be struck down by diarrhea.

In a note, pinned up in full view of worshippers, the friars "pray to God that the thief is struck by a strong bout of the shits". One friar said, "It's not exactly clean language, but we couldn't put up with it any longer. The Lord and the faithful will understand".

GOOD GRIEF! IS IT POSSIBLE PAT ROBERTSON IS RIGHT ABOUT AN ETHICAL QUESTION?

John Rafferty

(Based on and excerpted from "Robertson Stirs Passions with Remarks on Divorce from an Alzheimer's Patient", in The New York Times, 9/17/2011)

The man who called "The 700 Club" for advice on September 13 posed a tough question: how should he advise a friend whose wife was deep into dementia and no longer recognized him?

"His wife as he knows her is gone", the caller said, and the friend is "bitter at God for allowing his wife to be in that condition, and now he's started seeing another woman."

So, what would right-wing Christian fundamentalist, homophobe, multiply-mistaken prophet, and sole recipient of SHSNY's Lifetime Achievement in Dumbth Award Pat Robertson counsel?

Surprise!

"This is a terribly hard thing", Mr. Robertson said, clearly struggling to think his way through a wrenching situation. "I hate Alzheimer's. It is one of the most awful things, because here's the loved one — this is the woman or man that you have loved for 20, 30, 40 years, and suddenly that person is gone."

"I know it sounds cruel", he continued, "but if he's going to do something, he should divorce her and start all over again, but to make sure she has custodial care, somebody looking after her."

When Mr. Robertson's co-anchor on the program wondered if that was consistent with marriage vows, Mr. Robertson noted the pledge of "till death do us part", but added, "This is a kind of death."

He said the question presented an ethical dilemma beyond his ability to answer. "I certainly wouldn't put a guilt trip on you if you decided that you had to have companionship", apparently suggesting divorce as a way to avoid the sin of adultery.

Seriously? Pat Robertson? Considering situational ethics? Not thundering Jehova-like against adultery? Counseling divorce?

His fellow fundamentalists, of course, went bananas (*"This is more than cruelty. This is a repudiation of the gospel of Jesus Christ"*). And so, of course, did Alzheimer's professionals, especially advocates for patients (*"... he only took account of the caregiver without taking account of the patient"*).

But, in the context of Christian moral teaching — you know, the supposed real stuff, love, forgiveness, redemption, "Christian charity" — and in the context of secular humanist, situational ethics, how wrong is Reverend Pat?

Or maybe — am I really writing this? — is it possible Pat Robertson is right?

Your opinion, please.

285 FREETHINKERS TURN OUT FOR "GOOD WITHOUT GOD"

Reported by Elaine Lynn

On August 20, SHSNY President John Rafferty conducted a panel discussion of humanist ethics for an audience of nearly 300 in the Concert Hall of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. *Good Without God: Ethics for Freethinkers*, presented by SHSNY and NYSEC (with support from all eleven of the Reasonable New York organizations), challenged a panel of public figures, leaders in the amorphous New York City freethought community, to articulate their own concepts of ethics and to discuss the role of humanist groups.

Members of our community consciously – and self-consciously – think of life in ethical terms and simultaneously work to define those terms. The panelists shared their conclusions in the ongoing search with us. Their discussion ranged from the basic concept of morality to whether humanists should create political organizations (all the more impressive since it was done without filling in all the steps in between) and it made for a great program.

John characterized the religious position toward morality as being crystallized in the title of a Ring Lardner short story, "'Shut up', He Explained". Massimo Pigliucci, Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Lehman College, said that humanist and religious ethics alike were fundamentally ways of thinking about how to behave in social interactions, how to relate to other people in a way that's beneficial for society, and they spring naturally from our being social animals.

Michael DeDora, Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry-New York City, also serves as CFI's observer at the United Nations. He told the audience of a recent and hard-won success within the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which has struggled for years with the demand of Muslim nations to support their laws against blasphemy. The Committee has recently issued an official decision that such laws violate the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which asserts that freedom of expression is a basic human right. Humanist ethics, Michael said, form the basis for political rights around the world.

All the panelists agreed that basic ethical values are inborn, obviating the need for a god or classical religious system to establish and enforce the rules.

Anne Klaeyson is Clergy Leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture and Ethical Humanist Chaplain at Columbia University, and holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Hebrew Union College. She told us that Ethical Culture is a "religion of ethics", and its purpose is finding the common ground among groups and experiencing ourselves as ethical people. Its adherents find a sense of the sacred in life and human relationships.

Are humanist organizations politically liberal? John asked. Should they be? Should they organize as a political force? Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director of the American Humanist Association, said, "Absolutely!" Humanist ethics often lead directly to moral evaluations and political

action. As an example, he said that President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq was "evil". Roy's reasons were as straightforward as his conclusion: Bush "lied" about the weapons of mass destruction, he invaded the country "to help his buddies gain money and power", and people died.

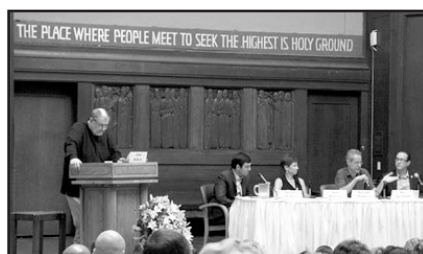
The other panelists were more circumspect about politics. Michael said that CFI was developing very specific stands on political issues, which they would advocate publicly, and that the positions would be widely acceptable because they were based solely on ethical grounds, rather than political ones.

Massimo said that the concept of evil was not useful to him, that our goal should be "reflective equilibrium", striving for coherence and consistency of the moral factors we consider. As with the other panelists, he found situational ethics the only meaningful approach, since context is always relevant. He emphasized the critical difference between situational ethics and moral relativism.

On the subject of neuroscience and ethics, everyone was, of course, intrigued, but two panel members had caveats. Massimo emphasized the limited nature of the information it gives us and its inability to give us answers to ethical questions. Anne expressed concern that it might lead to the spread of determinism, undermining our appreciation of free will.

All the panelists clearly had strong opinions on political issues, but seemed to doubt the influence the humanist movement had in the secularizing and liberalizing of modern society. That's only because in the past, Roy pointed out, organized humanism didn't have the impact, numbers, and public positioning we will have in the future.

Ed. Note: Afterward, panelists and audience repaired to NYSEC's Community Room for wine (Thanks, bartenders Irv Millman and John Wagner), cheese, and another hour of lively discussion.



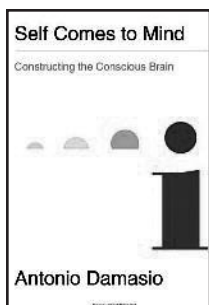
SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2011

SHSNY BOOK CLUB meets

THURSDAY, OCT. 6, 6:30 pm
in the Gallery room of
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
(3 doors West of the church - red door)
to discuss

SELF COMES TO MIND:
Constructing the
Conscious Mind
by **Antonio Damasio**



From one of the most significant neuroscientists at work today, *Self Comes to Mind* is a pathbreaking investigation of a question that has confounded philosophers and

neuroscientists for centuries: How is consciousness created?

Damasio introduces an evolutionary perspective that entails a radical change in the way the history of conscious minds is viewed and told. He explains that many species, such as social insects, have minds, but humans are distinguished by the "autobiographical self," which adds flexibility and creativity, and has led to the development of culture, a "radical novelty" in natural history.

Damasio speculates on the evolutionary process by which mind developed and then gave rise to self.

"The marvel of reading Damasio's book is to be convinced one can follow the brain at work as it makes the private reality that is the deepest self."

— V.S. Naipaul, Nobel Laureate

Paperback and Kindle editions.

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

The SHSNY Book Club
is open to all ... and free!

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURSDAY, NOV. 3, 6:30 pm
at The Community Church
of New York

28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)
IS THE INTERNET
CHANGING

THE WAY YOU THINK?
The Net's Impact on Our
Minds and Future
by **John Brockman**

Brockman, publisher of Edge.org, posed the question to more than 150 of the world's most influential minds, including Dawkins, Dennett and Harris, of course, but also the likes of Brian Eno, Helen Fisher, Martin Rees and Alan Alda.

"Brilliant, farsighted, and fascinating, Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think? is an essential guide to the Net-based world."

Paperback and Kindle editions.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURSDAY, DEC. 1, 6:30 pm
at The Community Church
of New York

28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)
FUTURE SCIENCE:
Essays from the
Cutting Edge
Ed: **Max Brockman**

Future Science features eighteen exciting young scientists, most of whom are presenting their work, ideas and insights to a general audience for the first time. This "remarkable collection of fluent and fascinating essays" introduces the very latest theories and discoveries in science.

"A tidal wave of talent. . . . A wealth of new and exciting ideas."

— Stephen Pinker

"I would have killed for books like this when I was a student!"

— Brian Eno

MONDAY, OCT. 17, 7:00 pm
(Yes, this is a date change)
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
"THE NIGHT OF
THE HUNTER"

For Halloween! (a little early), the only film actor Charles Laughton ever directed – and a spooky, chilling beaut. "Hunter" is an allegory of innocence, evil, and hypocrisy, with psychotic religious fanatic Robert Mitchum (his greatest-ever performance) menacing two homeless children. With Shelley Winters and a wonderful Lillian Gish as the children's defender.



SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

Check out the menu and prices at
www.stonecreeknyc.com

BRUNCH!
SUNDAY, OCT. 23, 12 NOON
(This is a date change)
Gather for our
MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH
GET-TOGETHER
at BXL East, 210 East 51 St.

We'll meet at Noon at our new favorite bistro just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and prix-fixe Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18. Check it out at bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/

Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome.

Bring friends!

November brunch: 11/20.

SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2011

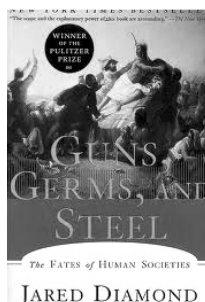
GREAT LECTURES

TUESDAY, OCT. 25, 7:00 pm
"GUNS, GERMS & STEEL"

Part 1: Out of Eden

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

A *National Geographic* production based on author Jared Diamond's best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning book whose subtitle, "The Fates of Human Societies", addresses



the questions: Why is the world so unequal? and What part does geography play in human and societal development?

This three-part series, with all the production values you expect of a *National Geographic* presentation, stars Peter Coyote and author Jared Diamond himself.

SHSNY Great Lectures Editor Bob Murtha will lead the (probably lively) discussions after each almost-an-hour dvd showing.

November 22 Great Lecture:

"Guns, Germs & Steel - Part 2"

Great Lectures Night is FREE

PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays and disasters aside, the usual monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Community Church of NY.

Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at BXL East Bistro.

Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

More info: www.shsny.org and at humanism.meetup.com/515; reasonablenewyork.org/ and 212-308-2165

SHSNY FREETHOUGHT DAY CELEBRATION
BRUNCH & LECTURE/CONVERSATION
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16, at 12 Noon, at
PETE'S TAVERN, 129 EAST 18 St. (Irving Place)

with guest speaker

HAROLD HUDSON CHANNER

Host of Manhattan Neighborhood Network's
Conversations with Channer.

**"FREETHINKERS I HAVE KNOWN:
38 YEARS OF HUMANIST CONVERSATIONS"**



Harold Hudson Channer has been a star of cable TV in New York for almost four decades, and has conducted more than 2700 "intelligent, relevant" interviews of such freethought luminaries as Isaac Asimov, Buckminster Fuller, Corliss Lamont, Ed Asner, and Gunnar Myrdal ... as well as leaders and game-changers like Abbie Hoffman, Barbara

Ehrenreich, Ralph Nader, Barry Goldwater, Timothy Leary, Pete Seeger, and Michio Kaku.

Join SHSNY's 3rd Annual Freethought Day in America Celebration with your fellow humanists and rationalists at historic Pete's Tavern, and don't miss a fascinating talk.

Brunch is \$25

for your choice of 11 entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.), and coffee or tea, including all taxes and tips.

PRE-PAYMENT IS A MUST!

The room only holds 50, and this event will be a sellout!

Pre-pay now at www.shsny.org

Use your PayPal account or your credit card.

Or mail your check, made out to SHSNY, to:

SHSNY, PO Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-7661.

Questions? Call 212-308-2165, and leave a call-back number.

OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

Check them out at their websites or
www.reasonablenewyork.org

Oct 4, 7 pm - Dinner & Philosophy
Now: *What's a Convincing Explanation?*

Oct 7, 7 pm - New York Society for
Ethical Culture, "Ethics in Film":
Dirty, Pretty Things

Oct 20, 7 pm - CFI-NYC: *Celluloid
Science - Humanizing Life in the Lab*

Oct 23, 6 pm - NYC Skeptics:
Eugenie Scott on: *Denialism of
Climate Change and Evolution*
Oct 26, 8 pm NYC Skeptics: *Drink-
ing Sceptically*

Every Friday, 8 pm - Richie's List:
Drinking With Atheists
Tuesdays, 6 pm - NY Society for
Ethical Culture: *Socrates Cafe*

WHY “RELIGION IS USEFUL” IS A TERRIBLE ARGUMENT FOR RELIGION

Part 2

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from *Alternet.com*, 7/29/2011)

(Editor's note: In the first half of this essay, reprinted in September PIQUE, Ms. Christina argued that the theist "argument from utility" – that religion is useful and makes people happy – makes no more sense than believing in Santa Claus because that makes children happy, and causes them to behave better, to boot. "And", Part 1 concluded in September, "if you wouldn't argue that belief in Santa is valid because it's useful, why would you argue it about God?")

Now, you might say that belief in God makes more sense than belief in Santa. You might say that, while we know Santa is fictional, the existence of God is, at least, an open question, and that therefore, belief in God is more defensible than belief in Santa.

But then you're back to arguing that God is real. Or at least plausible. You've abandoned the argument from utility (you should, it's a terrible argument), and you've circled back around to debating whether God really exists, and whether good evidence supports that hypothesis.

And the whole freaking point of the argument from utility is that it abandons the case for God being real. The whole point is that it doesn't matter whether God is real, as long as belief in God makes people happy. So you don't get to shore up that argument by saying that God might be real after all. Not unless you're willing to make a pretty convincing case for God being real.

And if you had a convincing case for God being real, why on Earth would you be arguing that it doesn't matter whether he's real, as long as belief in him makes people happy? If you can make a better case for God than you can for Santa, then why aren't you making it? Why are you falling back on this patently absurd notion that grown-ups should believe whatever makes them feel good, regardless of whether that belief has any connection with reality?

The Argument That Eats Itself

Whenever I hear the argument from utility, I pretty much consider it a victory for my side. It's an entirely self-defeating argument, an argument that admits that it's wrong in the very stating of it. When people start arguing for the utility of their beliefs regardless of whether they're actually true, they've essentially conceded. They're essentially saying, "You're right. The things I believe almost certainly aren't true. I certainly can't make a good case for why they're true. Now will you leave me alone and let me believe them anyway?"

Well, if you want to believe things that you know almost certainly aren't true, you're certainly free to do that. I'm not sure what definition of the word "believe" you're using, but sure, if for you, "believing" in God means "telling yourself over and over that God exists in hopes that you can make yourself really think it", then knock yourself out.

But if that's what you think, then why are you

bothering to argue with atheists? If you really just believe things because you want them to be true, why do you care what anyone else thinks about it?

I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt here. I'm going to assume that you're debating atheists because you want to test your beliefs against the people who will question them the hardest. I'm going to assume that you do, in fact, care whether the things you believe are true. And I'm going to show the argument from utility for what it is: a last-ditch effort to hang on to a belief that you know isn't supportable, but that you're having a hard time letting go of. I know that religion is hard to let go of: I know that people have emotional attachments, psychological attachments, social attachments, to believing in God, and/or the soul, and/or the supernatural, and/or the afterlife. I've been there. I get it.

So I'm going to do you the respect of treating you like an adult. I'm going to do you the respect of assuming that you're mature enough to face realities that, at first, are hard to face. And I'm going to do you the respect of being straight with you: If you're making the argument from utility, if you're arguing in favor of wishful thinking, you're not living up to your maturity.

I will tell you here that life without religion can be really good. I'll tell you that life without religion can be liberating, that it can give you an intense and profound sense of connection with humanity and the universe. I'll tell you that atheists have meaning in our lives, and joy, and comfort in the face of hard times, and solace in the face of death, and a passion to do right. I'll tell you that atheism can be a safe place to land, and that, as the atheist community grows bigger and stronger, it's getting safer every day. I'll tell you that most former believers I know are tickled pink to have let go of their beliefs.

I'm entirely sincere about all of that. But it's not the most important thing. The most important thing about atheism is that it's almost certainly true. And if you're defending religion because it's useful, regardless of whether it's true, then on some level, you know that.

Come on in. The water's fine.

HONESTY IN (DANAE'S) RELIGION

Wiley Miller

(Transcribed from the comic strip "Non Sequitur", 9/8/2011)

Eight-year-old Danae has set up her Church Of Danae booth. A man approaches, noticing her "Commandment Du Jour" sign:

"Thou shalt make room for donuts."

Man: Hey, I like that. Do you have other commandments?

Danae: You bet. (Shows close-up of Commandments List):

1. Thou shalt not question me ... ever.
2. Thou shalt just shut up.
3. Thou shalt not question the Scriptures with "facts".

Man: These look like they've just been made up to fit a personal agenda.

Danae: And ...?

Man: And I like it. It's refreshing to see honesty in religion for a change.

MICHELLE BACHMANN EARNS HER SECOND CONSECUTIVE DUMBTH NOMINATION, AND NO, SHE'S NOT REALLY FUNNY

As Hurricane Irene splashed up the East Coast on August 28, Michelle Bachmann, campaigning for the Republican nomination for President, and ignoring the fact that she is herself a politician, earned her second straight Dumbth nomination by telling the *St. Petersburg Times*:



"I don't know how much God has to do to get the attention of the politicians. We've had an earthquake; we've had a hurricane. He said, 'Are you going to start listening to me here?'"

So, not only is God a Republican, He's a dimwit who sent natural disasters to Washington to get the attention of "the politicians" while the politicians (including Bachmann) were absent from Washington. Congress wasn't in session.

Funny.

But just in case you think Rep. Bachmann is a harmless fool, consider her "HPV vaccination causes 'mental retardation'" announcement. 4,000 women a year die of cervical cancer in America. The HPV vaccine, if given to girls at around age 11 or 12, before the beginning of sexual activity, works against a sexually transmitted virus that can cause cervical cancer. It's a proven, safe preventive. Proven.

During the Republican "debate" in Tampa in September Bachmann castigated Texas Governor Rick Perry for attempting to mandate vaccinations in his state — you



know, big-government interference in young girls' freedom to risk cancer. The following day she announced that an unnamed, unidentified woman had approached her after the debate and told Bachmann that the

woman's daughter had received the vaccination and, as a result, had become "mentally retarded".

Not funny.

Because there are hundreds of thousands of people—maybe millions—who believe whatever shoot-from-the-lip Bachmann says, no matter how fact-challenged, reality-deprived, or simply politically motivated.

So the immediate outcry from the medical community that the vaccination cannot cause "mental retardation" will mean little to them; they'll believe Michelle.

And when HPV vaccination is offered to their own daughters, many of those believers, perhaps tens of thousands, will opt out in fear.

And some (who can know how many, how many is too many?) of those daughters will—prematurely and unnecessarily—die.

No, not funny at all. — JR

AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH Neil Postman

(Excerpted from *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, published in 1985, and posted on delanceyplace.com, 9/7/2011.)

We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and Orwell's prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares. But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another — slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.

Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions". In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

Possibly Huxley, not Orwell, was right.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE ...

Steven Solomon

(From Mr. Solomon's book, *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization*, as excerpted on delanceyplace.com, 8/25/2011)

(Editor's Note: Just as September PIQUE, with its lead article, "How Do You Kill an Ocean?" — about the fragility of our salt-water resources — returned from the printer, this eye-opener about Earth's fresh water came to our attention.)

Despite Earth's superabundance of total water, nature endowed to mankind a surprisingly minuscule amount of accessible fresh liquid water that is indispensable to planetary life and human civilization. Only 2.5 percent of Earth's water is fresh. But two-thirds of that is locked away from man's use in ice caps and glaciers. All but

a few drops of the remaining one-third is also inaccessible, or prohibitively expensive to extract, because it lies in rocky, underground aquifers—in effect, isolated underground lakes—many a half mile or more deep inside Earth's bowels. Such aquifers hold up to an estimated 100 times more liquid fresh water than exists on the surface. In all, less than three-tenths of 1 percent of total fresh water is in liquid form on the surface. The remainder is in permafrost and soil moisture, in the body of plants and animals, and in the air as vapor.

One of the most striking facts about the world's fresh water is that the most widely accessed source by societies throughout history – rivers and streams – hold just six-thousandths of 1 percent of the total. Some societies have been built around the edges of lakes, which cumulatively hold some 40 times more than rivers. Yet lake water has been a far less useful direct resource to large civilizations because its accessible perimeters are so much smaller than riversides. Moreover, many are located in inhospitable frozen regions or mountain highlands, and three-fourths are concentrated in just three lake systems: Siberia's remote, deep Lake Baikal, North America's Great Lakes, and East Africa's mountainous rift lakes, chiefly Tanganyika and Nyasa. ...

The minuscule, less than 1 percent total stock of accessible fresh water, however, is not the actual amount available to mankind since rivers, lakes, and shallow ground water are constantly being replenished through Earth's desalinating water cycle of evaporation and precipitation – at any given moment in time, four-hundredths of 1 percent of Earth's water is in the process of being recycled through the atmosphere. Most of the evaporated water comes from the oceans and falls back into them as rain or snow. But a small, net positive amount of desalted, cleansed ocean water precipitates over land to renew its freshwater ecosystems before running off to the sea. Of that amount, civilizations since the dawn of history have had practical access only to a fraction, since two-thirds was rapidly lost in floods, evaporation, and directly in soil absorption, while a lot of the rest ran off in regions like the tropics or frozen lands too remote from large populations to be captured and utilized.

Indeed, the dispersion of available fresh water on Earth is strikingly uneven. Globally, one-third of all streamflow occurs in Brazil, Russia, Canada, and the United States, with a combined one-tenth of the world's population. Semiarid lands with one-third of world population, by contrast, get just 8 percent of renewable supply. Due to the extreme difficulty of managing such a heavy liquid—weighing 8.34 pounds per gallon, or over 20 percent more than oil—societies' fates throughout history have rested heavily on their capacity to increase supply and command over their local water resources. ...

Almost everywhere civilization has taken root, man-made deforestation, water diversion, and irrigation schemes have produced greater desiccation, soil erosion, and the ruination of Earth's natural fertility to sustain plant life.

How societies respond to the challenges presented by the changing hydraulic conditions of their environment

using the technological and organizational tools of their times is, quite simply, one of the central motive forces of history. ... Throughout history, wherever water resources have been increased and made most manageable, navigable, and potable, societies have generally been robust and long enduring. ... In every age, whoever gained control of the world's main sea-lanes or the watersheds of great rivers commanded the gateways of imperial power.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #84

In Florida's Palm Beach County, it used to be unlawful to bring a gun into a county government building or a local park. In Groveland, firing a gun into the air in celebration (as on a drunken New Year's Eve) was illegal. In Lake County, firearms in libraries were a no-no, and in South Miami stored handguns had to have trigger locks so that children couldn't fire them.

Sound like reasonable restrictions? Not to the right-wing controlled Florida state legislature that ordinarily trumpets its fealty to "small government", but has put new teeth—including \$100,000 fines—into a 1987 law that prevents local governments from writing laws the National Rifle Association doesn't like.

"The notion that a city ordinance stops violence is patently absurd", said State Representative Matt Gaetz, a Fort Walton Beach Republican who sponsored the bill. "People lawfully carrying weapons with permits are rarely part of the problem."

Comment: But when "rarely" happens, Mr. Gaetz, people "often" die. – JR

GUNS: COMING SOON TO A LIBRARY NEAR YOU Cliff Schecter

(Based on and excerpted from alternet.org/newsandviews/665357/nra_lobbyist_chris_cox_makes_a_ludicrous_pitch_for_forced_conceal-carry, 9/12/2011)

The newest campaign by the National Rifle Association to turn all of America into a B-movie vision of the Wild West is being spearheaded by NRA lobbyist Chris Cox, who writes op-eds in favor of the National Right-to-Carry Reciprocity Act (H.R. 822).

That act, Mr. Cox and other NRA activists claim, "explicitly protects the right of each state to issue its own permits and determine its own rules and regulations with regard to concealed carry".

Of course, that is exactly what the intended legislation does *not* do, if the state in question has restrictions on gun ownership that the NRA considers oppressive – which means any restriction at all.

Under H.R. 822—if it passes, and never forget that the NRA is the most powerful lobby in America—it will be possible for anyone who can get a permit to carry a concealed handgun in a state with such lax standards that even convicted criminals can get one—as, say, in Florida—to then retain that right while simply crossing the border and entering another state where there are laws in place to

protect its citizens from criminals.

In other words, New York's gun-control laws would not apply to visitors from other states.

Justification? Hey, Mr. Cox argues, every state has to honor every other state's driver's licenses, don't they? Naturally, he sees that reciprocity working in only one direction in the case of conceal-carry gun laws: New York has to respect Nevada's laws, but not the other way around.

It's quite simple, really. If Mr. Cox has his way, more domestic batterers, more sex offenders, more drunkards, more drug dealers and more fugitives from the law will soon be allowed to legally conceal and carry a firearm in a neighborhood near you, perhaps because a state 3,000 miles away says that's just the American way.

DON'T REGISTER GUNS. REGISTER ... UM ... US.

Richard Milner

Ed Brayton notes on "Dispatches from the Culture War" (<http://scienceblogs.com/dispatches/>) that "Internet Pastor" Mike Stahl has come up with an interesting idea to assist Christians in day-to-day life.

According to Stahl, the nation should set up an "Atheist Registry" in order to provide an updated list of anyone who is a "self-proclaimed atheist", just as you would do for people convicted of sex crimes or associating with terrorist groups.

Yes, atheists are apparently just that dangerous. Stahl wrote his original proposal last year, where he explained his reasoning behind the registry:

Now, many (especially the atheists), may ask "Why do this, what's the purpose?" Duhhh, Mr. Atheist, for the same purpose many States put the names and photos of convicted sex offenders and other ex-felons on the I-Net – to INFORM the public!

Although Stahl's registry would only have a name and perhaps picture of the avowed, publicly declared atheist, and no physical address, he also believes that knowing who the atheists in your neighborhood are could lead to a wonderful opportunity to try to convert (or punish) them, too.

Perhaps we may actually know some. In which case we could begin to witness to them and warn them of the dangers of atheism. Or perhaps they are radical atheists, whose hearts are as hard as Pharaoh's. In that case, if they are business owners, we would encourage all our Christian friends, as well as the various churches and their congregations, NOT to patronize them as we would only be "feeding" Satan.

Although Stahl came up with his grand plan nearly a year ago, he reposted it recently to his Facebook page in order to get some fresh thoughts on his God-fearing brainstorm, causing a storm of activity that forced him both to delete the link and put his blog on "Private".

It's probably a bad sign when an "Internet Pastor" has to hide himself on the Internet.

TO MY CHRISTIAN FRIENDS

Al Henick

To all my Christian friends, with whom I disagree vehemently on matters of religion, please be advised that I do not agree with Bill Maher (PIQUE, September) that "Christianity is perfectly capable of once again becoming the violent, blood-letting religion it was under the Crusades". Wild predictions of this type because of the actions of one depraved Norwegian Christian terrorist do not serve the cause of free-thinkers or secularism. When an individual Israeli enters a mosque with a machine gun and executes 30-40 Muslims in prayer, he can properly be called a "Jewish terrorist", but it is not a foreboding of a worldwide blood-letting by Judaism.

Do not equate individual, half-crazed murderers, even when they invoke religion, to terrorist movements in Islam. These are organized factions consisting of thousands of members whose stated goal is jihad, murder, and terror. They do not compose the majority of the Muslims of the world, but no other religion, especially Christianity or Judaism, have segments remotely resembling Al Qaeda, the Taliban, or Hamas.

There seems to be a tendency among some freethinkers, in their passion to attack the dominant Christian leaders in our country, to play devil's advocate when it comes to Muslims. Face the facts. Count the bodies. Compare the status of Muslims in our country to that of Christians, Jews, or freethinkers in Muslim nations. Then write the equation.

THE BRITISH IS COMING! OR IS IT?

John Rafferty

In the August issue of *The Humanist Monthly*, newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society, the following notice appeared:

For centuries, it has been standard U.S. practice to place commas or periods (but not other punctuation marks) inside of quotation marks, regardless of whether they were part of the quoted material. This practice is said to have emerged from aesthetic considerations – but maybe (?) also just to defy British practice which is, simply and logically, to enclose only quoted material in quotation marks.

But reports are that text in places like the Web, emails ... etc., is, with increasing frequency, following the British practice. So ... in this issue we are endeavoring to join the growing trend to restoring accuracy and logic in the English language.

What do the very-literate readers of PIQUE think? Shall we continue to edit the American English way, with periods and commas within quote marks, e.g., "She called him an 'idiot.'"? Or shall we advance boldly into the 21st century and adopt the English English usage of the 18th century, e.g., "She called him an 'idiot.'"? This issue experiments with the latter.

Your opinions, please, which I will consider carefully, and then do exactly as I please.

THE TRAGEDY OF LITERATURE ABUSE

(Excerpted from *Thisistrue.com* 9/9/2011)

Are you a Literature Abuser? Do you read more than is healthy for you? Take this test and find out how many of these instances of abuse apply to you.

- I've read fiction when depressed, to cheer myself up.
- I have binged, reading an entire book in a day.
- I read rapidly, often "gulping" chapters.
- I sometimes read early in the morning or before work.
- Sometimes I avoid obligations in order to read novels.
- I have spent money meant for necessities on books.
- Most of my friends are heavy fiction readers.
- I've wept or been angry over something I have read.
- I have sometimes wished I did not read so much.

If you answered "yes" to three or more of these questions, you may be a literature abuser. Once a relatively rare disorder, Literature Abuse, or LA, has risen to new levels due to the accessibility of higher education since the end of the Second World War.

Abusers become withdrawn, uninterested in society or normal relationships. In severe cases they develop bad posture from carrying heavy book bags. In the worst instances, they become cranky reference librarians.

Excessive reading during pregnancy is perhaps the number one cause of moral deformity among the children of English professors, and teachers of English and creative writing. Known as Fetal Fiction Syndrome, this disease also leaves its victims prone to a lifetime of nearsightedness.

Recent studies have established that most abusers have at least one parent who abused literature, often beginning at an early age. Many spouses of an abuser become abusers themselves. Other predisposing factors include fathers or mothers who do not encourage children to play sports or to watch television in the evening.

Within the sordid world of literature abuse, the lowest circle belongs to those sufferers who have thrown their lives and hopes away to study literature in our colleges. Parents should look for telltale signs – has your teenager named her cat after a Romantic poet? Don't expect her to voluntarily confess, "I can't stop reading Spenser." By the time you find the secret stash of *Paris Review*, it may already be too late.

If you suspect your child is majoring in English:

- Talk to her in a loving way. But let her know that you aren't spending a hundred grand to put her through Stanford so she can clerk at Waldenbooks, either.

- Tell her what you know, and how: "I found this book in your purse. How long has this been going on?"

- Ask hard questions: "Who is this Count Vronsky?"

- Move the TV into her room.

- Introduce her to frat boys.

- Tear up her library card. Make her stop signing her letters as "Emma." Transfer her to an Alabama college.

Most important, remember, you are not alone. To seek help for yourself or someone you love, contact the nearest chapter of the American Literature Abuse Society, or look under ALAS in your telephone directory.

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at Pete's – Order Now!

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Orwell Vs. Huxley

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Beyond "New Atheism"

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Ready to write your
Elevator Speech?

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