

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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June, 2011

How well do unbelievers face the raw fact of their own mortality? Pretty well, we point out herein. This month, too, we offer more epiphanies of unbelief, consider the current condition of reason, possible futures of the human condition, and Christians who poison dogs. We critique bibles old and new, say goodbye to an old friend, celebrate a new couple, and report on social gatherings both educational and what-the-hell. But first, the news we expect you have been awaiting breathlessly. – JR

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## THE SHSNY ELECTION RESULTS ARE IN, AND WE'VE ROUNDED UP THE USUAL SUSPECTS

**T**he 2008-2011 SHSNY Board of Directors met on May 19 to count the ballots in this spring's election. Voting by ten percent of the membership would be enough for a valid election\*, but this year nearly half of all dues-paid members voted by mail (going through the wearying process of checking boxes, finding a stamp, etc.), and both the turnout and the results were especially gratifying for the current leadership.

Three-quarters (76 percent) of all the ballots received were check-marked for "All the Below" candidates, (none for "None of the Above," by the way) and so all—their names are listed in the masthead box at the bottom of this page—were deemed elected for the term 2011-2014.

Immediately after certifying the election of the new Board, nominations and elections for officers in the new term were held.

Re-elected were John Rafferty as President and Donna Marxer as Treasurer. Newly elected were Robert A. Murtha, Jr., as Vice President, and Lee Loshak as Secretary. All the nominations were unopposed, the elections unanimous.

*\*Dues-paid member and you don't have a copy of the SHSNY constitution? Call 212-308-2165, or email [editor@shsnny.org](mailto:editor@shsnny.org).*

## NEW COMMITTEES: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOU TO GET INVOLVED AND SERVE

**A**t a March 24 meeting of the previous Board, a decision was taken (and re-affirmed by the new Board on May 19) to establish several new standing committees to coordinate and supervise SHSNY's growing membership and expanding menu of events.

Volunteers—*this means you!*—are needed for:

**EVENTS:** *Lee Loshak, Chair.* Elaine Lynn, Bob Murtha, Irv Millman, Carl Marxer and John Rafferty will also serve, but we need volunteers to set up chairs, hand out fliers, greet newcomers, etc. You don't have to attend every event — just help out at the ones you do go to.

**Book Club Special:** Are you a Book Club regular? Editor Elaine Lynn could use early-arrival help in setting up chairs, passing around her written summaries, etc.

**MEMBERSHIP:** *John Rafferty, Temporary Chair.* Carlos Mora and Remo Cosentino will also serve. But we need computer-literate help in replacing an early-1990s home-made (but effective – 91 percent renewal rate!) system.

**ADVERTISING/PUBLIC RELATIONS:** *John Rafferty, (Very) Temporary Chair.* John Wagner, Beth Zucker and *Communications Coordinator* (new position) Carl Marxer will also serve. We need volunteers to write releases, to distribute them to the media, to monitor and update our press lists, and to monitor our advertising on Google and respond to inquiries directed to our website.

**SOCIAL NETWORKING:** *John Wagner, Chair.* Carl Marxer, Remo Cosentino and Beth Zucker will also serve. They, and more volunteers, we hope, will maintain our Facebook page(s), upgrade our SHSNY website (including posting PIQUE and other pdfs) and our Meetup notices, and upgrade our links to other groups and networks.

## HOW TO VOLUNTEER, OR GET MORE INFO

Call 212-308-2165, or email [editor@shsnny.org](mailto:editor@shsnny.org). (Leave a call-back number if you phone.) The chair of the committee you're interested in will get right back to you, promise.

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**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  
**SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / 212-308-2165 / [www.shsnny.org](http://www.shsnny.org)**

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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.

## LEAVING LIFE AND RELIGION BEHIND

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from "Why Atheists Are Better Prepared for Death than Believers," on AlterNet, 11/12/2010)

(Note: Ms. Christina begins this essay with a long introduction about the diagnosis of cancer in her pet cat.)

Now, at this point, you might be wondering what any of this has to do with atheism. You might be thinking, "But religious people know that their pets are going to die! They know that the people they love are going to die! They even know that they themselves are going to die! They disagree with atheists about what happens after we die, but they know that death is real, and inevitable. What does making clear-eyed choices about death and life have to do with atheism?"

And that's a fair question.

But I recently saw some research that gives an answer to this question. There was a study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2009, showing that among terminally ill cancer patients, those with strong religious beliefs who relied on their religion to cope with their illness were more likely to request aggressive medical care in the last week of life. In other words: People who are most strongly attached to a belief in an afterlife are more likely to try to delay death when it's clearly imminent.

That doesn't make any logical sense. If someone believes in a blissful afterlife, then logically, you'd think that person would accept her death gracefully, and would even welcome it. But it makes perfect sense when you think of religion not as a way of genuinely coping with the fear of death, but as a way of putting it on the back burner.

The dominant way we deal with death in our culture is religious. And our religious culture deals with death by pretending it isn't real. Religion deals with death by pretending it isn't permanent; by pretending that the loss of the ones we love is just like a long vacation apart; by pretending that our dead loved ones are still hanging around somehow, like the dead grandparents in a "Family Circus" cartoon; by pretending that our own death is just a one-way trip to a different place. Our religious culture deals with death by putting it on the back burner, by encouraging people to stick their fingers in their ears and yell, "I can't hear you, I can't hear you, I can't hear you!" (This is backed up, again, by the JAMA study, which also showed that "a high level of religious coping was also associated with less use of end-of-life planning strategies, including do-not-resuscitate orders, living wills, and appointment of a health care power of attorney.")

So when religious people are faced with the harsh realities of death—and with the possibility that their beliefs might be bogus and that death might really, truly be the end—they're often not prepared. They haven't had to think about the inevitability of death and its finality, and what kinds of choices they would make when faced with it.

Hence, the lack of practical preparation for death, and the pointlessly aggressive medical care in the last week.

Atheists, on the other hand, have had to come up with

ways of dealing with death more or less on our own. Like anyone who rejects the dominant culture, and who rejects the default answers to hard questions that get spoon-fed us by this culture, we've had to come up with our own answers. The same way that LGBT people are forced to think about sexuality and gender; the same way that vegetarians are forced to think about the ethics of food, atheists are forced to think about death, and what kind of value life might have when it's brief and finite. If we once had religious beliefs about an afterlife, letting go of those beliefs forced us to think about death, and to face its finality, to come up with ways of coping with it. And even if we were raised non-believers, the religious views of death are so ubiquitous in our culture they're impossible to ignore. And non-religious alternatives, to put it mildly, aren't.

Atheists have had to come up with these alternatives more or less on our own. (To be fair, some religious adherents have thought carefully about these questions too, the way some straight people/cisgendered people/carnivores have thought carefully about sexuality/gender/food ethics, but being an atheist means having that thoughtfulness thrust upon us, whether we like it or not.)

So when the subject of death arises, atheists can't evade it. We can't paper it over with a Band-Aid of "Well, we'll see each other again on the other side," with no careful thought about whether that other side is remotely plausible, or whether it would be desirable even if it existed. And every time we hear people talk about Heaven or angels or past lives or their loved ones being in a better place and looking down on them right now, we're reminded: "Oh, yeah. We don't think that. We think that when we die, we die forever. We don't think our dead loved ones are with God. We think that they're dead." We have to face death a little bit, every day of our lives.

It's like an inoculation.

So when it comes time to face it for real, we're ready. Of course we're frightened by it; of course we're upset by it; of course we want to delay it if we reasonably can, for as long as we reasonably can. Life is precious, and of course we grieve for its end. But it doesn't take us by surprise. We've had time to think about it. We've had time to think about questions like quantity of life versus quality of life, and what we personally think about how these balance out. We've had time to think about questions like what makes life meaningful even though it's finite, and how to make that meaning still be meaningful, even when that finiteness is looking very finite indeed.

And so when our pets get sick, or when our parents start to get frail, or when we're facing hard decisions about our own life and death, we're not caught off-guard. We can make calm, informed, evidence-based choices that are in keeping with our deepest and most treasured values, and that aren't just frightened, reflexive reactions to the single undeniable reality of our life. When people with life-threatening illnesses like cancer or HIV are given a good prognosis, they're sometimes told, "You'll live long enough to die of something else." That may sound grisly and

morbid to some. But to me it's oddly comforting. It offers the comfort of the solid foundation of reality, understanding that yes, we're going to die someday, and so, armed with that understanding, we can make good, thoughtful choices about our death, and about our life.

If you're a believer who's questioning your beliefs, leaving your religion does mean facing the finality and permanence of death. That can be a hard pill to swallow. But when I think about those religious believers frantically pursuing aggressive and pointless medical care in the last week of their life, it seems like a bargain.

## MORTALITY FOR BEGINNERS

Gretchen Robinson

(Note: Ms. Robinson is a humanist hospice chaplain.)

End of Life is a complicated subject. And what I see written is, often, a lot of claptrap. I was disappointed, for instance, with *Free Inquiry's* May special section, "Facing Misery: Confronting Illness, Even Death, without a Prayer." I didn't read it in depth but I remember thinking "They don't get it": what it's like to die or to have a loved one dying before your eyes. The writers were mostly in their own heads, too objective. Humans/humanists have hearts and brains, but sometimes it seems the latter (humanists) spend too much time in their glorious brains/intellec

The thing about my work is the small 'u' universalism. Every human being has to face dying, and there's something about dying that causes people to doubt religion and/or their faith in a way that never happened before in their lives. Too many of the *Free Inquiry* writers don't "get" that their standpoint will be challenged as much as the faith of a Catholic.

My work, seeing thousands of family members and hundreds and hundreds of patients gives me a deep understanding of how the end of life challenges whatever belief system people have.

I saw the *JAMA* article that Greta Christina (above) references. I think its conclusions may be true in some circles but it didn't capture what I see. People I meet and counsel are much more pragmatic, less captured by traditional Catholic theology. Statistics are hard to find for say, patients/families who turn their back on religious teachings (as Catholics readily do on abortion and birth control) and find ways to give loved ones a good death (euthanasia).

On the other hand, the medical director of our hospice is Jewish, and says that some forms of Judaism say you should do all you can to restore health, including going for further chemo when it will likely cause further suffering and little benefit. This is clergy abuse to most religious liberals. For me it's anathema, and it's not the view of most people I encounter. People are pragmatic, at least in this area. We do get the occasional family member (usually spouse) who insists on keeping a wife, husband, mother, father alive despite advanced Alzheimer's disease. At that point, who is it that's playing God?

The terrific thing about Greta Christina's article is that she compares facing end-of-life with the great process of self-understanding and discernment that LGBT persons face when they face up to being other than heterosexual.

Death is just as scary for humanists as for theists. One added fear we have is the fear that "there are no atheists in deathbeds" (Hey! I just made that up). But for the record, humanists/non-theists die well. They've done such "soul searching" (human soul) that they face their deaths with equanimity. Even the most devout and committed, say, Catholic, still has to make "a leap of faith" at EOL because they don't know, not for sure. I think if people are honest with themselves—or others, including me—they all have doubts at the end.

We all question. We all, if we are honest, doubt.

**Comment:** To explore this subject more thoroughly, try *Free Inquiry's* 2007 special section, "Dealing with Dying," available at [www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=fi&page=dealwithdying](http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=fi&page=dealwithdying) ... and the magazine's current update in the April/May 2011 edition, also at [secularhumanism.org](http://secularhumanism.org).

And a good place to start in preparing for the terribly inevitable is available at [manhattanusersguide.com/archives.php](http://manhattanusersguide.com/archives.php) and, under INFO, click on 11.12.10 Funerals, the skint.

Also, our hospice chaplain asks that we give the hospice movement (industry?) some credit for sensitivity and for trying to serve the legitimate needs of non-theists. To learn more, try: [comfortdying.com/hospice\\_care\\_and\\_palliative\\_care\\_61640.htm](http://comfortdying.com/hospice_care_and_palliative_care_61640.htm)

## WE'RE THE LUCKY ONES

Richard Dawkins

(Excerpted from Chapter 1 of *Unweaving the Rainbow*)

We are going to die and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they're never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. ... In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here. ...

This is another respect in which we are lucky. The universe is older than a hundred million centuries. Within a comparable time, the sun will swell to a red giant and engulf the earth. Every century of hundreds of millions has been in its time, or will be when its time comes, "the present century." ...

How it feels to me, and I guess to you as well, is that the present moves from the past to the future like a tiny spotlight, inching its way along a gigantic ruler of time. Everything behind the spotlight is in darkness, the darkness of the dead past. Everything ahead of the spotlight is in the darkness of the unknown future. The odds of your century being the one in the spotlight are the same as the odds that a penny, tossed down at random, will land on a particular ant crawling somewhere on the road from New York to San Francisco.

In other words, it is overwhelmingly probable that you are dead.



## END OF LIFE (AS WE KNOW IT) DECISIONS

Wiley Miller

(*Transcribed from the comic Non Sequitur, 11/20/2010*)

*She:* Life is a precious thing, but simply breathing and existing isn't living. The end is inevitable for everything. We need to face it and accept it as a part of life in order to make the necessary decisions and move on. I'm afraid the time has come for you, dear. I have to pull the plug.

*He (as She unplugs the TV):* But the game is in overtime!

*She:* Go to the light, honey, in the dining room. Dinner's on the table.

## "SACRED HISTORY" AND GENUINE HISTORY

Reza Aslan

(*Excerpted from No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam.*)

One could argue that the clash of monotheisms is the inevitable result of monotheism itself. Whereas a religion of many gods posits many myths to describe the human condition, a religion of one god tends to be monomythic; it not only rejects all other gods, it rejects all other explanations for God. If there is only one God, then there may be only one truth, and that can easily lead to bloody conflicts of irreconcilable absolutisms. Missionary activity, while commendable for providing health and education to the impoverished throughout the world, is nonetheless predicated on the belief that there is but one path to God, and that all other paths lead toward sin and damnation. ...

Religion, it must be understood, is not faith. Religion is the *story* of faith. It is an institutionalized system of symbols and metaphors (read rituals and myths) that provides a common language with which a community of faith can share with each other their numinous encounter with the Divine Presence. Religion is concerned not with genuine history, but with sacred history, which does not course through time like a river. Rather, sacred history is like a hallowed tree whose roots dig deep into primordial time and whose branches weave in and out of genuine history with little concern for the boundaries of space and time. Indeed, it is precisely at those moments when sacred and genuine history collide that religions are born. The clash of monotheism occurs when faith, which is mysterious and ineffable and which eschews all categorizations, becomes entangled in the gnarled branches of religion.

## LIVING WITHOUT MYTH

From *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Joseph Campbell

Wherever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history, or science, it is killed. The living images become only remote facts of a distant time or sky. Furthermore, it is never difficult to demonstrate that as science and history mythology is absurd. When a civilization begins to reinterpret its mythology in this way, the life goes out of it, temples

become museums, and the link between the two perspectives is dissolved. Such a blight has certainly descended on the Bible and on a great part of the Christian cult. ...

The democratic ideal of the self-determining individual, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed. In the fateful, epoch-announcing words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "Dead are all the gods." One knows the tale; it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind's coming to maturity. The spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, was shattered with sure and mighty strokes. The dream-web of myth fell away; the mind opened to full waking-consciousness; and modern man emerged from ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon, or like the sun at dawn from the womb of mother night.

It is not only that there is no hiding place for the gods from the searching telescope and microscope; there is no such society any more as the gods once supported. The social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization. Its ideals are not those of the hieratic pantomime, making visible on earth the forms of heaven, but of the secular state, in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources. Isolated societies, dream-bounded within a mythologically charged horizon, no longer exist except as areas to be exploited. And within the progressive societies themselves, every last vestige of the ancient human heritage of ritual, morality, and art is in full decay.

## LIVING WITHOUT FAITH

Christopher Hitchens

Faith is the surrender of the mind; it's the surrender of reason, it's the surrender of the only thing that makes us different from other mammals. It's our need to believe, and to surrender our skepticism and our reason, our yearning to discard that and put all our trust or faith in someone or something, that is the sinister thing to me. Of all the supposed virtues, faith must be the most overrated.

## NO RELIGION? HERE'S ONE TO TRY

(*Excerpted from ThisIsTrue.com, April 17*)

Philip H. Mockli of Preston has sued Idaho in U.S. District Court, alleging that his civil rights have been violated by the state, which allows municipalities the right to prohibit bars from serving hard liquor. Mockli says this infringes on his religion. He is the founder and "Head Honcho" of the Ethereal Enigmatic Euphoric Movement Toward Civilized Hedonism, which uses liquor as a sacrament. But, he says, local politicians have banned liquor "to force their morality on those of us who don't believe in their religion," despite the fact that both the U.S. and state constitutions "say that drinking firewater is okey-dokey."

*Comment:* Drinking "firewater" as a religious ritual makes as much okey-dokey sense to me as eating the body of a god. - JR

## BARBARA FRIEDBERG DISCUSSES “REASON AT THE CROSSROADS”

Reported by John Rafferty

If audience participation is a measure of success – and it is – Barbara Friedberg’s lecture and discussion on the current state of reason and rationality at the Muhlenberg Library May 14 was a whopper.

Drawing on recent thought-provokers like John Brockman’s *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* and Jaron Lanier’s *You Are Not a Gadget*, as well as mathematician George Polya’s 1940s classic *How to Solve It*, independent scholar Friedberg led the full-room audience through a historical review of both the term “reason” and its applications (remember when it was a given that reason was going to solve everything?).

Preferring and defining the term “rationality” as a *process* that cannot be unlinked from the *purpose* of any of our problem-solving or information-seeking endeavors, Ms. Friedberg contended that while *purpose* is not necessarily at war with *objectivity*, “deciding on a purpose transforms all your thoughts.” So, what are the thought processes, she asks, in non-purposeful, undirected Internet searches?

And *quo vadis*? If the Internet promotes a “democracy of ideas,” in which open-source (and error-riddled) Wikipedia is used more than *Britannica*, and young people’s educations are built now not on what has come before but rather on what’s “in the air” (or the cloud), will future generations lose their/our hold on the rational process?

## TOM FLYNN GIVES A MASTER CLASS IN DEMOGRAPHICS

Reported by John Rafferty

Members, friends and interested newbies (50 of them) crowded into the upstairs private room at Pete’s Tavern (“the oldest continuously operating bar in New York City”) on May 1 for our third annual SHSNY Day of Reason brunch. And to see and hear Tom Flynn, Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism and Editor of *Free Inquiry*, on “the demography of unbelief.”

“Crowded” is the operative word in that first sentence. We sold out, then oversold as PayPal misinformed us on numbers, but the waiters scrounged extra tables and chairs to cram the overflow in, and this reporter, halfway into the coat closet, ate from a plate balanced on his knees. Happily.

But the crowding, leavened by good food and warm-up Mimosas and Bloody Marys, generated dozens of lively conversations and new friendships, and an attentive audience for Tom Flynn’s hour-long, fact-filled and illustrated presentation: “Who Are These Doubters, Anyway?” If you had questions as to who we, the doubters, are and how many of us there are, Tom Flynn had answers.

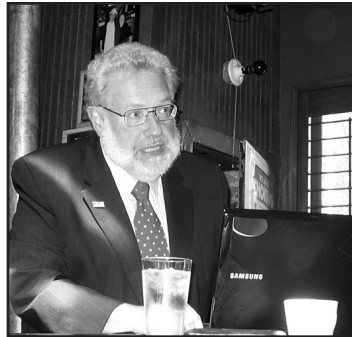
Yes, our numbers are growing, not just along with the population, but in ever-greater proportion. The “Nones” – those who answer “none” or “none of the above” in religious-preference studies – now comprise at least 16 percent of all Americans – one in six!

Yes, and even better, more of those Nones than ever specifically identify as atheists, agnostics and humanists, while in total Nones are now the second largest “denomination” in America, after Roman Catholics.

And yes, we do seem to be the wave of the future, even in America: the greatest growth of Nones in the nation is in the young-adults demographic.

And no, we’re not kidding ourselves. Those other surveys that “prove” religion in America is stronger than ever? Tom detailed case after case of faulty methodology, small and selected samples, and even numbers fudging by the believers who won’t take None for an answer.

A fascinating and informative hour, warmly received and applauded by all. For more information, see Tom’s upcoming articles in *Free Inquiry*. Not a subscriber? Remedy that at [www.secularhumanism.org](http://www.secularhumanism.org).



## CONGRATULATIONS, MARIA & HARRY

The day was gorgeous, the food and the setting were elegant, champagne flowed, the assembled families and friends had a raucous good time, and the handsome couple beamed happiness throughout. On May 7, at The Players, Maria Astifidis and Harry Graber were married, delighting their many, many friends in the freethought community.

Unless we hear a dissenting vote, SHSNY will give the happy couple a new Family Membership, free, for a year. Ayes? Nays? The Ayes have it.

P.S.: That’s Harry and Maria, top right photo, paying close attention to Tom Flynn’s presentation. Well, Harry, anyway.



# SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE - AUGUST 2011

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 6:30 pm**  
**Muhlenberg Branch Library**  
**209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)**

### **TALIBAN:**

***Militant Islam, Oil,  
 and Fundamentalism in  
 Central Asia (2nd Edition)***  
**by Ahmed Rashid**

"The single best book available on the the Taliban." Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist who has interviewed many of the Taliban's leaders (and whose rage against them comes to the surface).



Originally published before September 11, 2001 (and updated in this 2d Edition), *Taliban* is essential reading for all who hope to understand the aftermath of that black day. It includes details on how and why the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the government's oppression of ordinary citizens (especially women), the heroin trade, oil intrigue, and bin Laden's sinister rise to power.

Now that bin Laden is dead, who, if anyone, will command the Taliban? *Taliban* may provide some useful clues. — *Paperback*

***Join us even if you haven't  
 finished reading.***

***The SHSNY Book Club  
 is open to all ... and free!  
 Every SHSNY Book Club  
 is a Book Swap, too.***

Bring the books gathering dust on your shelves and take your pick of other readers' castaways. The leftovers? Donated to the Library.

## July Book Club

**Thursday, July 7, 6:30 pm**  
**at the Muhlenberg**  
**BRAINTRUST:**

***What Neuroscience Tell Us  
 About Morality***  
**by Patricia Churchland**

What is morality? Where does it come from? And why do most of us heed its call most of the time? In *Braintrust*, neurophilosophy pioneer Patricia Churchland argues that morality originates in the biology of the brain. She describes the "neurobiological platform of bonding" that, modified by evolutionary pressures and cultural values, has led to human styles of moral behavior. The result is a provocative genealogy of morals that asks us to reevaluate the priority given to religion, absolute rules, and pure reason in accounting for the basis of morality. — *Hardcover or Kindle*

## August Book Club

**Thursday, August 4, 6:30 pm**  
**at the Muhlenberg**

***THE MORAL LANDSCAPE:  
 How Science Can Determine  
 Human Values***  
**by Sam Harris**

It used to be a given that religion was the source of all important knowledge, both the "how" of the universe — what it is like, and how it works — and the "why" — why it exists at all, and why human life has a place in it.

Harris argues forcefully for the superiority of science over religion as a means of determining morality and understanding the subtle gradations between permanent truths and culturally and historically determined values.

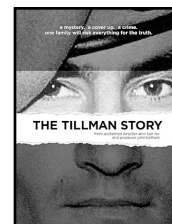
Not everyone agrees (ask Massimo Pigliucci), but Harris makes a powerful argument.

**MONDAY, JUNE 6, 7:00 p.m.**

## SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**"The Tillman Story"**

Pat Tillman, the pro football star who gave up his million-dollar NFL contract to enlist in the Army after 9/11, was killed in Afghanistan by Taliban fire — the war's first true hero — right?



Tillman's family comes forward to tell the real story about what happened on April 22, 2004, in Afghanistan when Tillman was killed by friendly fire and not the Taliban, as first reported. Amir Bar-Lev's documentary pieces together the Tillmans' search for the truth, how they exposed a military cover-up that led to top-ranking officers and called to the carpet the likes of Donald Rumsfeld.

***SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.***

Check out the menu and prices at [www.stonecreeknyc.com](http://www.stonecreeknyc.com)

## SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 12 NOON OUR MONTHLY 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/](http://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!*

***July brunch: 7/17***

# SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE - AUGUST 2011

## GREAT LECTURES

**TUESDAY, JUNE 28, 7 p.m.**

**"THE ATHEISM TAPES"**

**DENYS TURNER**

**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**

**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

"Fascinating" — and even "hugely entertaining" — are the best words to describe the short interviews of six of today's leading men of letters and science — each discussing his intellectual journey to atheism — conducted by playwright and atheist Jonathan Miller for this 2004 BBC series.

This month Great Lectures leader Bob Murtha will present Miller's interview of Denys Turner, the Oxford and Cambridge philosopher who is now Professor of Historical Theology at Yale.

Turner, the author of *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*, asks the ultimate question: Can we prove the existence of God? As anyone acquainted with contemporary philosophy of religion knows, the apparent simplicity and straightforwardness of this question is deceptive. Many subsidiary questions must be asked before any informative answer is forthcoming. What do you mean by "prove"? What do you mean by "God"? And "prove" to whom?

**Great Lectures Night is FREE.**

## SCHEDULES CHANGE! CHECK FOR UPDATES

at 212-308-2165 ... on our website at [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org) and/or [www.meetup.com/shsny-org/](http://www.meetup.com/shsny-org/)



**Center for Inquiry-New York  
and**

**New York City Skeptics  
present**

**MICHAEL SHERMER**

**"THE BELIEVING BRAIN"**

**Thursday, June 9, 7 p.m.**

**Auditorium on Broadway**

**1871 Broadway (67 St.)**

In this Voices of Reason event, noted skeptic and bestselling author Michael Shermer will talk about his new book, *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies — How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths*.

*The Believing Brain* is Shermer's comprehensive and provocative theory on how beliefs are born, formed, reinforced, challenged, changed, and extinguished. Synthesizing thirty years of research, Shermer upends the traditional thinking about how humans form beliefs about the world.

Simply put, beliefs come first and explanations for beliefs follow. Interlaced with his theory of belief, Shermer provides countless real-world examples of how this process operates, from politics, economics and religion to conspiracy theories, the supernatural, and the paranormal. Ultimately, he demonstrates why science is the best tool to determine whether or not a belief matches reality.

Admission is \$10 cash at the door for the general public, free for members of CFI and NYC Skeptics. RSVP by e-mailing your name/s and email address to: [contact@nycskeptics.org](mailto:contact@nycskeptics.org). The event will include a Q&A session and book-signing. There will be a post-event reception at Red Eye Grille at 56th and 7th (if that is full, attendees will also gather at PJ Carney's at 57th and 7th).

## OTHER EVENTS

**Sundays:**

*Religion on the Line*

6-9:00 a.m. — WMCA, 770 AM

*Equal Time for Freethought*

6:30 p.m. — WBAI-NY 99.5FM

*Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*

6:30 p.m. — Channel 13

**Wednesdays:**

*Atheism History Week — 5:30 p.m.*

Hosted by SHSNY President John Rafferty. On MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

**Thursdays:**

*NYC City Atheists TV — 7:00 p.m.*

*Atheist Book Club — 7:30 p.m.,*

hosted by SHSNY Book Club Editor Elaine Lynn. Both on MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

**Fridays:**

*Drinking With Atheists* — Meet, at a venue to be announced, with like-minded friends for a fun evening of conversation. Details at: [www.meetup.com/RichiesList/](http://www.meetup.com/RichiesList/)

**Various Dates & Times:**

*Agnostic A.A.* — Seven A.A.-endorsed meetings. Schedules: [agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html](http://agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html)

## PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays, double bookings and other screwups and disasters aside, the *usual* monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:

**Book Club: First Thursday**  
at the Muhlenberg Library.

**Movie Night: Second Monday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Brunch: Third Sunday**  
at BXL East Bistro.

**Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge.

## BIBLES MAKE NEWS

Barbara G. Lifton

The “Bible” has been in the news lately: a man by the name of A.C. Grayling has spent thirty years compiling *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible*, according to the April 16 *New York Times*. A new book, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* by Timothy Beal, is commented upon by Laura Miller in April PIQUE.

In addition, there is a very long article by John Leland in the April 24 Sunday *Times* Metropolitan Section about the proliferation of “start-up” evangelical churches devoted to the Christian gospels in Manhattan (five or six, by last count). The article describes the itinerant pastors from other states, sent or led to New York for the purpose of proselytizing in the evangelical faith, who are all male and white. They seem to be radically conservative: anti-gay, anti-birth control, anti-sex-before-marriage, and anti-abortion, although they rarely talk about these issues to their New York audiences. The pastors sell a feel good, “I am loved and cared-for” set of beliefs that mask a strict adherence to doctrine and control over people’s lives. It is a subversive introduction to totalitarianism, sexism and homophobia — horrors that we all thought were no longer acceptable to most Americans.

Those of us who try to live our lives with tolerance, charity and a sense of justice, knowing that humans are capable of ethical behavior and love for one another without believing in magic, mythology and the supernatural, understand that these “religious” events are dangerous.

It is not clear *what* Bible the Beal book talks about — the Christian gospels, all written after 50 CE for the purpose of underpinning a new church orthodoxy, or the Jewish scriptures written mostly in the four centuries after the 7th Century BCE, under the aegis of King Josiah of Judah? As Mark Oppenheimer of *The Times* notes about Beal’s efforts, “There is an unfortunate history of humanist movements co-opting the forms of religion.” I don’t agree with Ms. Miller’s seeming approval [in April PIQUE] for Beal’s criticism of the modern “ironing out” of Biblical “wrinkles and perplexities” in the ancient texts. Beal misses the boat entirely. What is damaging and “insidious” about both “Bibles” is that they are treated as the revealed word of non-existing deities who recite “truth” and “law” that must be obeyed upon pain of eternal punishment. Neither “Bible” is historically accurate in its most critical parts, those that claim to be revealed “truth” but invite obedience based on myth.

If Beal really wants people to know how these books were “assembled,” as he calls it, he should read accounts written by qualified, knowledgeable Biblical archaeologists and historians, such as Professors Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, and Neil Asher Silberman, a director of the Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation in Belgium, and a contributing editor to *Archeology* magazine, as well as other professionals.

As Finkelstein and Silberman put it, talking about the Hebrew Scriptures: “The historical saga contained in the

Bible — from Abraham’s encounter with God and his journey to Canaan, to Moses’ deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage, to the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah — was not a miraculous revelation, but a brilliant product of the human imagination. It was conceived, as recent archeological findings suggest, during the span of two or three generations, about 2600 years ago.”

These are not books that should be emulated by a humanist, even in fun. If, as Oppenheimer states, Grayling thinks that focus on a deity distracts us from seeking the good life, why spend 30 years writing a poor copy of a book that insists that such a focus is mandatory?

I think it is safe to say that what secular humanists need is not an imitation “holy book”, but a simple and clear affirmation that our short time here on earth should be spent in trying to alleviate the suffering of all species, and in actively seeking justice for all on this beautiful but threatened planet.

**Comment:** *I’ve bought and have started browsing through distinguished philosopher Grayling’s The Good Book: A Humanist Bible, Barbara, and it’s pretty good stuff. The next time you’re in Barnes & Noble, just riff through Chapter 1 of Genesis, for a brilliant new take on the garden and the apple.*

*Simultaneously, I’m following son Colin’s daily-for-a-year reading of the not-so-good 2,600-year-old Bible — “A Year of the Bible: atheist and curious.” Want to join the atheist/humanist conversation? It’s at [bibleyear.rafferty.net](http://bibleyear.rafferty.net). For a sample, try the following. — JR*

### GENESIS 46-47: JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR GRIFT Colin Rafferty

*(Reprinted from [bibleyear.rafferty.net](http://bibleyear.rafferty.net), May 10)*

Jacob and all his 70 descendants move to Egypt to live under the protection of Pharaoh. God encourages this. I have a feeling it’s going to be a bad idea in the long run.

Earlier in the story, Jacob’s son Joseph told Pharaoh that there would be seven fat years followed by seven lean years. Instead of seeing this as a way of helping the people of Egypt, Pharaoh and Joseph saw this as a great way to take over their lives. They could have warned everyone, but instead said nothing, and stockpiled enough to be a monopoly in the second seven years.

First, Joseph took all the Egyptians’ money in exchange for grain. The next year he took their livestock. The third year, he took their land and their freedom. So now everyone in Egypt is a slave to Joseph and Pharaoh.

I’ve now read a large part of Genesis, and I’ve just come to realize that this is not a book about morals, any more than *The Odyssey* is. In this story, Joseph is Mr. Potter, and there is no George Bailey. We’ve seen the acts of Lot’s daughters and Lot offering up his daughters, Abraham on the mountain with Isaac, and God destroying whole towns, and even the world, for unnamed “sins.” I’m hoping it gets better, but I know I haven’t read the story of Job yet.



## **PITZER COLLEGE IN CALIFORNIA ADDS A MAJOR IN SECULARISM**

**Laurie Goodstein**

*(Excerpted from The New York Times, May 7, 2011)*

Colleges and universities have long offered majors in religion or theology. But with more and more people now saying they have no religion, one college has decided to be the first to offer a major in secularism.

Starting this fall, Pitzer College, a small liberal arts institution in Southern California, will inaugurate a department of secular studies. Professors from other departments, including history, philosophy, religion, science and sociology, will teach courses like "God, Darwin and Design in America," "Anxiety in the Age of Reason" and "Bible as Literature."

The department was proposed by Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist of religion. Studying nonbelief is as valid as studying belief, he says, and the new major will make that very clear. "It's not about arguing 'Is there a God or not?'" Mr. Zuckerman said. "There are hundreds of millions of people who are nonreligious. I want to know who they are, what they believe, why they are nonreligious. You have some countries where huge percentages of people — Czechs, Scandinavians — now call themselves atheists. Canada is experiencing a huge wave of secularization. This is happening very rapidly. It has not been studied."

*Comment: How did this not get started in New York? – JR*

## **IN OTHER ACADEMIC FREEDOM NEWS ...**

**John Rafferty**

Charles Koch, one of the Koch brothers now notorious for funding extreme right-wingers and Christian fundamentalists, has donated \$1.5 million to Florida State University to fund positions in the school's economics department.

Good on Charles? There's a catch. Mr. Koch's representatives and the screening committee he appoints get to screen and sign off on any hires for a new program promoting "political economy and free enterprise." Those reps have, in fact, nixed more than half the candidates proposed by the faculty since the deal was signed in 2008.

David W. Rasmussen, dean of the College of Social Sciences, defends the deal, which has just come to light. After all, this is America, right? Free market, right? You get the ideas and opinions you pay for, right? Far right!

## **... AND IN MILITARY ACADEMIA, POISONING DOGS FOR JESUS**

Professor David Mullin teaches at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) in Colorado Springs. He is, in his own words, "a devout evangelical Christian," but he is also an advocate for separation of church and state. He is the only openly "public" USAFA client of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), out of more than 250 clients who are anonymous for fear of retaliation by fundamentalist, right-wing Academy officials.

Professor Mullin testified in a federal court case in February that sought to block an evangelical ex-Marine from speaking during National Prayer Day. While others were reluctant to step forward, Mullin also made a statement to a team led by retired Air Force Gen. Patrick Gamble, who looked into the coercive fundamentalist religious climate at the academy. Mullin is also a complainant and key witness in an investigation that involves several senior USAFA individuals and "serious allegations of unconstitutional religious intolerance" at the Academy.

Professor Mullin suffers from balance problems and dizzy spells, which require that he be assisted by a service dog.

One day in mid-April, while he was teaching and his dog, Caleb, waited in the Professor's office, some inspired Christian warrior fed Caleb rat poison and killed him.

## **... WHILE THE TIMES SORT-OF CONSIDERS ATHEIST/HUMANIST MILITARY CHAPLAINS**

On April 27, *The New York Times* ran a front-page article, "Atheists Seek Chaplain Role in the Military." Commendable, even surprising, but of course the piece was a "balanced" presentation, which I felt needed a dose of atheist/humanist bias. I emailed the letter below, which *The Times* did not run. In fact, only one letter, from a Unitarian Universalist chaplain (and let's not forget that UU is a church), did run, eleven days later, on May 8.

I recognize that a lot happened during the following week: storms killed 340 people across the South; Osama bin Laden went to Muslim hell, and ooh-ooh-ooh, *The Royal Wedding!* (Have tens of millions of Americans forgotten that we're a republic?) But I wonder if, in virtually ignoring us, *The Times'* editors didn't consider that maybe they'd made a *faux pas* in putting us on the front page in the first place. Anyway, here's what they didn't run ...

*TO THE EDITOR: Jason Torpy of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers has it exactly right when he says that "Humanism fills the same role for atheists that Christianity does for Christians and Judaism does for Jews. It answers questions of ultimate concern; it directs our values." Humanist principles of the rational, examined life, unencumbered by superstition and dogma, have been enriching peoples' lives since Epicurus in classical Greece and Erasmus in the Renaissance.*

*Tens of thousands of men and women rationalists in our military deserve to have their atheist and humanist principles recognized, and to have the same access to counseling as their religious comrades. In light of the many recent reports of coercive and even abusive proselytizing by fundamentalist Christian evangelicals in the U.S. military services and academies, the establishment of humanist chaplaincies will be an important corrective first step toward equality.*

*John Rafferty, President  
Secular Humanist Society of New York*

**DOROTHY HARRIS**  
**OCTOBER 22, 1925 – MAY 10, 2011**

**T**he world does not pause for human tragedy. Birds still sing outside hospice windows, flowers grow in roadside ditches where an accident wiped out a family, and the hands of a clock move without pause.

Dorothy, my wife for almost 58 years, died as she lived, courageously and unyielding. She did not go quietly into the night, but struggled valiantly to the end.

She was not so much an unbeliever as indifferent and questioning. Any religious holidays that were celebrated were celebrated as family reunions. We rarely noted our lack of faith and were surprised when our son asked to be bar mitzvah. It turned out that he didn't want to miss out on the gifts.

She leaves a legacy of courage and dedication both to education and to our family. She was a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and an educator who graduated summa cum laude. As a librarian for the NYC Board of Education, she ran the city's first multimedia library at John Bowne High School in Flushing, selected the books for high schools and successfully prevailed against censors.

She served as an officer for more than 20 years in Village Reform Democratic Club politics. She was proud of our son, a high ranking Army officer.

Dorothy leaves a legacy of courage and dedication both to education and our family.

Our son is being transferred to a posting in Washington D.C., arriving in July. He asked that a planned memorial service be held after that time so that he and his family could attend. I will notify everyone of the date and place.

Thank you for your help and sympathy during this difficult time. — *Arthur Harris*

P.S.: In lieu of flowers please send a contribution to the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, 80 Maiden Lane (21 FL), NY, NY 10038, [www.metcouncil.org](http://www.metcouncil.org).

**WHAT WILL BECOME OF US?**  
**FIRST, LISTEN TO YOGI BERRA**  
**Graeme Wood**

*(Excerpted from "What will happen to us? Forecasters tackle the extremely deep future," The Boston Globe, May 1)*

**N**ick Bostrom's Future of Humanity Institute is in St. Ebbes, central Oxford, a district named for the site of a church that has been built and rebuilt over a thousand years. The Faculty of Theology, he says, would have been the home for his institute in any other century. But when the institute was founded in 2005, the natural home for it had shifted toward the secular. It straddles a departmental boundary between Oxford's Faculty of Philosophy and its Martin School, a creation of the computer-science whiz James Martin, meant to encourage interdisciplinary thought about science, policy, and risk. ...

Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, turned his attention to the end of time after a career in physics reckoning with time's beginning. An understanding of

these vast time scales, he contends, should have a large and humbling effect on our predictions about human evolution. "It's hard to think of humans as anything like the culmination of life," Rees says. "We should expect humans to change, just as Darwin did when he wrote that 'no living species will preserve its unaltered likeness into a distant futurity.'" Most probably, according to Rees, the most important transformations of the species will be nonbiological. "Evolution in the future won't be determined by natural selection, but by technology," he says — both because we have gone some distance toward mastering our biological weaknesses, and because computing power has sped up to a rate where the line between human and computer blurs. (Some thinkers call the point when technology reaches this literally unthinkable level of advancement the "singularity," a coinage by science fiction writer Vernor Vinge.) ...

For Rees, then, and many other thinkers about the future, a central preoccupation is making sure that humans survive to see it. Only 0.01 percent of all species that have ever existed continue to do so. We happen to be one of them, for now. When Rees looked at the myriad ways in which the present is more perilous than the past in his 2003 book, *Our Final Hour*, he set the odds of human extinction in the next century at 50 percent.

Bostrom, the Oxford philosopher, puts the odds at about 25 percent, and says that many of the greatest risks for human survival are ones that could play themselves out within the scope of current human lifetimes. "The next hundred years or so might be critical for humanity," Bostrom says, listing as possible threats the usual apocalyptic litany of nuclear annihilation, man-made or natural viruses and bacteria, or other technological threats, such as microscopic machines, or nanobots, that run amok and kill us all.

This is quite literally the stuff of Michael Crichton novels. Thinkers about the future deal constantly with those who dismiss their speculation as science fiction. But Bostrom, who trained in neuroscience and cosmology as well as philosophy, says he's mining the study of the future for guidance on how we should prioritize our actions today. "I'm ultimately interested in finding out what we have most reason to do now, to make the world better in some way," he says.

So if we really understood the future, how would we behave? "It turns out that the reduction of existential risk turns out to be one of the most important things we can do," he says. "It turns out, if you act and consider all good — including that of future generations — you could outweigh the good you can do today by eliminating world hunger, say, or curing malaria." Saving a billion from famine today is, by this calculation, a minor concern compared with making sure no extinction-level event snuffs out the opportunity for a trillion more to live in centuries to come.

There is, both in Bostrom's scenarios and in Rees's, the possibility of a long and bright future, should we manage to have any future at all. Some of the key technologies capable of going awry also have the potential to keep us alive and

prospering — making humans and post-humans a more durable species. Bostrom imagines that certain advances that are currently theoretical could combine to free us of some of the more fragile aspects of our nature, such as the ability to be wiped out by a simple virus, and keep the species around indefinitely.

If neuropsychologists learn to manipulate the brain with precision, we could drug ourselves into conditions of not only enhanced happiness but enhanced morality as well, aiming for less fragile or violent societies far more durable than we enjoy now, in the nuclear shadow.

And if human minds could be uploaded onto computers, for example, a smallpox plague wouldn't be so worrisome (though maybe a computer-virus outbreak, or a spilled pot of coffee, would be). Not having a body means not being subject to time's ravages on human flesh. "When we have friendly superintelligent machines, or space colonization, it would be easy to see how we might continue for billions of years," Bostrom said, far beyond the moment when Rees's post-human would sit back in his futuristic lawn chair, pop open a cold one, and watch the sun run out of fuel.

There is one surprising survival scenario of particular worry for Bostrom, however — one that involves not a physical death but a moral one. The technologies that might liberate us from the threat of extinction might also change humans not into post-humans, but into creatures who have shed their humanity altogether. Imagine, he suggests, that the hypothetical future entities (evolved biologically, or uploaded to computers and enhanced by machine intelligence) have slowly eroded their human characteristics. The mental properties and concerns of these creatures might be unrecognizable.

"What gives humans value is not their physical substance, but that we are thinking, feeling beings who have plans and relationships with others, and enjoy art, et cetera," Bostrom says. "So there could be profound transformations that wouldn't destroy value and might allow the creation of any greater value" by having a deeper capacity to love or to appreciate art than we present humans do. "But you could also imagine beings that were intelligent or efficient, but that don't add value to the world, maybe because they didn't have subjective experience."

Bostrom ranks this possibility among the more likely ways mankind could extinguish itself. It is certainly the most insidious. And it could happen any number of ways: with a network of uploaded humans that essentially abolishes the individual, making her a barely distinguishable module in a larger intelligence. Or, in a sort of post-human Marxist dystopia, humans could find themselves dragooned into soulless ultra-efficiency, without all the wasteful acts of friendship and artistic creation that made life worth living when we were merely human.

"That would count as a catastrophe," Bostrom notes. There is, of course, a long history of prognosticators whom history has outwitted. "It's tough to make predictions," as Yogi Berra said, "especially about the future."

## KUDOS FOR PIQUE & "EPIPHANIES"

Congratulations once again on a most interesting and enjoyable issue (PIQUE, May). I'm a member of some half-dozen newsletter-producing organizations and yours is always the best. You search out and collect the most varied, significant and entertaining articles, and they make for an interesting, enjoyable and educational read. Your article, "Humanism, Politics and the Pages of PIQUE," was excellent; you nailed the subject matter dead on.

One last kudo. In a postscript to Giddian Beer's "Epiphany," which was excellent, you asked readers to share their "coming out" stories. Terrific idea, as this is central to each of us. Not only would our stories make for interesting reading, but just the writing of them has to be of incalculable value to the writer. I'll try to find the time in the near future to do mine. Best wishes — Stanley Friedland

*Comment: Thank you, Stan, and here are two more epiphanies.*

## ART: 10; CHRISTIANITY: 0

Donna Marxer

I was nine years old and sitting in the little white First Congregational Church in North Miami, Florida, not listening to the babble of words from the altar, as usual. I was gazing out the tall clerestory windows, watching a couple of dancing mocking birds in the treetops. I clearly remember wanting to be out with the trees and the birds and drawing them.

That was my last trip to church. I had already decided to become an artist and didn't want to waste any more time in this place.

My parents had let me choose my own Sunday school and, to their dismay, they being mainstream Protestants, I had chosen the Christian Science church. They needn't have worried; I listened to nothing. I went there because they had the best crayons.

My tenth birthday coming up, I announced that I wanted a box of oil paints and Saturday art lessons at the Miami Moon Art School, which was next door to the Christian Science Church. I swapped Saturdays for Sundays and art for religion and never looked back. Now I had my own crayons.

At the end of my tenth summer World War II ended and the world, as well as my world, changed forever.

## THE LIVERWURST EPIPHANY

Chic Schissel

Giddian Beer's "Epiphany" reminds me of my own. It was Yom Kippur and, eight years old, I was sitting with my Dad in the synagogue, a rare event in my family. But I was feeling uncomfortable and seriously guilty because that morning, hungry, I had broken the fast by eating a piece of a friend's sandwich, un-kosher liverwurst no less.

My parents, though from orthodox backgrounds, were not religious, but our influential (to me) relatives were, and liverwurst compounded my blasphemy.



Soon came the part of the service when God decides whether or not to write down your name in the book of life; whether or not you will live through the next year. My Dad noticed how I was squirming uncomfortably (the liverwurst sin) and deduced that, for some reason, I was terrified that God wouldn't allow me to survive the year.

He tried to comfort me. He said "Don't worry. God is not some bearded person sitting there writing in a book. That's just a story. God is everything, God is that tree, God is the sky, God is the water, everything."

But that was no consolation: now there was no place I could go where the S.O.B. wouldn't see me! There was no escape for me: God knew about the liverwurst.

However, this episode generated some doubt, and years later, when I got to high school and was introduced to thought-provoking literature, I lost faith completely.

#### BY THE WAY ...

Mention should have been made, last month, that Giddian Beer's "Epiphany" is an excerpt from his forthcoming book of essays scientific, social, philosophical and personal, and of poetry and stories. Giddian's working title is *Contributions and Complaints*, and the book's hoped-for due date is August.

#### I LEARNED A NEW WORD THIS MONTH, ONE VERY USEFUL IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

**John Rafferty**

**mi•sol•o•gy** *n.* Hatred of reason, argument or enlightenment. – **mi•sol•o•gist** *n.*

#### ED'S SATIRIC SITE SIGHTED

Long-time SHSNY member and "equal-opportunity Loffender" Ed Henrion has launched a new website devoted to his own not-for-sissies art: extraordinary satirical commentary on life and love in the second half of the twentieth century, and exquisite nude drawings. View at your own risk at: [www.edwardhenrion.com](http://www.edwardhenrion.com).

#### WE'RE STILL HERE!

After checking that none of their family or friends had disappeared the night before, leaving behind their clothes, eyeglasses, watches and wallets, 31 not-left-behind unbelievers showed up for SHSNY's We're Still Here! day-after brunch and packed the back room at BXL East Bistro on May 22. A rapturously good time was had by all.



**SHSNY Election Results:  
New Officers, New  
Committees  
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**Questions of Living  
While Dying  
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