



# Humanistically Speaking

June 2021

*A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview*

## The End of Hibernation?

### Humanist Groups Bumper Edition



*Teddy Prout's  
advice to  
all Humanist  
Groups*

Our recorded interview this month is with Teddy Prout who is Director of Community Services at Humanists UK. Teddy has a thing or two to say about organising Humanist groups – especially those that are emerging from their 'Covid chrysalis' – which is *Humanistically Speaking's* main theme for this issue.

A few days after the interview, however, we were very sorry to hear that Teddy will be leaving Humanists UK at the end of August. So see Teddy's recorded interview at page 22. This may be our last chance to hear what he has to say!

**Features this month:**

- Teddy Prout interview
- Dawkins Affair response
  - Introducing Lily
- Ideas for group activities
  - Thought for the day
  - A day in the life...
- Bill Gates Book Review

Humanistically  
Speaking



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# In this Issue

*Come in, sit down, put your feet up...*

**David Brittain**  
Executive Editor



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## CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists of humanist volunteers. Articles are written by them, or by our readers and contributors, and published at the discretion of the editorial team. We strive to publish content in line with humanist aims and values but views expressed by writers are their own and not necessarily shared by any associated Humanist groups or Humanists UK.

This is perhaps the first monthly issue of *Humanistically Speaking* at what we hope will be the beginning of the end of Covid – at least as a runaway pandemic. It's been a tough period for everyone. During the past eighteen months or so humanist groups have reacted in very different ways, and as you will see, Humanist UK's Director of Community Services, Teddy Prout, offers his advice in a recorded interview.

But with all this, we cannot ignore the pain of recent world events, and we have all seen the tragedy unfolding with the latest bloody chapter in the ongoing Arab/Israeli conflict. Maggie Hall puts a very Humanist perspective on these events. She raises the question of how and why we must try to resist the temptation to regard people from different cultures as 'the other'. If we cannot get over this tendency to separate ourselves into different identities with no recognition of our common humanity, the outcome will not only be tragic, but forever. To many Humanists it must seem so odd that after two thousand years the Abrahamic religions (Christian/Muslim/Jewish) don't seem to have gone much beyond lip service when it comes to ending human conflict.

Coming back to more practical matters, our first dip into advertising is shown at page 17. We are learning as we go along, but we hope it will be a success and grow. No one will be happier than me if we can one day earn our keep rather than depend on donations, so please do think about advertising with us.

There are too many excellent articles in this issue to mention them all here, so I'm afraid you will just have to find them yourself, but Amelie relates Humanism to the stage, and Lily Berrell shares with us her route to Humanism through her father, who tragically passed away less than a year ago.

As Humanists, we naturally look to the young, and I think to myself, that with people like Lily, Amelie and Ronnie in our team, and indeed, in the world, there is hope and inspiration for us all.

**David Brittain**

# BREAKING NEWS



## Groups Ambassador

### VACANCY

We are seeking a talented and communicative Humanist to join our team with the aim of contacting all the Humanist groups in the UK and inviting them on board.

As *Humanistically Speaking* grows, we want to be a central communications hub for groups everywhere, reaching out to people old and new, establishing our [Groups page](#) as a central portal that will lead you to contact points with all groups out there.

Your role would be to establish initial contact with groups on our behalf (some don't yet know we exist), explain what we're about, send a link to our website, tease them into reading a couple of issues and asking them to send our magazine to their subscriber list. In return we will add them to our groups directory and go from there.

Are you interested?

 [send an email](#)

Additionally, we are still seeking both a general Administrator to manage various functions within *Humanistically Speaking* as well as a Social Media Influencer who would operate and manage the Social Media streams, promote *Humanistically Speaking*, and reply to questions and queries as they crop up. Could this be you?

 [send an email](#)

## Welcome to Lily Berrell!

We're delighted to announce that Young Humanist Lily Berrell has joined our editorial team so that during periods of high workload in study and employment for the younger members of our team there will always be someone able to give us a few words from the youth perspective. We invited Lily to introduce herself in sixty words, but look out for her first article later in the issue.



"I study German language and literature and hope to get students more involved with Humanism and secular issues at Oxford University. I spend a lot of time reading and believe we should be encouraged by the power of language and storytelling. This shouldn't be underestimated, as you can't help but look at the world differently."

# BREAKING NEWS



## Logo Design Service

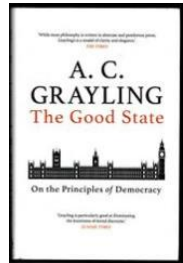
Groups need a logo, an icon, a form of recognition to help build their unique identity and to that end we are offering our “non-expert” team of designers who may be able to help you out.

We understand that some groups may have a very limited budget and possibly even more limited skills base in this area, thus if you let us know what you need, give us some basics of how you want it shaped, look, feel, any preferred colour scheme and any identifying landmarks to tie it to your district and we will see what we can do. Some examples are shown in this column, some that were accepted and used, others that never went any further than an email.

If you are a group doing well, with lots of funds, we certainly won't say no to a donation into the *Humanistically Speaking* pot for future development costs. *Many thanks!*



## And the winners are:



The winners of last month's special prize of A C Grayling's book *The Good State* are named below:

- Toby Parr - Ipswich, Suffolk
- Paul Ewans - Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk
- Colin Williams - Farnham, Surrey
- Amelie Forbes - Fleet, Hampshire

## Like What We Do? Help Fund Us!

*Humanistically Speaking* is created by unpaid volunteers, yet we do incur some costs and we'd like to expand our operations. Could you make a voluntary donation by Standing Order from just £2.00 a month? Or a one-off donation? We'll leave our bank details here and let you surprise us. Please use HS DONATION as the reference.

Account name: **Humanistically Speaking**  
Sort 30 98 97 – Acc 33444562

- Running Costs
- Technology upgrades
- Leaflet printing
- Travel expenses



*Humanistically Speaking* is for humanist groups everywhere, but our readership is growing and is fully open to non-humanists and persons of faith.



# Humanist Groups? ... Who Needs 'Em?

David Brittain  
Executive Editor



I recall when I first joined what was then the British Humanist Association. It was November 2005, and as someone who had previously belonged to a political party, I waited for someone to make contact and enroll me into the nearest Humanist Group. But nothing came, and when I eventually made enquiries in London, I was told, quite simply, that there wasn't a group anywhere near where I lived. That led me to ask how many registered Humanists there were in the country, and I learned that there were just under 6,000.

"But I can send your email address to BHA members in your area", she said, "and you can start a group yourself if you want!" And so I did. The BHA sent a message on my behalf to other Humanists nearby, I got just two responses at first. We met in a pub the following January and decided to launch North Herts and Beds Humanists. By April that year we had regular meetings set up that were attended by over 20 people. North Herts and Beds split in the end – the Herts bit went to Watford Humanists, whilst the rest called itself Bedfordshire Humanists, and that was that.

Nine years later, we moved house to Basingstoke, and I found a similar story there, so I immediately started to form Basingstoke Humanists. There were many differences between the two groups, but one similarity that struck me was that there was no problem finding other *Humanists* – only Humanist groups – and you can take it from me that forming a group is a great way of putting down roots and making friends.



A humanist group enables individuals to seek out and find other like-minded people, and make friends. This picture was taken at a Defence Humanists AGM.

Now, from my current perspective as Editor of *Humanistically Speaking* I can see that there are many individuals who have subscribed to the magazine who do not have a local group that they can belong to, and I am very happy, and proud, to think that this magazine might help break down any sense of isolation.

But *Humanistically Speaking* is also dedicated to helping people establish new groups, and I am beginning to see a picture emerging of subscribers who think they are the only Humanists in town, when in fact there are many others, just like them, just around the corner.

Groups provide all sorts of functions. They enable individuals to seek out and find other like-minded people, and make friends. They allow you to share in the pursuits that other Humanists enjoy, and (in my case at least) widened my scope of interest and allowed me to develop and stabilise my own ideas. The community element was important, too. We organised social events, evening talks, country walks, special visits, summer barbecues... we even had Christmas ►

dinner together and called it Winterva! And it was thanks to the other Humanists I met that I was able to grow.

They taught me. I *learned* from them (Humanists are well able to teach each other) and I grew in confidence as well as knowledge.

Being a Humanist is one thing, but having Humanist friends is very different, and very special. Now, there are about 100,000 members and supporters of Humanists UK, and there is no reason why there shouldn't be a Humanist group in every town.

And Humanist groups *can* make a difference. They can show the world that Humanism exists, that calling yourself a Humanist in a largely Christian or Muslim town is no longer a ticket to social isolation, and we can begin to enjoy that same sense of belonging that is important to so many of us. For me, an atheist for most of my life, discovering organised Humanism was one of the best things that ever happened.

And now, I'm going to invite you to imagine something amazing. Imagine, if you will, how the world might be if *everyone* in it was, if not a Humanist, at least respectful and responsive to the Humanist way. Think about it. Your first thought might be what a tedious humdrum existence it would be with everyone being the same. But not so! It is a hallmark of Humanism that we are *not* all the same. Humanists by nature are always questioning, challenging, and often disagree about all kinds of things, but there would be a Humanist foundation underlying what we do, how we behave, and how we perceive ourselves and each other.

Humanists are not perfect, and there might still be heated debate and disagreement at times, but underneath it all there would be a

common understanding that all sides will need to find a rational and equitable way through. There would be a foundation of understanding that we all deserve the same consideration and respect, and that the vast majority have very similar human concerns. An appreciation that, in the end, we all have the same needs. There would be no justification for war, no excuse for poverty in society, no discrimination excusable, no voice unheard, and no need ignored.

Now, you might think all this is utterly impractical, and hopelessly idealistic. But if you think *that*, consider the alternative way that we live today. In the long term, is that not utterly impractical?

Humanist values have never been more important for the wellbeing of humanity and other sentient species today, and as Humanists, we have a responsibility to organise, to shout from the hilltops who we are and what we stand for, and, yes, we need to be prepared to suffer inconvenience or worse for that if necessary. ►



A Humanist equality message out on the streets in Bournemouth



At your service: Our illustrious Editor posing as Group Captain Archibald Brittain-Smyth

Humanism is not *just* what we think and Humanists are not *just* who we are. Above all, Humanism is a responsibility. We need to organise and shout and stamp our feet and do whatever is necessary at local as well as national and international levels until the world listens. Forming groups at ground level are one essential element towards doing that. It is our duty never to allow the world to ignore us, because ignorance, dogma, self-interest, social discrimination, indifference to suffering, and blind obedience to authority still exists and makes humanity less than it is able to be.

Humanist intellectuals and politicians, celebrants, pastoral carers, and school

speakers all play their part, and Humanist groups have a big part to play too. We have one common aim... to suggest a different way, with principles that promote rational thinking, honesty, tolerance, humility, awareness, compassion and happiness in this life. To declare our principles and to win hearts and minds.



Do I think, then, that if everyone was a Humanist there would be a perfect new world? No, I don't. But I do think it would be the beginning of a chance to turn the tide away from hatred, ignorance, self-interest and want. It would not be an end in itself, but it would be a promising start.



The birth of the South Central England Humanists Network in 2017, some of whose members went on to found *Humanistically Speaking*

*If you are one of those who do not have a group nearby, and like the idea of starting one, do email us at [Humanistically.speaking@gmail.com](mailto:Humanistically.speaking@gmail.com) to let us know.*

*We are here to help. We have access to the advice and resources that you need ... And we are at your service!*



# Why I'm a Humanist

By Lily Berrell

I'm a Humanist because I believe that we are part of nature, not separate from it. Humanism was never discussed in school or regarded in the same way as religion which means that many people don't adopt Humanism as a worldview when they might have done otherwise. (Incidentally, as a German student, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce our readers to the wonderful German word *Weltanschauung* which means 'a particular philosophy or view of life'.)

Unlike many people, however, I learnt about Humanism outside of school, as my dad identified with humanist beliefs after breaking away from his strict Catholic upbringing. He once told me about how he thought the soul meant the sole of your foot! He said he visualised dirty marks on his foot that disappeared once he has confessed his sins. I found this quite amusing, but it has also made me appreciate the open-mindedness of my parents, and how I have never experienced breaking away from my family's fundamental beliefs.

I also call myself a Humanist because I feel that my religious education at a Church of England school was a missed opportunity. Non-religious beliefs were only spoken of in terms of atheism, with little discussion of wider philosophical topics, and absolutely no mention that millions of people over the world call themselves Humanists. It was only



Lily with her dad - a Humanist role model

once I studied Classics that I learnt about religions outside of Christianity and their development throughout history. This lack in religious education in schools is a shame, but despite this I identify as much more than just an atheist, and I feel confident explaining to someone why I find comfort without believing in a god; how spirituality does not entail religion; and that I accept life ends with death. We are told how great the education system in the UK is and that many people do not have this privilege. I agree that I am so much luckier than so many people, but I also think we can aim to be better, particularly where religion and philosophy are concerned.

One of the ultimate tests of faith and religion comes in times of crisis and change. Since my dad's recent death, I have been contemplating my beliefs, and better understanding why religion is so important to so many people. But I have also come to



realise how important my values are to me, regardless of not believing in God. I find comfort and connection with my dad through the ideas he left behind, the endless piles of books that he recommended to me, and through my desire to carry on his legacy in the human story. I want to use whatever time and resources are available to me to stand up for what I think is right and to use my position, however small, to move towards much-needed change.



*So many Humanists have had to live life undoing what their parents or schools taught them about life; how lucky to have a Dad who embraced humanist values from the start.*



Increasing numbers of people in the UK are moving away from active religious practice, so it will be interesting to see how this trend progresses over the next few decades, during which time Humanism may (hopefully) be more widely accepted and recognised, especially in schools. Perhaps Humanism will encourage young people to be more engaged with modern problems, since many are disillusioned with politics (and understandably so). Since speaking more openly about my values, I have had discussions with students and friends about Humanism. I was surprised to discover how few people had heard of the term, and then twice as excited to hear that many responded positively to what I told them; one student said, "I hadn't heard of Humanism, but I googled it and I agree with the basic ideas, so I want to learn more".

While people differ in how they define themselves, I personally believe change is more likely to occur if we are organised and united through networks, groups and joint action. This does not mean there is no scope for debate within Humanism, and this freedom is exactly what makes Humanism so attractive to me. Similarly, I am discovering just how inclusive Humanism is. I took part in interfaith dialogue training with Humanists UK recently, and this has shown me the need for cooperation between faiths and humanity as a whole. Disagreement and uncomfortable discussion are important for progress, but so is tolerance and compassion. The kind of Humanism I stand up for is not intolerant of other people's faiths but wants to raise important questions where necessary and to value individual contributions to help make the world a better place.



By Amelie Forbes

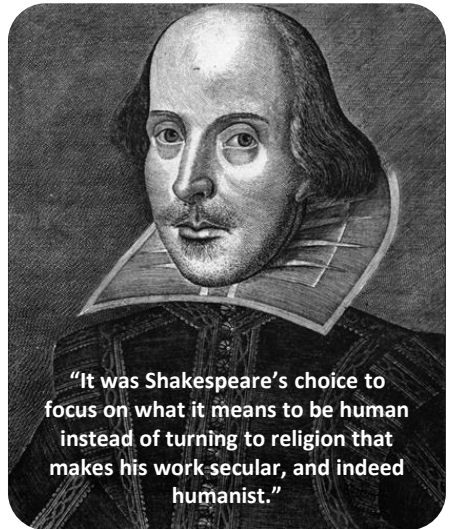
# Amelie Analyzes

## *Theatre... an undeniably human creation*

Theatre is human-centric. It's created and performed by humans, conveying stories about humans and discussing human issues, to an audience of humans. Theatre is something that I have been involved with since the age of six, and hopefully will be what I make a career out of, but I had never considered that it may be something that is inherently humanist. The way I see it, theatre and humanism align in many of the values they pride themselves on.

For starters, theatre is about freedom of thought and expression. Plays explore a range of issues, the voices of all types of people can be heard, and theatre makers use theatre as a way of making the statements that are important and true to them. As actor and patron of Humanists UK Kimberley Nixon said, "...if I couldn't rely on the right to free thought and free expression, I'd probably find myself out of a job". Liberty is at the centre of theatre because creativity is subjective and unique to the individual. Theatre probably wouldn't even exist if freedom of expression was banned... or if it did somehow exist under such a regime, it would be boring because it would only ever speak to a limited portion of the population.

Equality is also at the heart of the theatre community. If theatre is doing its job correctly, all people should be included and represented. Through writing and



performance, fresh perspectives can be brought to light and never-before-told stories can be conveyed for the first time. Theatre gives opportunities for views to be challenged and for people to be inspired to make a difference and change the world for the better. For me, a good piece of work should always make people think, pushing them out of their comfort zones in the sense that people should be able to watch performances that highlight both relatable struggles and struggles they may never personally go through. I strongly believe that good theatre encourages the growth of tolerance and understanding, bringing together people from all walks of life.

Another thing humanism and theatre have in common is happiness. Theatre is a thing of joy. For me, where there is creativity, there is joy. To create great work, I think there must be at least a small degree of happiness, because creating theatre is about human empathy. When we watch something and are able to recognise truth in it, that makes us happy. That's often why we laugh at things – because on some level, we see truth in it. Being involved in theatre, be that creating or watching, is obviously something that makes me happy because it is what I've decided to devote my life to. But I also think that theatre can be a thing of happiness for everyone. For millions of years, theatre of varying forms has been a way in which communities have bonded. From the early humans on earth telling stories in caves to the trailblazing modern adaptations of Shakespeare we now see at the National Theatre, theatre has evolved throughout history to match the contemporary human experience. Granted, the storytelling of our 'caveman' ancestors and 21st century Shakespeare in the National are very different forms of performance, but the fact remains that theatre has always been a way in which we can bond and communicate with each other. As I not-so-subtly stated at the beginning of this article, theatre is a human-led thing, and I think there is immense joy in that – regardless of whether you're a regular theatre-goer or not.

A notable theatre maker who seemed to have humanist tendencies is William Shakespeare. Of course, Shakespeare was around a very long time ago and couldn't have known humanism as we know it today, but there are elements of his work that make it quite humanist by nature. The characters Shakespeare created were complex, had depth, and were flawed like any other human.



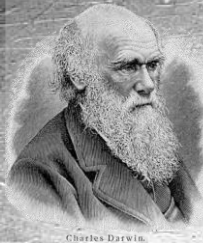
### **Kimberly Nixon**

Actor and Patron of Humanists UK starred in the BBC One costume drama series *Cranford*

It was these human flaws that also brought about the tragedy in Shakespeare's tragic plays. While religion was present, as Shakespeare was brought up in a highly religious society and had to produce his work in a way that pleased the monarchy, it doesn't appear to be a driving factor in any of his plays. In fact, there are certain characters and plotlines that Shakespeare potentially used to somewhat mock religion. The fact that Shakespeare created tragedy though human error also avoids religion being a central element, as it provides an alternative to tragedy coming about due to God administering punishment. In his explorations of human nature, Shakespeare's work also often had a strong sense of morality, which was again in light of humanity and not the good and evil preached about in religion. It was Shakespeare's apparent choice to focus on what it means to be human instead of turning to religion that makes his work secular, and indeed humanist.

Shakespeare was one of the most influential figures in theatre history, and his plays still heavily feature in the world of theatre today. So, if Shakespeare's plays are humanist by nature and still relevant today, surely that speaks for there being a strong connection between theatre and humanism? Shakespeare aside, it is clear to me that theatre and humanism share qualities and both provide a sense of community, sparking debate and bringing people together. That's why I think theatre is inherently humanist.





Charles Darwin

# Dear Darwin

Ask Charles your difficult questions...



The Mount, Shrewsbury.  
Darwin's family home.

## Dear Darwin

Humanists live by common values and principles but what should we do when one value seems to conflict with another? I've noticed a lot of debate recently about whether things like free speech and asking rational questions/collecting evidence should be prioritised over empathy and compassion. People have been discussing the differences between free speech, hate speech, and general sensitivity towards others (e.g., people thinking free speech means you can say anything regardless of consequence and others thinking that anything that could be deemed offensive is automatically hate speech). This has been playing on my mind a lot and I would value your comments.

Alistair Parr, Worthing

## Dear Alistair

These are complicated matters. Allow me, if you will, to call upon the assistance of my esteemed friend John Stuart Mill who defended free speech thus:

"...the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error."

I am minded to agree with Mill that humanists should try to bear as much discomfort as possible in defence of free speech, for the reasons he gives.

But my 21<sup>st</sup> century advisers have been educating me about the exotic phenomena of 'cancel culture', 'micro-aggressions' and 'safe spaces'. Of course, we should treat people with empathy and compassion, but I understand that many people in your century have come to believe that speech is a form of oppression or even violence and they have introduced a strict regime of controlling who may speak and what they are permitted to say.

I am an old, white, wealthy male scientist but I must say I find these future developments rather alarming. I believe that we should strive to maintain a liberal approach to free speech, valuing charitable interpretations and tolerating a wide range of views. Otherwise, we may be in danger of creating a stifling atmosphere which is not conducive to the free exchange of opinion.

I remain, Sir, your most humble and obedient servant,



# Aaron Explores

Trying to see the wood for the trees: Groups Development



## 19 ways humanist groups could reach out to new members...

**Like a butterfly opening its wings for the very first time, humanist groups will be emerging back into the sunlight when lockdown ends! For some, it's a change of routine having functioned on Zoom for the past year and a half; for others, it may be the first group meeting for a long time. Allow me to inspire you with some ideas!**

For some groups this may be a daunting time, trying to get the old band back together, rebooking old venues, finding new and interesting speakers and events, making contact with your previous members, plus new ones, who may be eager to be enticed back into the world of Humanism. Are you up to the task? Do you have an exciting summer programme to tempt them back?

Perhaps you're a member reading this, excited by our release back into the community, wondering how you can do your bit to make things reignite in Humanist circles? Groups everywhere will be looking for new volunteers, helpers and committee members who can spread some of the load, and make things happen. Are any of the below suggestions something you could bring to life?



### Saturday Talks

Talks could be on a variety of subjects that would be of interest to a Humanist audience and may include a presentation, several speakers and will often have a Q&A session afterwards for further discussion on that or a related topic. You could have a weekend talk and a midweek talk to capture different audiences?



### Social Nights

This is your chance to meet some of the members and chat about anything that comes to mind. Meet once a month in a town centre pub and secure a table large enough. Humanists are always eager to discuss the week's goings on. Often involving food, some occasional flirting and definitely lots of laughter.



## Walks

Walks offer another dimension to the group and often attract a different crowd from the regular guest speaker events. It's an opportunity to talk, exercise, visit new places and explore common themes amongst the group. Why not ask for a volunteer to lead an event?



## Cycle Rides

Cycling is another activity that attracts different members. You can go further afield, explore different trails and cycle ways, and hold interesting conversations along the way. Pub and café stops are entirely optional, as is Lycra, and distances can vary to meet ability!



## Public events

There are always opportunities for your group to reach out to the public, be it a carnival, pride, car-boot sale or other local outdoor gathering where you could pitch a table, advertise your upcoming events, talk to local people about Humanism and build up your membership with like-minded folk.



## Branding

To get recognised as a formal and established group, grab yourself a logo and build upon your branding. A consistent look will give you a sense of community and enhance the connection between members. *Humanistically Speaking* may be able to offer help in this area. See Page 4



## Home Groups

In addition to the main meetings, you can also have break-off splinter groups that explore a given topic. Topics to explore could include ethics or humanist links with Buddhism, running over six to eight sessions in members' homes thus keeping the cost down.



## Working Groups

A good way to get members talking to each other is to facilitate small group discussions. This can also be done as a meeting in itself; to generate opinions, brainstorm future event ideas, and to work on the group development and growth.



## Café Philo

In Dorset, a Humanist-affiliated group called Café Philo meets on two Sundays a month to discuss a philosophical topic, news item or big question around a table with 20 to 30 individuals. Members can run this, leaving the committee to manage other events.



## Skeptics in Pub

Skeptics in the Pub groups often attract a lot of interest and they can run in parallel with humanist groups. They host excellent speakers on a wide variety of topics. Click [here](#) for Skeptics in the Pub online.



## Remembrance

Why not get your group represented in your town's Remembrance day event? It can be challenging to get recognised, but some groups have succeeded. Humanists UK Defence Humanists can help. <https://defencehumanists.org.uk>



## Dialogue groups

Dorset's dialogue group is called 'Out of the Box' which combines Christians and other faiths with Humanists to discuss various topics. Think of the BBC's "Big Questions" and you will be on similar ground, but with varying formats of presentation, speaker, panel and debate issues with Q and A.



## Good causes

Supporting charities in itself is a good thing, but with your marketing head on, you need to tell people about it. Christians often claim this ground and Humanists need to get media attention to balance the scales. Stick it in your newsletter, get the press involved, tweet, Facebook and publicise it.



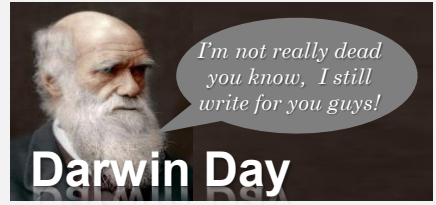
## Choirs

There is no shortage of volunteers to be in a choir, so this is yet another avenue that can attract, involve and enable members to interact. Several times a year you can perform for your group, or in fact go to other venues and sing in the name of Humanism!



## Barbeques

Eating out seems like a thing of the past right now, but we all miss it so why not start planning that big event where you can all get together outside. A beach, a park, some other green space or even a member's garden can all serve as great venues for a get-together.



## Darwin Day

Many Humanist groups celebrate Darwin day either on the 12<sup>th</sup> February or a convenient day around then where a special guest speaker, grand venue and a lunch is typically the order of the day to make it a bit of a special occasion. It's good to celebrate a special day just for us.



## Talk Back

After your main event, why not break for coffee and then reassemble in a circle to chew over the talk or another topic as a half hour dialogue exercise. Often during talks members rarely get to meet or talk to each other – this idea opens the floor to those who may not want to raise a hand.



## Zoom

Couldn't complete this list without including Zoom in the mix. You may be Zoomed-out or you may not have tried it at all. Either way, this remains an opportunity to use, to reach out to members that don't travel, or reach guests speakers further afield.

## The Committee



Building a strong and dynamic team can be challenging and yet on other occasions all one has to do is invite someone onto the team, and because the cause is Humanism, they rarely say no. Spreading the workload, having different people doing different tasks, plus having "on the night" volunteers to meet and greet, put out chairs and help with catering can all make for a smooth, seamless event. On your membership form ask if that person has a skill they can contribute, do they have a short talk in them, do they fancy helping the committee or would they like to donate. But don't stop there, feel free to approach regulars, they may feel honoured to have been approached. Remember, we all share a common goal.



# Humanistically Advertising



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# Young Humanists



## Ronnie Barr investigates the crisis in mental health support for students...

Mental health is an area I know all too well. I started displaying various concerning symptoms during middle school before being diagnosed with depression aged twelve and Asperger's Syndrome at thirteen. At seventeen I almost had to drop out of school altogether when I was diagnosed with Dissociative Seizures that severely impacted my ability to get out of bed, let alone study, and only last year at twenty-two was I finally given a diagnosis for Mixed Anxiety Disorder.

While awareness of mental health problems has increased drastically over the years and it has become significantly easier to get the support needed to deal with them, the pandemic has had a concerning impact on the availability of mental health services. Many face-to-face services have had to switch to giving support online or over the phone and with an increase in people needing support during such a difficult year these services have become extremely difficult to access for many of us who need them.

According to the Office for National Statistics a 2020 survey revealed that more than half of

students responding said that they felt their mental health had deteriorated since the start of the term but only one fifth of them had sought help. I've seen this first-hand with my own friends; many of them have had to drop out or take a year off from the courses they were studying due to poor mental health, and those still in education have had to rely heavily on their friends for help due to being unable to get any support from mental health services or the establishments they're attending. I myself only just managed to pass my module at university before starting on a new apprenticeship while undergoing multiple mental health crises on and off this past year.

This hasn't gone unnoticed. On Thursday 15th April, the government responded to a petition relating to Compensation for Lost Teaching and Rent and a considerable amount of discussion went back to student mental health. The Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan, made many points about what support the government put in place during the pandemic, including the setup of new service Student Space, and what they have pledged to do going forward, such as dedicating an additional £50 million to mental health.

Young Humanists also took notice of the growing mental health crisis and on ►



*Young Humanists hosted the 'Student Minds Matter: Mental Health at University' event. The event highlighted the many flaws with the way our services and institutions are run.*

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> April they hosted the 'Student minds matter: mental health at university' event. Chaired by Isabelle Ellis, Hari Parekh, Jenny Smith, and Dr Anastasia Somerville-Wong the event discussed the various mental health initiatives they're involved in as well as the current problems with mental health services, funding, and university support.

They rightfully pointed out that there are many flaws with the way our services and institutions are run. Despite the vast number of us that rely on the NHS, for both mental and physical health, in the past year we've had to resort to fundraising money to keep the service afloat, despite it being a government funded service rather than a charity. Our universities are undergoing a similar problem. They are reliant on and unable to survive from tuition fees and government funding alone so turn to less ethical sources to finance themselves and support students.

Even with the government's pledge to dedicate a further £50 million towards mental health for students it's simply not good enough. I've crunched the numbers. In the 2019/20 academic year there were 2.46 million students in higher education in the UK, £50 million of mental health funding works out at only £20 for support for each individual student, barely a drop in the ocean to give them the help they need!

If one thing has been made clear to me over this past year it's that students have had enough. As a student at the Open University I'm used to seeing plenty of discussions online regarding a lack of support from the university – anything from unresponsive tutors to vital materials for studying not being delivered to those who need them. I can't even name the tutor leading my last module, having only had brief contact with him twice during the entire year despite my personal student support plan specifying frequent contact and help sessions. Other students have gone to greater lengths to rectify problems with their universities, including students from SOAS University of London and the Royal College of Art planning on taking their institutions to court!

**So many of us have been pushed to breaking point and it can be difficult sometimes to know where to turn. It feels like every service available is underfunded and overcapacity. I'm lucky that my local Humanist group was able to provide extra support and pastoral care where my local services were unable or unwilling to help me. Phoning a crisis line or using coping techniques like mindfulness can help with smaller problems in the short term but major change is needed to ensure students, and indeed the rest of the population, can get the support they need.**



# The Dawkins Affair

**Biologist and humanist Richard Dawkins was stripped of his 1996 'Humanist of the Year' Award in April by the American Humanist Association. He is alleged to have demeaned marginalised groups and implied that the identities of transgender individuals are fraudulent. Our Young Humanists editor Ronnie Barr believes that the AHA action was justified. David Warden, assistant editor, thinks that the AHA action was a mistake. He explains some of his thinking in this open letter...**



*Dear Ronnie,*

You wrote in your column last month that "Time and time again Dawkins has tried talking about various minority groups on inappropriate forums like Twitter and using offensive language and every time it's been pointed out that the way he's seemingly going about his 'research' is wrong. It's his refusal to change his approach or even acknowledge that what he's doing is wrong that's led to his award being revoked. His latest tweet about transgender people is merely the final nail in the coffin." I agree that Twitter is hardly the best medium to have nuanced discussions about the complexities of gender. I also agree with you that trans people need to know that you'll be listened to and accepted before you get involved in these dialogues, instead of having others speaking on your behalf and potentially hindering these conversations.

You discovered Dorset Humanists about four years ago when we had our outdoor information tent at the Bournemouth LGBT Pride Festival. You were a shy but brave teenager when you came out to me as trans

after one of our subsequent events. You've really grown in confidence since then.

Nearly three years ago, when you were twenty years old, you gave an eloquent and very moving talk to Dorset Humanists. You told us about feeling suicidal when you were just twelve years old because seeing your body develop and change left you feeling physically and mentally sick. Eventually you felt OK about your sexuality, despite taunts from bullies, but you still felt that there was a piece of the puzzle missing. Being masculine had always felt right to you. You preferred your hair short, and all the clothes you liked came from the men's section. Everything about being a girl felt wrong. You wanted biceps and abs and some facial hair. You wanted to rock up to prom in a nice suit. I can identify with your experience to some extent. In my teens, I was at the tail end of the bell-curve when it came to puberty and physical development. I desperately wanted my voice to break and be able to grow sideburns. It was a miserable and humiliating time as even younger boys overtook me.



One good thing about the Dawkins affair is that it has prompted some deeper conversations between us about gender identity and we've been able to 'compare notes' so to speak. For you, a male identity formed despite the fact that you were born into a female body. For me, a male identity has always been correlated with the fact that I inhabit a male body. Neither of us can really understand what it's like for the other person because these experiences are subjective and internal. All we can do is describe them and accept each other's testimony.

## The Foucault connection

You wrote in an email to me that 'gender identity and biological sex are two entirely separate things... The way [Dawkins] is phrasing his statements is him refusing to acknowledge a person's real gender identity and instead defaulting to their biological sex which is ultimately irrelevant'. These statements help to make sense of the trans experience but we need to be cautious about universalising partial truths. This, I believe, is where Queer Theory has gone wrong. Queer Theory is a branch of applied postmodernism which derives from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault and his followers such as the American philosopher Judith Butler. It's interesting but it's unscientific and very politicised. The scientific consensus is that biological sex and gender identity are usually correlated although gender, of course, is subject to a great deal of social conditioning. The trans experience can be accommodated within this scientific worldview. It's the more radical positions of Queer Theory which seem to have put trans activists on a collision course with the wider community. I don't doubt the reality of your perceived gender identity and your self-identification as a transman. You're legally recognised to be a man and you're on the

NHS waiting list for treatment. This implies that the physical attributes of gender are significant and important to you, as they are to me.

## The Dawkins confusion

So coming back to Dawkins, you explained that '...when Dawkins says "You will be vilified if you deny that they literally are what they identify as" he is wrong, because transgender people are literally the gender they identify as already.' I can't help feeling there's a misunderstanding here. There's no reason to believe that Dawkins would deny the psychological, social and legal status of your gender identity any more than I do. What Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, is doing is challenging the unscientific dogmas of postmodern Queer Theory which appear to deny there is *any* correlation of the concepts 'man' and 'woman' with human anatomy. Your desire to transition in a more physical sense testifies to the relevance of the human body for trans people.

I think we need to try and understand where people are coming from and avoid, as far as possible, accusing people of transphobia. Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director of the American Humanist Association, has just published a book called *Justice-Centered Humanism* (2021) which appears to accept uncritically the core concepts of post-modernist identity politics so it's not surprising that the AHA has taken this action against Dawkins. It's worrying though that the AHA has adopted an ideological rather than a critical stance on this issue and made it more difficult for humanists worldwide to discuss the issue at all for fear of causing unintended offence. I'm grateful to you Ronnie that you are prepared to have these difficult conversations.

*David*

# Brittain Interviews...

*Our video conference with notable Humanists, interviewed by David Brittain*

## Teddy Prout

Teddy Prout has had an impressive impact on the group culture among Humanists, and in this fascinating interview he not only offers advice for groups who are emerging from post-Covid hibernation, but explains how he thinks group events will change now that so many have become accustomed to holding meetings online. Teddy also offers advice on how to kick-start a new group, and explains what kind of support is available from Humanists UK.

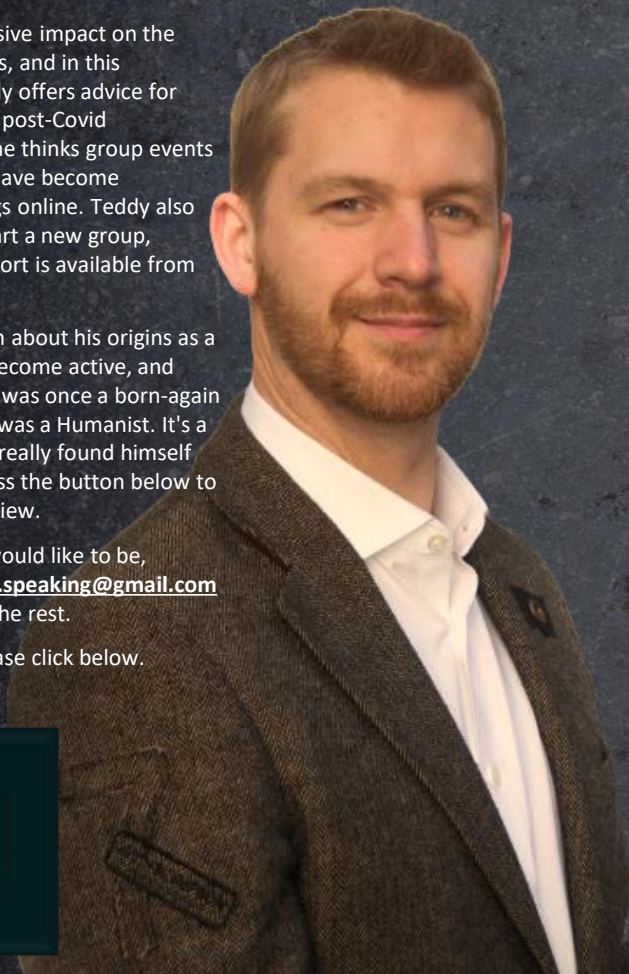
But first, David Brittain asks him about his origins as a Humanist, why he decided to become active, and indeed how – as someone who was once a born-again Christian – he decided that he was a Humanist. It's a fascinating story of a man who really found himself when he found Humanism. Press the button below to view the whole one hour interview.

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# Speaker Finder Extraordinaire Lyn Glass...

*Filling up an events programme with interesting and engaging speakers on a variety of topics can seem a little daunting. Aaron Darkwood asked Dorset Humanists' Vice-Chair and Speaker Finder Lyn Glass, 'How do you do it?'*

After a year of hibernation and semi-concealment behind Zoom screens, our theme this month is "getting back to reality". Groups which may have been dormant for a while will be thinking about how to restart their engines and getting the show back on the road. I asked Lyn Glass, Vice Chair and former speaker finder for Dorset Humanists, how she did it.

"Well, one of my favourite strategies is following up various humanist and secular speakers I see publicised in *The Freethinker*, Humanists UK Newsletters, and Hampshire Skeptics in the Pub event emails and the like. Then of course Humanists UK provides a database of speakers available to local groups ([Patrons list here](#)) plus I'm always nagging folk at Dorset Humanists to let me know if they know of anyone suitable, particularly if they have email contact details for them. It's too much hard work if someone just mentions a name and area of expertise without any way of getting in touch with the person. When we have a good speaker on a particular subject I do always ask them if they have other talks available and try to book them to come back again a year or two later."

I asked Lyn about her 'secret list' of contacts she'd previously mentioned to me; where did they come from? "I print off emails regarding any speaker ideas and have a big file box with speaker ideas separated into type: science,



Lyn adores rubbing shoulders with celebrities and even HM the Queen. She's pictured here with former President of Humanists UK Shappi Khorsandi and David Warden.

ethics, human rights, philosophy, psychology etc., to try to ensure I get a good spread of different topics across the year." Are speakers hard to get with their busy schedules? Can you just contact them and book them? Lyn explained, "I was normally booking speakers four to eight months in advance so as to secure them. It could be very stressful at times as occasionally someone would cancel at the last minute but I always knew the Chairman had a Plan B." How do you feel stepping down from this role? "I'm very relieved that Simon Whipple has agreed to take over the speaker finder role from July, but it has been great being the first to meet all our guests, my 'new special friends' as I like to call them, and although I'm stepping down as Speaker Finder, I will still be Vice-Chair and very visible to our future guests, who will become my new 'special friends'."

How do you get good speakers? Tell other readers by emailing us at:

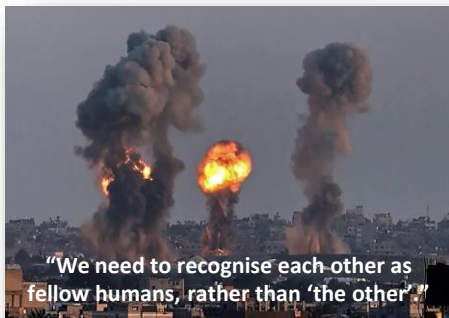
[humanistically-speaking@gmail.com](mailto:humanistically-speaking@gmail.com)



# Thought for the Day

By Maggie Hall

Few of our readers can have failed to be deeply troubled by the latest manifestation of the human instinct for tribalism demonstrated by the current situation in Israel. The historic background to this conflict is well-known and is beyond the remit of this article but, like most human conflict, it centres around territorialism, tribal loyalty and identity, of which religion is only a part. Two nations, each with a deep-rooted sense of entitlement to the same territory, are once again embroiled in aggression, counter-aggression and stubborn refusal to view each other's citizens as anything but "the other" and a threat to their own self-identity.



As Jeremy Bowen, [BBC Middle East](#) editor, puts it "Leaders on both sides have been fighting their own domestic political battles, concentrating on safeguarding their own positions, when the biggest issue for any Palestinian or Israeli leader should be making peace. That challenge has not been addressed seriously for years."

How do we, as humanists, view this awful situation? Humanist International's Oslo

Declaration on Peace ([2011](#)) states, "All wars are started by human beings and war can be ended by human beings working together". This is true, of course, but in order to get human beings to work together for their own mutual benefit they need, first of all, to recognize each other as fellow humans, rather than "the other".

Tribal loyalty served our species well in our evolutionary past, but like our other basic human instincts, including revenge, greed and the urge to procreate, it now threatens us with extinction. However, we have proved that we can overcome these basic natural urges of the primitive brain when our more modern, rational brain recognizes that they are no longer appropriate or beneficial. We do it every day when we are polite to people that we would really rather ignore, when we control our temper in situations where to do otherwise would be counterproductive, and when we otherwise inhibit natural cravings or desires, so we know that it is possible.

One of the most commonly attested principles of Humanism is empathy, and this would indeed seem to be an essential requirement for harmony among the many different tribes and factions of humanity in the world today. So, if Humanism could become a driving force in the world, would conflict cease, or at least diminish? Would all of humanity come to see itself as one "tribe"? Are humanists better at empathy than those who do not have a humanist approach to life or would not self-identify as humanists? Does Humanism make us less contentious and more peace-loving? Does it help us view all



People as fellow human beings and not “the other”? Humanism certainly seems to have that potential, but is that how we all “do Humanism”?

The basic starting point for Humanism is, of course, that it is a non-religious ethic. As humanists we stand apart from creeds and dogmas which stem from what we view as irrational beliefs and rightly stand against inequalities driven by religious privilege and faith-based actions which threaten the human rights of others. But how does that influence the way that we view individuals who hold those beliefs? What sort of people are they in our minds? Why are they so illogical in their thinking? Is it because they are ignorant? Are they unintelligent? Are they malign in their thinking? Do we think there is something intrinsically sinister about them?



Some decades ago (more than I care to count) I myself was a believer, a member of a fairly fundamentalist Baptist church. I was a real born-again, washed-in-the-blood-of-the-lamb, sanctified (not to say sanctimonious), evangelical, bible-bashing, god-bothering, pain-in-the-neck Christian. I don't consider myself now to be any more intelligent or more well-intentioned than I was all those years ago. I am, indeed, considerably older, wiser, less naïve and better educated perhaps, but I'm still the same person and this is something of which I find I need to

constantly remind myself when encountering the views and actions of those fellow human beings who are still where I once was so that I do not fall into the trap of viewing them as “the other”.



**“Humanists should guard against ‘othering’ the person who turns up on your doorstep with bible tracts. Years ago, it could have been me.”**

Not very long ago I had a bit of a run-in with a person who wished to collaborate with our humanist group on a quite big, important online event we were due to run. This person represented an organisation which I would not describe as in any way humanist and we had no hesitation in declining the offer of collaboration, which did not best please that person. In the invective that followed I was told that our attitude would “let the theists win”, as if we were at war with theists! Are non-believers who view believers as opponents in a war any better than those who fight religiously motivated wars? Personally, I think not. Yes, we need constantly to be on our guard against religious encroachment on public life, religious domination of our education system, religiously inspired hate and violence, but at the same time also guard against “othering” of our fellow human beings. The young woman who turns up on your doorstep with a tract full of Biblical quotes, hoping to save your soul could, many years ago, have been me.





# Getting back in the saddle

How hard can it be...?

**After more than a year of pandemic pandemonium, how are we feeling about the prospect of retuning to normal?**

Have you ever had the experience of a blissful week off work which has flown by too fast and ended with that sense of dread as Monday appears over the horizon once more? Or maybe during a period of sickness your mind had disengaged from the hustle and bustle and stress of ongoing responsibilities and the thought of returning is making you feel ill again? Multiply this by a whole year of lockdown and these feelings can increase a dozen fold. It may even seem like starting a new job all over again. Or perhaps you're one of the lucky ones who so enjoys your job that you've been itching to get back to your place of work with a skip in your step?

As someone managing depression on a daily basis, I know that 'normality' has been on my mind with the highs and lows that come with that. I've grown so used to my own space that interaction with others on a number of days in a row can be overwhelming.

Like many group organisers and activists I've stood in front of an audience, delivered a talk, organised, chaired or participated in a debate and generally been in front of a crowd. Not so many years ago the thought of this would have had me running for the hills. Now I'm on the fence a little, wondering if the previous

*Aaron Darkwood  
reflects on getting  
back to normal*



me is still there somewhere? Do I need to come out of the closet again and find my inner extrovert? The person who previously relished human interaction in order to feel involved and alive?

*Humanistically Speaking* has kept me very busy during lockdown, but as we face normality there will be events to organise, venues to find, speakers to arrange and places to be. Yes, that's right it will be 'leaving the home' time again. I'm sounding like a recluse. I'm not really, but Zoom does make for a very sedate arrangement when all the talks can be attended from the comfort of my sofa.

As we move forwards, I know that human interaction is good for us, and your local groups are going to need your input to help them get back on track. So in these final few words I would like to reach out to you if your slippers have become a little too comfortable, and encourage you to do your bit to help build your groups back up and beyond where they were before. Volunteer, give a talk, move some chairs or donate. After this long break we need to get our game faces back on. Do what you're comfortable doing, of course. But most of all, do it for you.

What are your hopes and fears about returning to normality?

[humanistically.speaking@gmail.com](mailto:humanistically.speaking@gmail.com)



# Musings by Maggie

*"The only atheist in the village!"*

**O**ne would normally expect that those who have reached the age at which the soubriquet "Senior Citizen" undoubtedly applies would long ago have left behind the gauche naivety of youth. Surely the rose-tinted spectacles through which the optimistic young regard their future should long have been consigned to the recycling bin of history? Alas, in my own case, it seems not to apply.

When my partner and I, both firm atheists and active humanists, decided to move from the small town on the outskirts of Brighton, where we had been living, to a smaller village only five and a half miles away in a more rural district, it was mainly because of a long-held ambition of mine to live "in the country". I wanted to grow vegetables, go for country walks and become involved in the local community. I'd heard many stories in the past about communities where virtually the only social life revolved around the church, but surely, I thought, that was in days gone by when those communities were more isolated, before everyone was so well-connected and had access to so many other opportunities to be socially active beyond the boundaries of local geography. Surely, with access to rolling news and the internet, not to mention social media, even rural communities are now more outward-looking and less parochial than they used to be? Naturally, there would still be the church, as there are still churches everywhere,

which would have their fair share of adherents, but that would only apply to a relatively small number of villagers, the remainder being just as centred in our mostly secular-minded society as people anywhere else in modern Britain. After all, this particular village is only twelve miles away from the city that tied with Norwich as the least religious place in Britain in the 2011 Census.



The Village Hall: a truly secular space but everyone on the committee was Anglican!

The reality was somewhat of a surprise. There are two churches in the village, one Baptist and one C of E, and they are both very active. The only café in the village is run by the Baptists. The only secular meeting place, apart from the two pubs, is the Village Hall, which is why I was pleased to be invited to join its management committee. However, although it is truly a secular space, open to people of all faiths and none, it gradually dawned on me after a while that just about everyone on its committee belongs to one of the churches, mostly the Anglican one. There are one or two who I suspect may not actually attend either church,

but none that I could identify as confirmed unbelievers like myself. The influence of the church, though not unduly intrusive upon the business of the management committee, is usually in evidence to some degree. Sometimes it's only a matter of "...as I said to you after church on Sunday", or "Oh, I shall be seeing her at 'Church Mice' tomorrow so I'll ask her". But at one meeting, one longstanding denizen of the village and a staunch member of the C of E turned to another and said, "You're supposed to be a Christian – that wasn't very charitable!" I'm not sure that the much younger woman she was addressing is, in fact, one of the faithful or whether the remark represents an assumption of Christianity as the norm in these ecclesiastically inclined parts.

Now don't misunderstand me. As a Humanist I believe in freedom of religion and belief and, although I can in no way share in the religious beliefs of all these fellow villagers, I defend their right to hold them. There is also clearly a strong social bond between them since they have their church and its activities in common. However, it does mean that a firm unbeliever like me sometimes finds herself at a social disadvantage in such an environment. When the church talk starts, I have to stand to one side and be politely non-participatory. If I should mention that I am busy on a particular day because of my humanist activities in town or elsewhere I am met with a polite but blank look and I'm never sure whether "Humanism" is even a word that means anything to most people around here. I dread to think what "atheism" might mean to them! Of course, the impression that absolutely everyone in the village belongs to one of the churches is a false one. For one thing I'm pretty sure that none of our immediate neighbours does, but the ones who don't participate in the churches don't seem to participate in

anything else either. Around here if you're active, you're active in the church – or at least alongside other people that you already know from the church. On the advice of my doctor, I joined the Pilates class at the Village Hall in an effort to help relieve my sciatica. It's a small class of eight or nine very friendly and jolly ladies, none of whom I had met before. I found the class very congenial, and my sciatica has certainly improved. However, it soon transpired that Joan was doing the flowers next week because Linda had a bad leg, Dorothy was looking for a suitable "collect" for next Sunday and Sally would meet up with Phyllis at the Parochial Council on Thursday. Looking around I could see that most of the participants were wearing the ubiquitous gold cross on a chain (even the teacher, but I already knew about her since, in spite of her Christianity and my Humanism, we are friends). I have tried in vain to recognise another religiously unaffiliated member of the group, but I fear I am still the only one not in the ecclesiastical club. One day I turned up to the class to find a new recruit in the place next to me. Could this at last turn out to be a fellow heathen, I ventured to hope? That hope was short lived. "This is Amy" I was told by way of cheery introduction, "our Vicar".

*Names have been changed.*





# Letters & Emails

## Dawkins transphobic?

Many people agree with Dawkins that gender is defined by biology and is not merely a 'social construct' as the Transgender Lobby would have us believe. And as Dawkins accurately predicts, anyone holding the scientific view identified by him will be vilified.

A reasonable reading of the article by Ronnie Barr (May edition) clearly demonstrates that it is intended to convey the impression that Dawkins not only has contrary views to the author but is actually transphobic. Luminaries such as Steven Pinker, Michael Shermer, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Jerry Coyne, Sam Harris, David Silverman, Daniel Dennett and Rebecca Goldstein have dismissed the American Humanist Association's decision to rescind Dawkins' award as nonsense. Are these noted liberal intellectuals also to be tarred with the same brush as Dawkins?

*Richard Layton, Colchester Humanists*

## Ruthless journalistic culture

Martin Bashir's deception to get an interview with Princess Diana was deplorable. But Bashir did not work alone. Within the BBC he had bosses who must have known (and approved) of what he was doing, and it is a real concern of mine that Bashir will be used as a patsy to take all the blame. He was not working alone, and the BBC must acknowledge that. But other media enterprises must also take a share of the blame. Let's not forget that Bashir interviewed the Princess in the 1990s, when some newspapers were spying on people, tapping

telephones and ruining lives. In that context, the headlines in some newspapers reveals the most breathtaking hypocrisy.

Replace Princess Diana for Millie Dowler, and you'll know what I mean. The Leveson inquiry of 2011 and 2012, recommended that an independent body should replace the Press Complaints Commission. The recommendations were welcomed by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, but never acted upon, and finally killed by the culture secretary, Matt Hancock in March 2018.

Bashir isn't the problem, he is just a symptom. He is a creation of a ruthless journalistic culture, and the lid needs to be lifted to expose the maggots inside. If there is to be an enquiry into the BBC, let's not forget the role our newspapers play.

*Brian Turvey*

## UK voted to keep 'first past the post'

Reading the May 2021 edition of your excellent magazine, I was distressed to read the letter from Roger Brown of Southampton University.

He claims that the EU referendum was about the dissatisfaction of UK voters with our political system and specifically our first past the post election system. Does he not remember that just five years before the EU vote, UK voters took part in another referendum specifically about voting reform? The result was a large majority wanting to keep our current system.

*Regards, Martin Knowles*





# A day in the life...

## of a Humanist Group Chairman



David at the colourful Bournemouth LGBT Festival.

### David Warden, Chairman of Dorset Humanists

#### Describe your role in one sentence:

Keeping the show on the road.

#### Five key responsibilities of your role:

1. Chair events and committee meetings
2. Co-manage our events programme
3. Produce our monthly news bulletin
4. Engage with our partners, including Humanists UK
5. Promote group and public understanding of Humanism

#### How did you find this role?

The previous chair retired and everyone on the committee looked at me.

#### What appeal did it hold for you that made you apply/train for it?

When I was a young boy I wanted to be a pop star, a train driver, or a vicar. Being chairman of a humanist group is closest to the last of those three. A humanist group is a community of like-minded people whose common bond is Humanism understood as an ethical non-religious philosophy of life. My whole life has been a kind of preparation for the role of leading a humanist group.



Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, and David Warden.



**A group of Dorset Humanists with former President of Humanists UK comedian Shappi Khorsandi.**

*Take us through a typical day of you performing this role.*

The most demanding task on a daily basis is keeping up with emails. I get dozens every day but I've become pretty skilled at deleting most of them.

The role is mainly about communication – liaising with potential speakers, answering queries from members and supporters, writing reports for our monthly bulletin and so on. Occasionally I am asked to conduct a humanist funerals and weddings.

Dorset Humanists typically hosts around 30 speaker events per year, plus walks, socials, outdoor festival appearances, and other special events, and so there's always lots to do to 'keep the show on the road'. I am very fortunate to have a dedicated team of volunteers to help.

I also chair our pastoral team and our schools team. In recent years (apart from 2020 for obvious reasons) I have also made numerous visits to local schools to talk about Humanism.

I'd love to see humanist groups grow nationally, both in number and strength. It's a big commitment but incredibly worthwhile.

*Do you require specific skills or training to conduct your role?*

A deep knowledge of the history of Humanism and humanist groups over the last 150 years is a great help. I also need diplomatic skills and the confidence to stand up at the front.

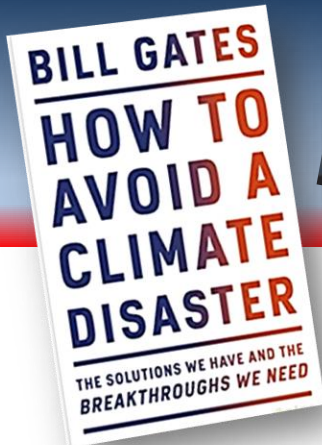
*What is most challenging about your role? How do you navigate complications?*

Very occasionally we encounter difficult people and situations but I have an incredibly supportive team and our collective common sense gets us through crises.

*What are the rewards in this for you? Why would you recommend it?*

The pay is atrocious (zero!) but it's the best job I've ever had. When people express their heartfelt appreciation of everything we do it makes it all worthwhile.





## Book Review by David Warden

### 'How To Avoid a Climate Disaster' (2021) by Bill Gates

**Bill Gates is a co-founder of Microsoft, co-chairman and co-founder of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and chairman and co-founder of TerraPower.**

One of the most astonishing things I read in this book is that Bill Gates sunk \$50 million into a biofuels company which turned out to be a dead end. He was completely relaxed about shrugging off this particular investment failure because, he wrote, 'We need to be exploring lots of ideas, even knowing that many of them will fail'. In fact, he's put more than \$1bn into the net zero project.

Gates's central assumption is that the world needs to get to net zero emissions by 2050 if we are to avoid a climate disaster. It will be no use reducing emissions a bit by 2030. The best use of the next decade is to ensure that we have everything in place by 2030 to reach net zero by 2050. That means from 51 billion tons of greenhouse emissions to 0.

Swapping to electric cars and increasing wind and solar power are the 'low-hanging fruit'. Much more difficult challenges include finding new ways to make cement, steel, and plastics. In developed countries we tend to think that erecting new buildings is a gradual process.

But Gates writes that 'The world will be building the equivalent of another New York City every month for the next 40 years'. That's nearly 500 new cities by 2060.

Gates's writing is exemplary. There's no scaremongering or moralising. Just a coolly rational plan for getting to net zero by 2050.

But it's complicated and it's a hard thing to do. For example, we need to develop hydrocarbon fuels but they are currently 237% more expensive than petrol. Getting that 'green premium' down to zero or into negative territory is the challenge. We need to develop 'direct air capture' of CO<sub>2</sub> but currently it would cost \$5.1 trillion to remove 51 billion tons from the atmosphere. We need advanced nuclear reactors but only a handful of companies, including Gates's own TerraPower, are working on them.

Gates writes that public investment in clean energy and climate-related R&D needs to be increased by a factor of five. It's expensive, but the countries that succeed in creating scalable new technologies could reap a massive reward in exports.

Most books in this genre are strong on diagnosis and weak on policy suggestions. Gates's book is almost entirely about policy and technology solutions. It's geeky and a bit boring at times, but if you're looking for an optimistic and rational plan for how to decarbonise human civilisation without taking us back to the Stone Age then you should read this book.

# GROUP NETWORK

*Check out what's going on within the network by clicking links below*

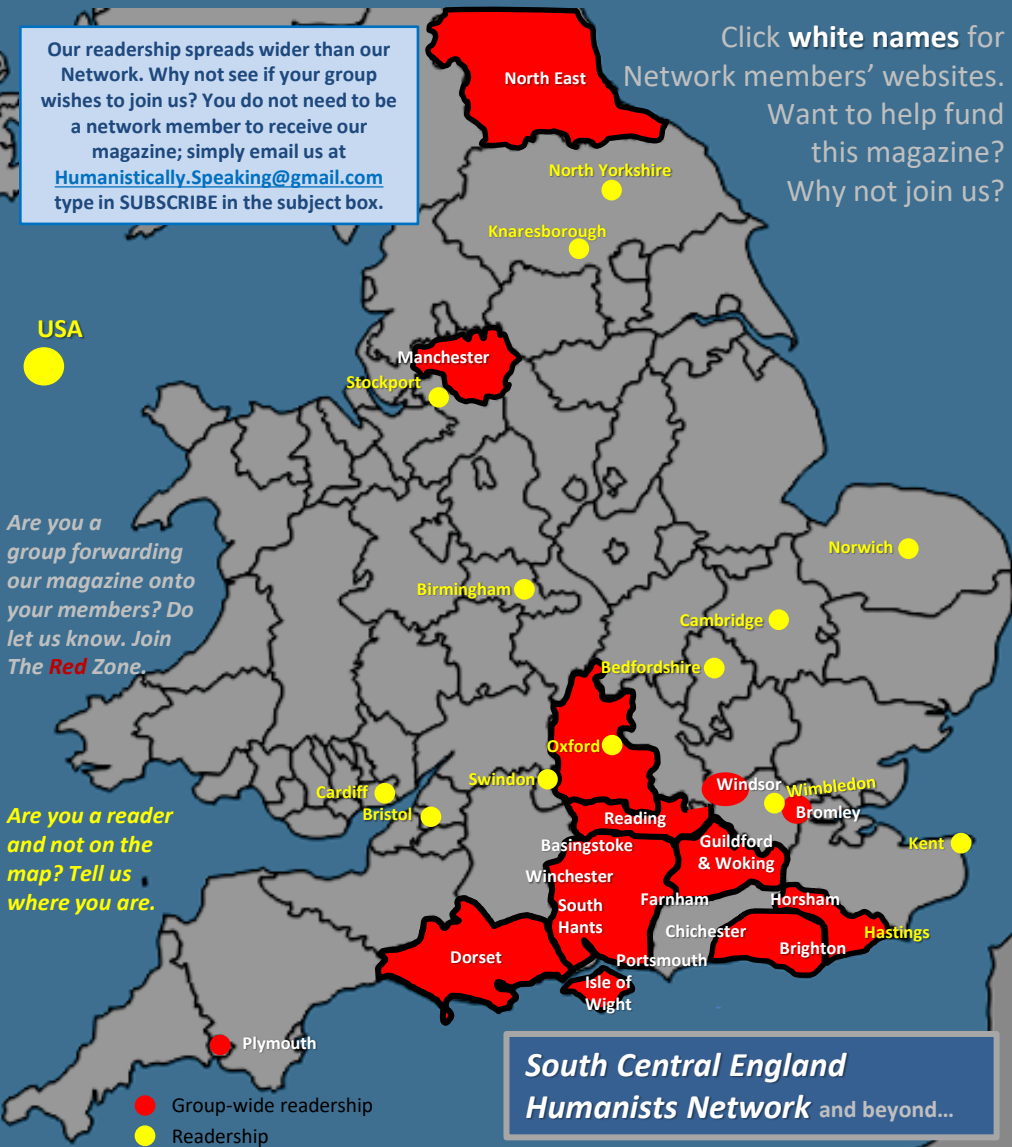
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Do you live in a town where you think a group could flourish?  
*Contact us and we will see what can happen with the Network's help.*



*Humanism is an ethical non-religious worldview. It's about tolerance, kindness, knowledge, and friendship. Although Humanistically Speaking is for Humanists, everyone is welcome to read and contribute, regardless of faith or belief.*



**Click the 'Happy Human' symbol above  
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