



Humanistically Speaking

October 2020



A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview

The New Normal?

Drama student Amelie Forbes reveals her fears about Covid 19 and its impact on her generation

At this time of year, I would ordinarily find myself feeling ready for the academic year ahead – eager to soak up the joy of new challenges. Instead, I find myself feeling burnt out before I've even gone back to having 'proper' lessons in the classroom.

I think it's safe to say that the ramifications of Coronavirus have been felt by us all. Of course, there have been others who have suffered a lot more than I have. For one, I am very glad that I wasn't doing my 'A' Levels this year. I am also thankful for the fact that I don't rely on having a job to support my family. On top of this, I have had full access to my education throughout lockdown, as well as being able to remain active and have food on the table every night. In the grand scheme of things, I have done well for myself throughout the grasp of the virus.

However, this 'new normal' – the thing we hear so much about – doesn't fill me with confidence... *(continued on page 10)*



Features:

- For & Against
- A Day in the Life
- Dear Darwin
- Chair's Interview
- Thought for the Day
- Lockdown laughs
- Letters & Emails

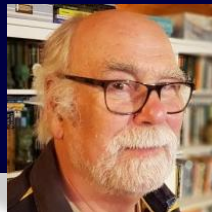
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Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com

In this Issue

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

David Brittain
Executive Editor,
Humanistically
Speaking



CONTENTS

Regular Features in yellow

1. Cover story
2. Editor's Introduction
3. Windsor Humanists
4. **For and Against**
6. Competition
7. **Dear Darwin**
8. **Thought for the Day**
10. Cover story *cont...*
11. **Lockdown Laughs**
12. Meet the Team
13. **Group Network map**
14. Humanism and Spirituality
16. A Twitch upon a Thread
18. Response by Fr Hogan
20. **Interviewing the Chair**
23. Local Talent Focus
24. Letters and Emails
28. **Day in the Life - Prisons**
30. **Book Club Corner**
31. Young Humanist Reflects

CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists entirely 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 the South Central England Humanists Network or Humanists UK.

Welcome to the 5th issue of *Humanistically Speaking*.

I have to say that this one is SO good, that I hardly know where to begin!

To start with, we've handed over our front page to 17-year-old HS prize-winner **Amelie Forbes** who gives a hard-hitting insight into how a 6th former might be feeling about returning to school whilst the pandemic is still with us. Then there's the latest news that **Windsor Humanists** have decided to join the *South Central England Humanist Network* of now 14 Groups who work together to share advice and support across the region.

This is also the first time we have announced the addition of **Penelope Mountford** to our team (page 12). Penelope is a "direct, controversial reporter not afraid of voicing an opinion", (her words) who is a little uncomfortable being photographed.

We're also proud to showcase the work of **Malcolm Love**, one of Brighton's foremost artists, and Humanist Celebrant **Cath Sutherland** explores what spirituality means in a Humanist context, young Humanist Ronnie reflects on our 2020 so far.

Tricia Wallis reveals the cruelty she suffered at the hands of teachers at her Roman Catholic School and, unusually for a Humanist magazine, we've invited Catholic Priest Father **Mark Hogan** to reply. Then we have **Maria Miller**, MP for Basingstoke, who responds to a message I sent to her about FGM, Gay Conversion Therapy and Humanist Marriage ... And we have an inspiring report from Humanist Prison Visitor, **Martin Garrity** in our *Day in the Life* report, as well as a fascinating interview with the Chair of Farnham Humanists, **Alan Montgomery**, in which he discusses his upbringing as a Protestant in Northern Ireland.

And finally, we have our first ever open competition, in which six lucky readers will win a copy of Alice Roberts' and Andrew Copson's beautiful new book **The Little Book of Humanism**. If you fancy your chances, see page 6 for details.

This issue is a blockbuster! ... Enjoy!

David Brittain

Now Windsor Humanists has joined the SCEHN Network!



Anthony Lewis, Chair of Windsor Humanists

Windsor has become the 14th Humanist Group to join the South Central England Humanists Network, and their chairperson is delighted!

“Joining SCEHN is important to Windsor Humanists, which, as a new and small Humanist group will be able to tap into the broader experience of other nearby and more established groups. Also, it’s important that we co-ordinate our activities to be joined up as a movement when, for example, the BBC or other media contact us for comments and interviews” says Anthony Lewis, who is Chair of Windsor Humanists.

And it turned out that the SCEHN network were also delighted to receive Windsor’s application, because when the SCEHN representatives voted to welcome Windsor into the club, their ‘thumbs up’ was unanimous.

“Windsor Humanists focuses especially on two Humanist UK campaigns” added Anthony. “They are *School Speakers* and *Inter-Faith Dialogue* and to that end we have close contacts with Jeremy Rodell, Dialogue Officer for Humanists UK”.

But Anthony is realistic about the wide variation among Windsor Humanists members. “Our area is one of the most diverse in the country outside London. You can name any ethnicity, faith or culture and I can guarantee we have it in the Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead areas. We also have a huge range in wealth from some of the richest people in the UK, living in Ascot, to some of the most deprived areas in Slough. It is also a vibrant region with full employment and there are many international headquarters in the Slough Industrial Estates. There is also a huge, continuous influx of asylum seekers due to

the proximity of Heathrow. It all makes for an interesting melting pot!”

Anthony’s enthusiasm for Humanism is infectious, but he is a relative newcomer to Humanism, having joined only after attending the World Humanist Congress in 2014 in Oxford. But he is now an active School Speaker who loves being a regular feature at several local schools.

Find out more about Windsor Humanists by clicking on this link!

<https://www.windsorhumanists.com/>



FACEMASKS

The case for...



“Governments need to protect the nation”

There are times when we are individuals with rights, freedoms, and our own spaces and there are times when we are one, interdependent nation when face masks, social distancing and other pandemic prevention measures are there for the safety of all of us. It is a government imperative that it decides how we as a country will tackle this, and what best measures are implemented in order to reduce spread and return us to normality.

There are those who feel that they should not be told what to do, how to act or indeed how to live their lives at this critical time, but with loose canons going about their business with little regard for others, everyone is at risk.

We are reminded that NHS workers wear very tight, restrictive masks for twelve hour shifts daily. Are we really that inconvenienced by wearing a loose flimsy paper mask for ten minutes in Tesco?

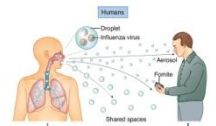
As a Humanist, I have followed the pandemic with interest, I have noted the science, evaluated it with my own common sense and looked at the steps made at every stage with the knowledge we had available at the time. We locked ourselves away. Then kept two metres apart, but further science indicates that although protected from droplets, smaller particles or aerosols are still able to spread, thus masks, shields, Perspex screens and other methods were implemented to form the ‘one metre plus’ protocol.

We know from less unified countries like the United States, where civil liberties and personal freedoms come before societal safety, that the spread is accelerating. Many states have reimposed lockdown as a result of the irresponsible behaviour of their citizens in refusing to comply with safety measures put in place to keep them alive.

As Humanists I feel our role is to question, to understand, to make logical sense of the science before us, and then to balance that with what is good for the nation, the world and the planet. Sometimes we simply can't have what we want if it means others have to suffer in return. In this case, suffering means potential death, likely chest and breathing issues for life and the continued restricted freedoms for everyone, damaging our economy and lifestyle just because the few couldn't comply with the many.

In future months we will have a vaccine at our disposal, the result of thousands of scientific study hours and hard work to again keep us safe, yet I am sure some will refuse to take it even when offered for free.

By Humanistically Speaking design editor Aaron Darkwood



FACEMASKS

The case against...



“Don’t Mask the Truth”

World lockdown in response to Covid 19 has been an economic, social and cultural disaster causing far more deaths than lives saved. The victims are mainly over 80 year olds whose lives would have been truncated anyway due to sickness and frailty – you cannot live forever. And yet every government in the world (apart from sane, sensible Sweden) have perpetrated the myth that Coronavirus is some sort of 21st century Black Death. The latest manifestation of worldwide paranoia is the mandatory wearing of face masks in what can only be seen as a face saving (excuse the pun) exercise by frightened governments: they need to keep alive fear of the virus to hide what they now realise is only a mild, though highly infectious disease. Populations have been transformed into mask wearing zombies as an inescapably dystopian reminder that the apocalypse is round the corner and that at any time that emotive ‘spike’ in cases could destroy us all. Enforced mask wearing is a political act and nothing to do with science.

Anders Tegnell, Sweden’s chief epidemiologist, has been described as ‘one of the few heroes of this crisis’. He advocates no lockdown, no face masks and no panic. Maybe this is why Sweden’s GDP has only fallen 8.6% whilst the UK’s has fallen by 22%. Tegnell believes masking is ineffectual and spreads rather than limits infection. The WHO said exactly the same at the beginning of the crisis; their volte face is inexplicable. Sensible Sweden relies on social distancing alone while it awaits the inevitable vaccine. But political leaders across the world cannot admit they have made an enormously self-destructive mistake and persist in socially illiberal policies such as mask wearing to justify themselves.

Infections are at present soaring in Spain and France where they had the strictest of lockdowns and where masks are now increasingly worn in all public settings: it is clear that masks are just not working. The truth is that the virus cannot be suppressed by masks and social distancing; it only damps it down.

Masks are grubby, sweaty and useless. Go onto any high street in the UK and watch how the soggy things are hoiked up and down at will covering the hands and faces of the wearers with others’ germs and viruses. We are all super spreaders now! Masks are baggy, ill-fitting monstrosities, made from old knickers and t-shirts, gaping at the sides and sliding down the nose. How unhygienic and unscientific they are. We poor gullible fools wear them as a kind of amulet or charm against infection: superstitious nonsense! Masks divide us from each other and atomise society: they are a social evil. All personal liberty has been lost. The Terence Higgins Trust now promotes the wearing of masks at all times during sexual intercourse: I rest my case!

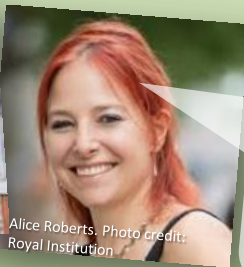
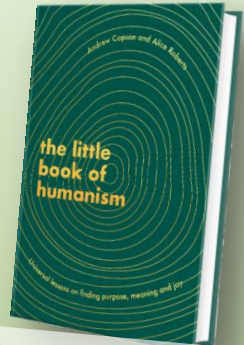
So let’s stand up and defy our guilty governments. Let’s tear off these badges of enslavement which do more harm than good and not only mask our humanity but also mask the truth that lockdowns and mob hysteria are destroying the world as we know it.

By Humanistically Speaking Features Editor Penelope Mountford

Win your own copy of *the little book of humanism* with *Humanistically Speaking!*



Andrew Copson and Alice Roberts' book has just been released, and we at *Humanistically Speaking* are offering our readers the chance to win their own copy for free! All you need to do is email humanistically.speaking@gmail.com and type the word **SUBSCRIBE**. You will not only be in line to get your own copy of the book for free, **but you will receive all future issues of HS from the editors, direct into your mailbox.**



Alice Roberts. Photo credit: Royal Institution

"I think this small gem of a book would make a perfect gift for someone looking for inspiration – and wanting to dip into the rich vein of humanist thinking and writing through history, from ancient Indian philosophers to Douglas Adams."
Alice Roberts

The first ten email addresses to be selected at random from all of *Humanistically Speaking's* subscribers list on the 5th October will be presented with their own copy of *the little book of humanism*. And remember, all of the authors' proceeds will go towards Humanists UK's campaigns.

So what are you waiting for? If you are not a subscriber already, email us [here](#) now, putting **SUBSCRIBE** in the subject box, and give yourself a chance to win this wonderful little book!

Your details will only be used by Humanistically Speaking to send you the bi-monthly online magazine.

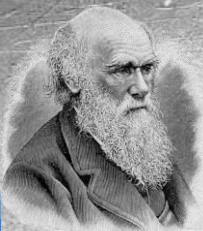
Humanistically Speaking is for you... yes YOU!

Why not start a conversation by telling us what you think?

- Dear Darwin – *Why not send your problems to poor Darwin to explain*
- Thought for the Day – *Why not send us a thought for the day article, or a suggested idea or theme?*
- Local Talent Focus – *Are you a Humanist with talent that you care to share with us all?*
- For and Against – *Do you have a good topic you would like our editors to tackle?*
- Letters Page – *Why not tell us how good (or bad) we are doing by writing to our letters section?*



Send your thoughts and opinions to
humanistically.speaking@gmail.com



Charles Darwin.

Dear Darwin

Ask Charles your difficult questions...



The Mount, Shrewsbury.
Darwin's family home.

Dear Mr Darwin

**How can a dog evolve into a cat?
Noah (aged 12), Southsea**

Dear Noah

A splendid challenge young man! Now of course it would be extremely improbable for a dog to evolve into a cat, as if by magic. What we have to do instead is think in terms of *shared* or *common ancestors*, just as you and your cousins, if you are lucky or perhaps unlucky enough to have any, have common ancestors in your grandparents. Dogs and wolves have a common ancestor, and domesticated cats and big cats like lions and tigers have a common ancestor. So let's say we now have an ancestral cat and an ancestral dog. If we go back far enough in the fossil record, we will find that ancestral cats and ancestral dogs also have a common ancestor. Mind you, we have to go back a very long time indeed, perhaps as much as 50 million years. And it is believed that the common ancestor of ancestral dog and ancestral cat is a weasel-like species called *Miacis*.

Unfortunately, the *Miacis* is extinct but if you do a Google search you will find some splendid pictures of what it might have looked like. Do you think it looks more like a dog or more like a cat? *Miacis* fossils have been found in many places but mainly in China and North America. Do write to me again if you find one!

Dear Darwin

I read somewhere that you recanted on your deathbed and confessed faith in God. Is this true?

Evan Jellical, Orpington

Dear Mr Jellical

Thank you very much for your question. I have no recollection of what I said on my deathbed in 1882 but my biographers, Adrian Desmond and James Moore, record that I exclaimed 'Oh God' and 'Oh Lord God' at the time. This can hardly be taken as a confession of faith. I was convulsed with nausea and pain. I suspect that most atheists might use similar expressions in such circumstances.

I regret, therefore, that I can offer you no victory over this recalcitrant infidel. I was always a bit of a doubting Anglican since my student days in Edinburgh. I finally gave up Christianity when I was forty years of age although I never described myself as an 'atheist' which would have brought social opprobrium in those days. The word 'agnostic' as coined by my good friend Thomas Henry Huxley was closer to the mark.

I remain, Sir, your obedient servant,



Thought for the Day

Why do I do it...?

Ever since I discovered Humanism – in 2006, when I was 58 years old – I have been dedicated to the Humanist cause. And to that end I have often gone to considerable personal effort to raise Humanist issues with a reluctant political class, a largely apathetic media, and a privileged Christian authority. And sometimes it has been at some personal cost to me.

So I am sometimes asked, why do I do it? Why did I put myself out to establish Bedfordshire Humanists, and then Basingstoke Humanists? Why did I work hard to revive the Armed Forces Humanists? And what was the point of my becoming a celebrant, and (training at least) to be a Schools Speaker, and a Pastoral Carer? And why do I *still* send pretty regular communications to my MP about Humanist issues?

The answer is simple. It's because Humanism is the one cause that I can believe in enough to fight for, the one idea that I feel so strongly about that once discovered, it changed my life. To me, the 'God' of Humanism is the god of reason, of tolerance, of compassion, of love. And for all the faults and weaknesses of the human condition, Humanism stands for empirical enquiry, the pursuit of truth as far as we can understand it, and a rational approach to the world's great issues.

It doesn't need the automatic rejection of a religious deity – that's just a side-line to us - it's about placing *all* religious beliefs, their authority and their deities under the same rational processes of open scrutiny that we place everything else.

And given the current state of the world, that approach has never been more relevant than it is today. Nevertheless, I think we Humanists are in danger of being side-tracked into thinking that

Humanism is a kind of closed debating circle for intellectuals ... a kind of passing hobby ... an interest we pursue with the same passion that we might a game of Scrabble™. But Humanism is far, far more important than that. The world needs us. The world needs to apply Humanist

principles to everything from freedom of thought ... to freedom of sexual orientation ... to equally respecting all races and genders ... to worldwide economics ... to eradicating poverty ... to respecting wildlife and the animals we depend on ... to protecting the environment and to climate change.

Above all, we need a Humanist approach to understanding who and what we are as human beings, and to recognise that we are one species, on one planet, and with essentially the same cares and issues.



All this might be pretty obvious to you. Most of you are Humanists already, so why am I saying this now? Well, that's because I recently heard of a speech that should be inspiring to *all* active Humanists, and yet it was delivered 110 years ago, to a foreign audience, by an unlikely American President, and at an unexpected place. But it inspired me, and I'd like to share it with you ...

"It is not the critic who counts. Not the person who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena – whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood. Who strides valiantly. Who errs. Who comes short, again and again because there is no effort without error and shortcoming, but who does actually strive to do the deeds. Who knows great enthusiasms. The great devotions. Who spends themselves on a worthy cause. Who at best knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst – if they fail – at least fail while daring greatly, so that their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory or defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt

That was Theodore Roosevelt addressing the Sorbonne in 1910. If ever there was a rallying cry for our fight for Humanist values in today's society, this is surely it. So what are you? Do you stride valiantly for a cause you believe in? Or are you just another cold and timid soul? Only you know the answer to that, of course. But it's a thought, I think, that some might reflect on.

David Brittain
Executive Editor, Humanistically Speaking

There is some thought about *Humanistically Speaking* going monthly from next year. What's your feeling on this? Why not tell us?

The New Normal



By Godalming College drama
student *Amelie Forbes*

Continued from front page...

Despite being lucky enough to be able to go back to college every other week, I don't feel particularly motivated by the lingering presence of remote learning. I don't seem to have a single friend who is excited by the concept of college life only half returning to how it was. As a drama student, I am constantly afraid that my practical performance work may be jeopardized by a second lockdown. Wanting to go to drama school and be a professional actor, I yearn for the theatre industry to thrive once again. Most people my age rely on social interaction for the preservation of their emotional wellbeing. Being split up for six months, only to be hit with the fear of being split up again upon coming back together, appears to be a necessary yet exhaustingly unhealthy environment. The best way to describe how the current situation feels to me is being sat on the tip of an iceberg: events could, and must, fall in one of the many possible directions, but each direction would lead to a plummet into freezing cold water.

Living through technology doesn't help. The news is constantly plastered with statistics that suggest that my future becomes more ruinous by the minute, along with incoherent mumbling from the professionals who are meant to make everything clear. I turn to my phone for a feeling of connection, yet I am bombarded by posts about all that is wrong with the world; how many people are dying; what we could all be doing to be better people. Having a computer screen as the portal to my classes makes me feel so far away from the college that is only a twenty-minute drive down the road. The isolation of lockdown still lurks, and that catalyses the rising of my unease.

Pessimism and uncertainty aside, there must be a glimmer of good in all of this, a little spark of hope that has a chance of turning into a great flame.

Wading through the muds of Coronavirus, I was still ecstatic to be back on college grounds the other day. I know that the return of routine is a blessing for the majority of students across the country. I also know that this virus isn't going to last forever, because the human race hasn't yet been wiped out by previous pandemics. Looking to a brighter future, not getting bogged down by the doom and gloom of the news or the threat of cases rising, is what I need right now to stay afloat. While it isn't ideal, I would take this 'new normal' over the uncertainty I had back in March, any day.

Lockdown Laughs



Two guys were discussing popular family trends on sex, marriage, and family values.

Bill said, 'I didn't sleep with my wife before we got married, did you?'

Larry replied, 'I'm not sure, what was her maiden name?'

'Mr Clark, I have reviewed this case very carefully,' the divorce Court Judge said, 'And I've decided to give your wife £775 a week,'

'That's very fair, your honour,' the husband said. 'And every now and then I'll try to send her a few bob myself.'

How to Test yourself for Coronavirus:

Step 1: Pour a glass of wine and try to smell it.

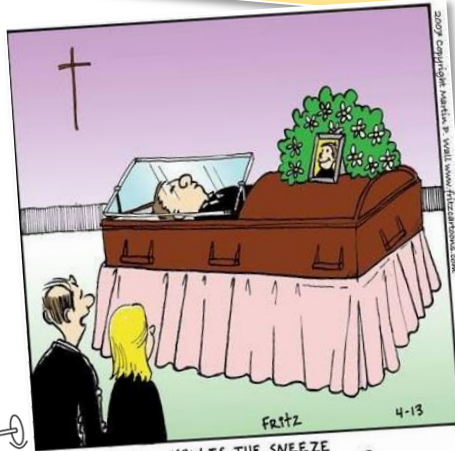
Step 2: If you can smell the wine, then drink some and see if you can taste it.

Step 3: If you can smell and taste it, you can confirm that you don't have Coronavirus.

Last night I did the test 9 times, and all were negative, thank God! (other religions and worldviews are available)

Tonight I'm going to take the test again, because I woke up this morning with a headache and feel like I'm coming down with something. I'm so nervous!

The graveside service just barely finished, when there was massive clap of thunder, followed by a tremendous bolt of lightning, accompanied by even more thunder rumbling in the distance. The little old man looked at the pastor and calmly said, 'Well, she's there'.



NOW IS THE SNEEZE GUARD REALLY NECESSARY?

A man is recovering from surgery when the Surgical Nurse appears and asks him how he is feeling.

I'm O. K., but I didn't like the four letter-word the doctor used in surgery,' he answered.

'What did he say?' asked the nurse. 'Oops!'

"Q: Why does it take 1 million sperm to fertilize one egg? A: Because like all men, they won't stop to ask directions."

Meet the team

The seven editorial volunteers who make it all happen



David Brittain – Executive Editor / Originator

I wanted a regional “general-interest-to-humanists” magazine that might be big enough to have a decent readership, but still able to report on local humanists, and local initiatives. Thanks to the enthusiasm of our new team, *Humanistically Speaking* was effectively born on the 1st January 2020.

David Warden – Copy Editor

I’m Chair of Dorset Humanists, Council Member for SCEHN, and an Honorary Member of Humanists UK. *Humanistically Speaking* is a lively new grassroots magazine which aims to fill the gap between individual group newsletters and national publications. Connecting humanist groups and raising awareness.



Aaron Darkwood – Design & Layout Editor

I aim to bring our storybook of words alive and make it visually appealing with graphics, images and some stylish design tinkering. I’m based in Dorset and have interests in fitness, outdoors, military, and psychology. I have thus far written a number of articles and have an overall aim of growing Humanism.

Ronnie Barr – Young Humanists Assistant Editor

I’m Diversity Representative, Social Media Co-ordinator, and a school speaker for Dorset Humanists as well as the Young Humanist Ambassador for Dorset and a SCEHN council member. I’m passionate about helping my local community. When I’m not volunteering I like to relax and read or write.



Tricia Wallis – Assistant Editor / Book Club

Farnham Humanists member and an enthusiastic new addition to the editorial team. I teach English Literature at Godalming College so love crafting language to present a compelling story or perspective. I enjoy writing polemical and opinion pieces as well as encouraging other writers to bring their views to HS.

Maggie Hall – Assistant Editor/A day in the Life

I’ve been Chair of Brighton Humanists since 2015, a volunteer school speaker and a retired Teacher of Speech and Drama with a life-long interest in the power of the spoken and the written word and a very annoying tendency toward grammar pedantry.



Penelope Mountford – Assistant Editor

Former director of a private school, itching to pass on my learned wisdom of many years. Strict Roman Catholic upbringing made me the Humanist I am today. Former Greenham Common activist and a vocal chairperson on my daughter’s school board. “If an opinion is worth giving, it’s worth giving twice!”



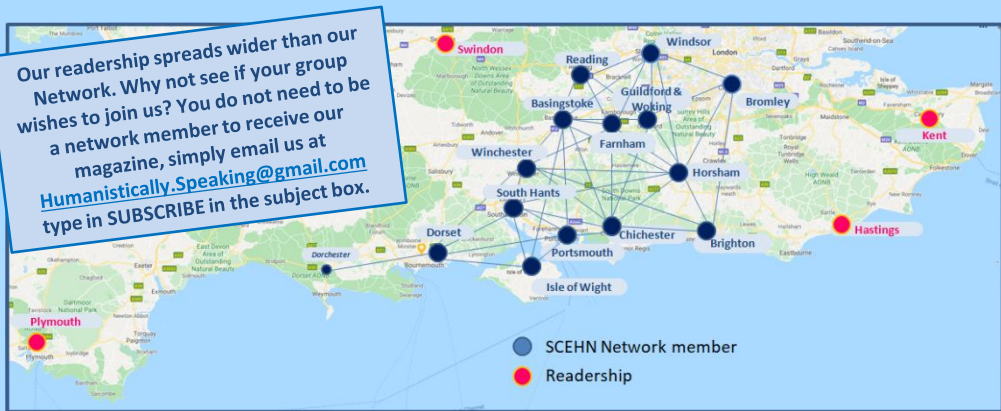
We welcome replies to any of our stories

Please email us at: Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com

GROUP NETWORK

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

Below you will see contact links for all the groups within the network. MEETUP is typically where many group events can be found, with their website and email listed for further group information.



South Central England Humanist Network

SCEHN MEMBER GROUPS

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Basingstoke Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Brighton Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Bromley Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Chichester Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Dorset Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Farnham Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Guildford & Woking | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Horsham Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Isle of Wight Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Portsmouth Humanists | Facebook | Meetup | Email |
| Reading Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| South Hants Humanists | Website | Meetup | Email |
| Winchester (PENDING) | Facebook | Meetup | Email |
| Windsor (NEW MEMBER) | Website | Meetup | Email |

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

Humanists & Spirituality

'Spirituality' can be feeling part of something greater, bigger, and looking on the world as if from a distance, like a bird flying over and looking down.

Joels M
DRONE PHOTOGRAPHY

By Cath Sutherland

'Spirituality' is a vexed word for humanists, as we don't believe that people have spirits that are separate from our bodies, and float out of us when we die. However, getting in touch with their 'spirituality' is very important to most people. They may not call it 'spirituality'. They certainly don't necessarily think of it as something religious. But most of us at certain times want to step back from the endless practicalities, interruption and noise of daily life, and get in touch with something 'deeper', more peaceful, more beautiful, more still, something bigger or more enduring than us. Some people need to find this inner peace as part of their daily life; others just when life get rough.

Spirituality can be described both as looking inwards or looking outwards. It is getting in touch with our serene inner world, rather than shutting it out by being always busy and preoccupied. It is also feeling part of

the world that surrounds us, rather than being preoccupied with ourselves, feeling part of something greater, bigger, and through this being interested in what other beings are feeling, what is happening to them. It is a 'stepping back' from daily life, and looking on the world as if from a distance, like a bird flying over and looking down. It is a temporary release from the problems and practicalities that beset us.

As humanists we need to say that it is natural and desirable to want to find this state of mind, and that humanists seek and value this as much as anyone else. We may not like the word 'spiritual' but we haven't come up with another word, so let's just keep using it until we do.

Like any belief system, Humanism needs to give answers, or guidance, as to how to think about the world's big problems and questions, and spirituality is one of those big questions. If humanists don't talk about how to find it, then people will look for answers elsewhere.

Humanists & Spirituality

People find spirituality in many ways. It can be experienced and accessed through certain activities. It is not an intellectual pursuit to be reached by reading books (although books can be helpful). The most uneducated person who cannot read and write can find spirituality as easily as a professor of philosophy. Some people find it through being close to nature, getting out into far flung places, or their local park. Some find it through extreme exercise, especially when doing it alone with just their determination to keep going, the elation they can feel, and their surroundings. Some find it through absorbing creativity. Some find it through helping other people, or animals, and feeling love and compassion. Some find it through meditation.

One of the most popular ways that people are finding spirituality in Western society today is through mindfulness. At first, I was dismissive of mindfulness. I thought it was just a little chunk of Buddhism (which it is – mindfulness comes from Buddhism). I thought that people who just learn about mindfulness are missing some of the other wonderful Buddhist beliefs, such as ‘the impermanence of everything’, or the mistake of ‘attachment’. But I have talked to a lot of people who have found mindfulness wonderful and very helpful, healing and inspiring. So I now believe I was wrong. Many people long for beauty and peace in their day-to-day world. Many people who are troubled or who have suffered something horrible are looking for a way of seeing, a way of thinking, that will give them strength, show them a path.



Cath Sutherland is a humanist celebrant. She conducts non-religious funerals, memorials, weddings, partnership ceremonies and naming ceremonies.

I think humanists need to acknowledge that well-taught mindfulness is one of the great ways of finding our own spirituality. Much mindfulness teaching includes meditation. They are both things that humanists should applaud and encourage other people to consider if they feel the need to.

Further reading

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World (2011) Mark Williams and Danny Penman

Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality Without Religion (2015) Sam Harris

Buddhism Without Beliefs (1998) by Stephen Batchelor

'A Twitch upon a Thread'

The Confessions of an Apostate

A personal account by
Assistant Editor Tricia Wallis

Two years ago I lay in hospital, seriously ill with a ruptured appendix and sepsis. My appendectomy was delayed as medication I had been taking had to dissipate before the risk of surgery. I was terrified. My love of life has always been intense and absolute and I thought I was about to face the void. I was brought up as a Catholic but I had embraced Humanism 10 years ago and had called myself an atheist and secularist since I was 18 years old. Humanism appeals strongly as it is founded on scientific and rational principles with the added bonus of celebrating all that is joyous and life affirming; a hedonist's philosophy in part...?

But this was different, my prospects were looking increasingly bleak. I was delirious. As I lay fixed to that hospital bed: lurid, nightmarish images straight from an Hieronymus Bosch painting crawled and groped over me. This was Hell. What was I to do? Where did I get comfort?

At this point you have probably guessed, to my shame, what I did. I was no longer the brave atheist, modern and defiant: the eternal rebel. Yes I prayed. I became again that small Roman Catholic child who was taught that one's guardian angel would lovingly fold her in its wings and bear her up to the light. I called to my parents (both recently dead) to deliver me from evil and take me to the bliss of eternity. I felt so vulnerable, so frightened, so lost to life. Momentarily, I relinquished a lifetime's apostasy in a moment of dark fear. It was Orwellian doublethink... How could I believe in God and not believe in God simultaneously? How could a life time of Catholic rejection suddenly provide such comfort? There are no easy answers to this

paradox but inner conflict, whether repressed or not, is the essence of apostasy.

Early Years

I had been born into a strict, almost fundamentalist Irish Catholic family of first generation immigrants; holy water from Lourdes was always by our front door. I attended St Mary's RC School until I was 11 years old. St Mary's practised a cruel and abusive regime where children (boys and girls) were regularly caned and hit with the ruler by teachers and priests alike for any perceived sign of non-conformity. It was a regime which bred guilt and fear. My mother (the more pious one of my parents) colluded and smacked me into submission. I believe this was born out of her real anxiety that permissive parents would be 'othered' by our small, Catholic and socially deprived community comprised mainly of Italians and Irish. The priest was a regular, apparently benign visitor to our home but his real motive was to ensure my parents were bringing up my sister and me as good Catholic girls. I was marched every weekend to

Confession and Holy Communion from the age of seven years: a demonstration of the Catholic mantra of Ignatius Loyola, 'Give me the child until he is seven and I'll show you the man'. I was forced to fast for three hours before receiving the host; I remember the dizziness and queasiness I invariably experienced. On Holy Days of Obligation we girls were often dressed in white and frills like child novice nuns and made to process through the grimy, urban streets with a statue of the Virgin Mary swaying drunkenly above our bowed heads. The Church wanted to make quite sure we could never escape its suffocating indoctrination.

Memories forever with me are the sheer terror I felt at nine years old when an Irish priest stood at the altar in the ornately vulgar interior of the church attached to our school and explained the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. I suddenly thought, as I bowed my head; imagine if I, a little girl, could be called upon by God to bear a child to demonstrate her faith and purity: I will remember the intense fear and giddiness I felt as my imagination took hold. Or maybe God would send me a vocation to be a nun and I would spend the rest of my life swamped in black vestments with my head shaven and covered, hidden from the world, in a convent prison. The idea of Transubstantiation also left me disorientated and confused. How could that thin, whitish sliver of wafer balanced so delicately between the priest's fingertips (they weirdly smelt of Palmolive soap) really be the body and blood of Christ and me a child of seven years to swallow him down. It all became a distorted and confusing blur and my feelings of guilt at such wicked thoughts consumed me.

A Change of Direction

What saved me from the morbid religious oppression and suffocating submission and control of my childhood? I realised as young as seven years, in spite of my guilt and Ignatius Loyola, that Catholicism was dark and

frightening, that I hated how it made me feel and I wanted none of it. My escape lay in school and education: I passed the 11+ and went to a girls' grammar school. It liberated me. Of course the irony was that my mother's educational ambitions and social aspirations for her daughter were the impulses which would make me such a disappointment as a dutiful and obedient Catholic. At eighteen, I told my mother that I was indeed an atheist and I never wanted to go to mass again. I remember she wept as she ran up the stairs calling back to me that she was a failure as a mother. My young, hard hearted defiance was invulnerable. I exulted at her words.

The Rest of the Story

No, I never changed my mind. I never returned to Catholicism. I am free. I relish being an apostate and am always fascinated by others' experiences of different faiths: I particularly admire Ayaan Hirsi Ali whose brave critiques of Islam resonated in some ways with my own experiences of Catholicism; though I can hardly claim, unlike those who attempt to leave the Muslim faith, that my life was ever at risk! But the question is, am I really free from religious belief? Although I rationally justify my decision to leave Catholicism, I sometimes realise I find it hard to psychologically and emotionally renounce those childhood years of brain-washing and psychological manipulation by family and religion. I call myself an atheist and Humanist but maybe I am a bit of a fraud? I love the rationality and scientific basis of Humanism but I am drawn almost by instinct to the smells and bells and the sheer mystery and theatricality of Latin mass; I enjoy religious iconography and Renaissance art: I pass all this off with the sobriquet 'Cultural Catholicism'. But does any of this really matter? Should I just accept the conflict and stop thinking about that moment two years ago when I was lying on that hospital bed, thinking I was going to die and felt that 'twitch upon the thread'?



In Reply...

“I’d like to begin, if I may, with an apology for many of the experiences which you have shared in your letter, and which have brought me great sadness as I’ve read them. I’m sad, of course, that you faced the fear of corporal punishment and that you were brought up in a culture which you perceived to be dark and frightening.

Response to “A Twitch Upon a Thread” by Father Mark Hogan

I’m sad too that you are not alone in having experienced Catholic Christianity in such a negative way. In fact, the Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth to which I belong launched a collaboration in 2015 with St. Mary’s University, Twickenham called “Share Your Story”. The aim was to *listen in depth* to the voices and stories of some of those, such as yourself, who have left the Catholic Church. Our hope? That we might become more aware of our failings as a Church and of areas where our church culture needs to change and become more embracing.

Over 250 non-practising or former Catholics generously took the time to respond. You can read the results in the book *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return* by Stephen Bullivant, Catherine Knowles, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce and Bernadette Durcan. The reasons people give for leaving are “practical and experiential” (e.g. life circumstances, parochial concerns, spiritual and liturgical disillusionment, the attraction of other churches, negative experiences with clergy, response to the sexual abuse crisis in

the church) as well as “intellectual, doctrinal and moral”.

I also have a sadness that, from what you say in your letter, you were only ever offered a caricature of true Catholic Christianity. I’ve been blessed, I suppose, that my experience of growing up in a Catholic family is so distant and removed from the one which you painfully describe.

I went to a Catholic primary school, a Catholic secondary school and sixth form, I was in a Catholic cub pack and scout troop and I attended mass at least once a week. In all that time, I never experienced guilt and fear or darkness as a result of my faith, other than the gentle, healthy guilt which comes from knowing I’d done something wrong (such as taking too many sweets from the tin) but which led not to darkness and fear but to contrition and peace.

“Do not be afraid” is a phrase used frequently by Jesus himself and my faith has always helped me to overcome my fears rather than causing them. The goal of any authentic

Catholic education is a deeper communion with Christ and his Church – but this is something that can never be forced, for it is ultimately a communion of love. As is the case with a wedding vow, it requires a free, personal, mature decision. It is that communion of love which sets us free from fear and shines a light on our path.

I've been blessed too that throughout my Catholic education I was always encouraged to think critically and rationally. My main passion was for mathematics and the beautiful language it offers as a tool for the scientist. I continue to admire great scientific thinkers, and among them some wonderful Catholic minds, such as Fr Gregor Mendel, the "father of genetics"; Fr Georges Lemaitre, the "father of the big bang theory and modern cosmology". For me, one of the most important questions we can ever ask is, "Why?" The beauty of the question is that it is of infinite depth and I've learnt never to be satisfied with the answer, "It just is." When we feel like we've arrived at the end of the road, that's where the intellectual and spiritual fun can really begin.

Finally, at least for the purpose of this response, I was blessed that my experience of a Catholic upbringing was not life-denying but life-affirming. As well as parents who loved me dearly, I belonged to a whole network of people who showed me great love and care: teachers, priests, nuns, the parents of friends and the feeling and belief that God who loved me enough to give his life for me. Jesus once said, "I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance" and my experience has been one of wonder and awe at the beauty of the cosmos on every scale imaginable and the sense that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).

I don't wish to claim that my life, my experience of the Catholic Church, has been

without its thorns. If you've seen the TV series *Broken* it might give you some insight into how messy life as a Catholic can be. I do know that I'm far from perfect, although I also know that my many strays from the right path have come about at moments when I've shunned or ignored my Catholic faith and its teachings. Pope Francis summed it up well when asked for his true identity. "Who is Jorge Bergoglio?" "I am a sinner," he replied, "upon whom the Lord has turned his gaze." It is that gaze of mercy, that knowledge and experience of being loved which, on our better days, when we allow it, sets us free.

Beyond this sadness which I experienced when reading your letter, I always have hope. The very fact that I've generously been invited to make a response to your letter offers me hope of a deeper understanding of the values and virtues, alongside the weaknesses, which are to be found among humanists and Catholic Christians, not to mention those of other religions and belief systems. I have hope that we will find ways to focus less on duel and more on duty, as we seek together the qualities such as personal responsibility, justice, compassion, and love which our broken world so desperately needs. With every blessing,"

Fr Mark

Parish Priest, St Peters Church, Jewry Street, Winchester





Interviewing the 'Chair'

Our regular spotlight on local Humanist group leaders

Alan Montgomery, Chairman of Farnham Humanists, interviewed by David Brittain

It was a warm, sunny day when my wife Linda and I arrived at Alan and Linda Montgomery's residence in Fleet, near Farnham. We sat in the garden taking care to keep two metres apart, obeying the coronavirus social distancing rule. Alan looked happy and relaxed. "Anyone for croquet?" he asked. Neither I, nor my Linda, are known for playing croquet so we politely declined, but we did enjoy the garden. We were impressed by the croquet lawn, the sizeable vegetable patch, the pond that was large enough to justify a walkover bridge, and the wooded area at the rear that one might conceivably get lost in. "It's almost an acre in size overall" said Alan, "we are very lucky to have this to self-isolate in."

As everyone who knows Alan is aware, he was born in Northern Ireland. But not everyone knows he spent his earliest years in a village called Dunmurry. Aged ten, his idyllic childhood was interrupted by a move to rural Ballymacash, "the back of beyond" he says, for four years, after which the family moved back to Belfast.



"Though Presbyterian, my family and social circle were not so much religious, as patriotically Protestant. Northern Ireland was a society divided by a common religion" he says. Monty (his nickname) thought the differences were essentially political – republicans sought a united Ireland, and unionists wished to remain in the UK. Religion is just a label that each side uses. "Nevertheless my family were regular churchgoers ..." he says "... I attended church three times on a Sunday: Morning service, evening service, and Sunday school in the middle".

"We did not mix with any Catholics. Even when I joined the cubs and later the scouts, there were Protestant cubs and scouts and Catholic cubs and scouts - both were separate organisations" said Alan, with a touch of irony. Scouting would be a major interest in his life, and would absorb much of his leisure time for many years, although the religious aspect of the movement would affect him as a young man – and there will be more on that later.

"No man is much good unless he believes in God and obeys his laws. So every Scout should have a religion."

Robert Baden-Powell,
Scouting for Boys, 1908



Young Monty was a bright lad, and after attending Methodist College, Belfast, he went to Oxford to study physics at Lincoln College. The culture he experienced there (and at other places outside) made Northern Ireland feel very closed and backward by comparison. He was always sceptical about Christianity and for a while he flirted with more 'watered down' versions of Protestantism exemplified by the Bishop of Woolwich's book *"Honest to God"*. Alan still attended church occasionally, but now he was a young man, and his purpose was mostly in pursuit of girls, rather than saving his soul.



But the final straw came in 1963 when he noticed a newspaper billboard that announced *"Kennedy Assassinated"*. It would prove to be a milestone in Alan's personal philosophy. *"How on earth ..."* he thought *"... could a good God let this happen?"* It was at that moment that he decided he would no longer believe in God. He later discussed his new-found atheism with a college friend, who promptly introduced him to the Oxford University Humanist Society, where David Pollock happened to be a leading light. (David Pollock would later become President of the European Humanist Federation.)

Alan's rejection of religion actually came as a great relief; *"I no longer had to pretend to believe stories that I knew were impossible,"* he said, and indeed these days Alan feels that faith is positively dangerous because it requires one to bypass rational thinking, and eventually the faithful stop thinking for themselves.

Monty remained actively involved with the

scout movement throughout his youth, and whilst at Oxford he trained to be a scoutmaster. But when he qualified, his atheism became an issue. At the passing out parade, Oxford's County Commissioner required that he and fellow trainees reaffirm the scout promise. As you might expect, unhappy with the 'do my duty unto God' promise, Alan asked if he could leave out the God bit.

The reaction he got was unexpected to say the least, because it seemed to bring on a fit of apoplexy on the Commissioner. Such an apparently simple request seemed to cast poor Alan into the very devil, and after a short exchange (*"I pointed out that Buddhists did not have Gods, and the Scouts also seemed happy to accept Hindu gods with elephant heads"*) the Commissioner yelled into Monty's face in front of his peers. *"You are not fit to be a scout master!"* ... and that was the end of that.

Alan's future would prove interesting and insightful, and there isn't space here to go through it all in detail, but his career, his family life and his Humanism seems to have gone hand in hand. For his D. Phil from Sussex University, he researched particle physics and, as his research was at Rutherford Laboratory near Harwell, he moved to Oxford and continued to socialize with the University Scout and Guide Groups there. He would soon meet Linda at a barn dance, they would fall in love, and they married in September 1972, by which time Alan was working in Reading. After a year in Reading they moved to Stoke-on-Trent, and later rural Cheshire, where they lived happily for the following 10 years. At each move, Alan - who describes himself as a joiner by nature - joined the local Humanist group. Monty then worked for ICL in computer programming, but after the closure of one site, he had the chance to take voluntary redundancy, and the family moved south to the Thames Valley area. They settled in Fleet, where they currently live. *"I had a redundancy settlement, and we were just able to*

buy this house". And it was the equity in the house that guaranteed the bank loans that... allowed Alan and Linda to start their first IT company, Integral Solutions Limited, based in Basingstoke.

Fourteen years ago, Alan received an invitation to join the very first gathering of Farnham Humanists where he soon became a member of the committee. He has now been Chair of Farnham Humanists for several years. He is also treasurer of the South Central England Humanists Network (SCEHN) and he is working to revive Reading Humanists. "I have links with Reading through my work," he said, "and I don't feel like giving up on Reading Humanists. We nearly made it last time."

He is optimistic about the future. Monty knew I was going to ask him about how he saw the future of Humanism, and had discussed this with his wife. Linda felt that religion will continue to fade away in the UK, and one day it might disappear, but whether or not that turns out to be the case, there will always be a need for organised Humanism to provide the checks and balances needed to resist dogmatism, extremism and fundamentalism. Alan thinks that one danger for Humanists UK is being over-ambitious, spreading resources too thinly. Organized Humanism also has to guard against becoming over-prescriptive, as all the major religions did, though he appreciates the need to set standards of quality for its celebrants, school speakers and pastoral carers. He is also cautious about the fruits that dialogue with religions might bring. "Free and open dialogue is never a bad thing" he says, "and religious people can be our allies in achieving



many needed reforms. But we shouldn't expect many converts to Humanism out of this."

So what are the opportunities? Linda is excited about the formation of *Faith to Faithless* (a section within Humanists UK to help support people leaving high-control religions) and Alan is delighted that there are now active people in Northern Ireland willing to take Humanism forward, because, he says, "... if ever there was a community that needed Humanism, it's in my country of birth!"

... And with that, I closed the interview by thanking Alan and Linda for their hospitality, and Alan for his story. The final act was for Alan to pose for a couple of photos for Humanistically Speaking. "I don't do smiling for photos ..." he said.

The interview completed, and we were about to say our goodbyes, when Alan sniffed the clean, fresh air and reached for his croquet hammer. "But before you go ..." he said. "Anyone fancy a game of croquet now?"





Local Talent Focus

Malcolm Love

A local humanist, an artist, you might know him?



The Flautist, oil on canvas

Malcolm is a member of Brighton Humanists and lives with his partner, Maggie Hall, the group's Chair, in the village of Upper Beeding in West Sussex. He has been painting professionally for over fifty years, having graduated with a Fine Arts Degree from Reading University in the mid-1960s and completed a Master's Degree with research into drawing strategies in Art Education in the 1980s.

He has exhibited at a number of venues in London and the South East over the years, including the Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge University as well as teaching art in secondary, further and adult education and undertaking private tuition. His work is in private collections both here and abroad.

A range of his work, including sizes and prices, can be seen on his website, www.malcolmlove.com



The Kiosk at Brighton Pier, oil on canvas



The Smoking Amphora, oil on canvas

Shadows at Cucuron, oil on canvas

The Buoy on the Beach, oil on canvas

Are you a humanist with a talent?

If you are, and you are a member or associate of one of the groups highlighted on the map, then Humanistically Speaking will be happy to advertise your work to all of our 2,500 readers. And if you would like to contact Malcolm Love directly, please visit his page www.malcolmlove.com



Letters & Emails

Thank you for sending the August issue of *Humanistically Speaking* in which you ask for readers' opinions.

I was very sad when reading through my issue at not finding any comments about the Coronavirus Emergency Act 2020 which was pushed through Parliament in one day (something usually unheard of) which has gifted immense powers to our police force. Many of these draconian rules and regulations are contradictory in the extreme, including the 'modelling' on which they are based and the behaviour of those in high office.

I find it bizarre that now we are being forced to wear face coverings whilst in public places when at the height of the virus in February/March no one wore any face coverings at all, no one was prevented from entering the country, no one was prevented from entering a care home, and our hospitals and ambulances were emptied, leaving folk to die at home too afraid to trouble a health service set up to look after them. And we clapped for that service.

Yes, we could say the government was caught unawares but looking at the amount of planning that was put in place to enable businesses and shops to close down by handing out large amounts of money, including payments made to our own MPs, (£10,000 each just to stay home) I would say that much thought over a long period of time seems to be a more realistic picture of events.

Sandy Vine

Thank you for putting our Humanist Climate Action article into *Humanistically Speaking*. There were several interesting articles in the magazine, including the one on a safer form of nuclear power. With regard to us sending in regular articles from the Humanist Climate Action, even if it just about climate change in general, we will have to discuss it at our next meeting, but it seems to me that the answer should be "Yes".

Does the magazine represent the views of Humanists UK, or do you accept articles on the individual views of humanists even if not necessarily in line with Humanists UK thinking?

Cath Sutherland, Humanist Climate Action Group

I think the August edition of *Humanistically Speaking* will reassure many of the members of the Conservative Humanists group [affiliated with Humanists UK] that Humanism is for them too, given how you provide a range of perspectives on very controversial issues including, some people would assess, as being centre-right on the political spectrum. Very brave of you to do so in the current climate.

Anthony Lewis

'Humanistically Speaking' is separate from Humanists UK but it aims to be supportive of Humanists UK's aims and values. We recognise the fact that humanists have different and sometimes conflicting opinions on a range of issues and we seek to reflect that diversity of opinion within the bounds of respectful debate.



Letters & Emails

The volume of passion, hyperbole and inaccuracies in Penelope Mountford's pro-protest piece drowns out both fact and reason ('Without Protest There Can Be No Change' - August edition). It has yet to be decided in court whether George Floyd was murdered or that his death was a combination of the effects of illegal drugs and the policeman's knee on his neck and head. The initial autopsy 'revealed no physical findings that support a diagnosis of traumatic asphyxia or strangulation. Mr. Floyd had underlying health conditions including coronary artery disease and hypertensive heart disease. The combined effects of Mr. Floyd being restrained by the police, his underlying health conditions and any potential intoxicants in his system likely contributed to his death'.

Mountford writes that 'Violence is a powerful weapon and if the cause is righteous the end must justify the means.' 'Righteous' has strong overtones of religion – a curious word to be used by a humanist. As for a humanist to state, 'the end must justify the means' – this could have been taken out of *Das Kapital*, *Mein Kampf*, Mao's *Little Red Book*, or the BLM mission statement.

Mountford also writes that 'The system needs to be torn down and rebuilt.' OK, Penelope, here is a sheet of A4 paper. Start writing. If you are so confident with your assertion, show us your positive side. I imagine you are content to continue living in the UK, benefiting from all it offers – while denigrating its majority culture. Perhaps the nirvana of North Korea is more to your taste.

Aaron Darkwood, in the same issue, asks 'Is

racism a factor in the US right now?' Racism is just part of animal nature – and humans are animals. All animals are drawn to their own species, their own kind, their own families. And away from the alien. For millennia, wars between humans have been fought based on tribal differences, on cultural differences – whether between peoples of the same or different races. With sight being the most prominent of human senses, skin colour becomes the primary way of detecting one person from another – hence what is called 'racism'. Fail to adopt a common culture that transcends race, and there will be 'racism'. Because of the manner in which USA was created, 'racism' has been at its heart since its formation.

Eric Hayman

Do you print out Humanistically Speaking?



This magazine is set up for A5 style reading on a tablet or computer via PDF format. However, it has been mentioned that some readers print it out for reading.

Would you like an image-light, monochrome printer-friendly version so you can print at home? If so let us know.

Reply at the email address below putting **PRINTING** in the subject box.

Send your thoughts and opinions to
humanisticallyspeaking@gmail.com



Letters & Emails



*Rt. Hon. Maria Miller, MP
for Basingstoke, in
response to a letter from
David Brittain, Executive
Editor of Humanistically
Speaking*

You have asked me to comment on a number of issues and I will answer each point in turn.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a form of child abuse. It is a deeply harmful and unacceptable practice and I know the Government is working to ensure the perpetrators of this horrific crime are brought to justice.

Action was taken to significantly strengthen the law in 2015. This change was motivated by the need to improve protection for victims and those at risk, and to break down barriers to prosecution. I welcome the fact that the Government has introduced a new offence of failing to protect a girl from FGM, extended the reach of extra territorial offences, introduced lifelong anonymity for victims of FGM, introduced civil FGM Protection Orders and introduced a mandatory reporting duty for known cases in under 18s.

Last year saw the first landmark conviction at the Old Bailey where a woman was convicted of FGM and sentenced to 11 years in prison. FGM Protection Orders are granted by a court and are unique to individual cases. They offer a legal means to protect and safeguard victims and potential victims of FGM and contain conditions to protect these individuals.

I understand this can include surrendering a passport to prevent the person at risk from being taken abroad for FGM.

I welcome the fact that the work to tackle FGM is a key part of the cross-Government Violence Against Woman and Girls strategy. I have always been clear that protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims is of the utmost importance. I was glad to stand on a manifesto which pledged to continue the fight against the perpetrators of violence against women and girls and will continue to closely monitor the effectiveness of the 2015 change. I can assure you that neither I nor the Government have lost interest in this issue.

Conversion Therapy - The suggestion that being LGBT can be "cured" is both morally and medically wrong and the concept of conversion therapy has no place in our society. Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is not an illness to be treated or cured.

I am encouraged that this view is shared by the head of the NHS, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the UK Council for Psychotherapy, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and the British Medical Association. Each of these bodies have concluded that such therapy is unethical and potentially harmful to those with a non-heterosexual identity.

The Government Equalities' Office commissioned a large-scale LGBT survey in 2017. Sadly, 2 per cent of respondents to the national LGBT survey said they had undergone conversion therapy in an attempt to 'cure' them of being LGBT.



Letters & Emails

...continued from previous page

A further 5 per cent said they had been offered it. Unfortunately, in this survey, what conversion therapy entailed was not defined, so the results should be read with that caveat. Nor were the respondents asked whether or not the conversion therapy referred to in their answer was offered in the UK.

I welcome the firm commitment to preventing these activities from continuing. Led by colleagues in the Government Equalities Office, I understand the Government will consider all options to end promoting, offering or conducting conversion therapy. The main objective is to protect people who are vulnerable to harm or violence, whether that occurs in a medical, commercial or faith-based context. I am clear that this will not prevent LGBT people from seeking legitimate medical or spiritual support from their faith leader in the exploration of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

I am positive about the steps that have been made so far in the UK to achieve LGBT equality, and am confident that this good work will continue.

Marriage Law Reform - I know that the Government wants to reform marriage ceremonies to make sure that there is a simple, fair and consistent legal framework, so that people can have a wedding that is meaningful to them. What is also clear, is the importance of not embarking upon piecemeal reform, which may lead to inconsistencies between groups – for example non-religious belief organisations and religious belief organisations.

That is why the Government announced in June 2019 that the Law Commission will conduct a fundamental review of the law on how and where people can legally marry in England and Wales. As part of the project, the Law Commission will be considering how a scheme could include weddings conducted by non-religious belief organisations and independent celebrants and where weddings should be able to take place.

The Law Commission is currently preparing a consultation paper with provisional proposals for reform and questions for consultees and I would encourage you take part when the consultation goes live.

The Law Commission acknowledged that the prompt for their involvement had been the consultation on whether humanists and other non-religious belief organisations should be able to solemnize marriages. However, it said, while this was important, this was only one of many issues which should be considered and that it would be unfair to privilege non-religious belief organisations over religious groups: In particular, it would be very difficult to justify why the fewest restrictions should be applied to the newest category.

I welcome the fact that alongside the Law Commission review, Ministers are exploring the extent to which regulations governing approved premises could be reformed to allow outdoor locations for civil weddings and civil partnership ceremonies.

I hope you find this information of interest.

Best wishes, Rt. Hon. Maria Miller, Member of Parliament for Basingstoke



A day in the life...

of a Pastoral Support worker in Prisons

"Groups across the UK have positions where volunteers help represent Humanist interests in everyday places, or represent a sector in society within our own groups."

Interview with Martin Garrity, a member of the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network

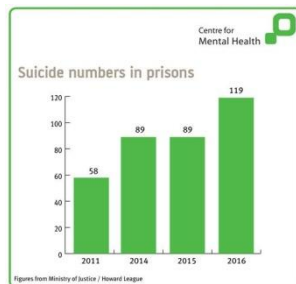


Describing my role in one sentence:

To provide pastoral care and support to prisoners and staff

Five key responsibilities in my role:

1. To hold one-to-one private conversations with prisoners about their spiritual, psychological and mental wellbeing
2. To provide prisoners with the opportunity to reflect on their lives and their spiritual needs
3. To communicate to prisoners news of a death in their close family and to support them through bereavement
4. To work with prisoners who are on suicide or self harm watch
5. To work with other members of the chaplaincy team from other faiths and with prison staff, healthcare, mental health, probation, offender management and reoffending teams



How did you find this role?

Humanists UK trained me to be a Non-Religious Pastoral Supporter. Once accredited, I started looking for a volunteer opportunity near to where I live. My local hospice wasn't interested in having a Humanist Chaplain on the team so I approached my local prison

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

I have a background in training and coaching leaders in business so I like doing one-to-one work and public speaking. I also have some skills at helping people suffering from stress or anxiety. Prison work seemed to be a natural development for me

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

I volunteer for an afternoon a week. It takes 10 minutes to get through all the security measures, draw a set of keys and walk to the chaplaincy centre. Once there, I sign in and go through the message book to see if my colleagues have taken any requests for my services. I also check the 'Deaths and Serious Illness' and Suicide Watch files to see if any prisoners with non-theist views or 'No Religion' on their documents need any support.

Once I've got a list together I walk to the wings and speak first to the staff there. I'll tell them I'm going to chat with Prisoner Bloggs and ask if there's anything I should know. Some officers have a detailed knowledge of a prisoners history. Others simply shrug their shoulders. Then it's into a private room with the prisoner.

The subjects we talk about vary widely. Sometimes I have to give bad news about a death in the family and to give bereavement support. Or it might be the anniversary of a death. Or a prisoner will be struggling with negative reflections on his life. Self harm is common in prisons so we might talk about that. And sometimes he simply welcomes the chance to chat.

If a prisoner is on Suicide Watch, I make an entry in his file to help officers know what I've heard. That write up also gets read at the next review of the prisoner's case.

As well as one-to-one work, I also run a Mindfulness and Meditation Group once a week for an hour or so with 8 prisoners. We work on training the mind to focus on breathing and staying calm.

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

Yes absolutely. Non-judgmental listening, ethics, counseling skills, understanding different worldviews, spiritual direction – all this is necessary to carry out this role.

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

- Listening to a prisoner say that he has no hope, nothing to live for and intends to take his own life is not easy
- Breaking bad news is also a challenge
- One or two chaplains from other faiths have been hostile to my arrival
- Although some prison staff try hard to support prisoners, some don't seem to care



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

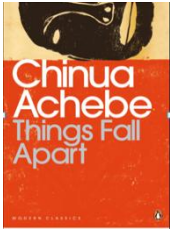
Even the challenging conversations carry their own reward, e.g. if a prisoner who last week said he was determined to end his life, says this week that he's feeling a little better. I love working with the chaplains from other faiths – I've learned from them all.



Tricia's Choices Book Club Corner

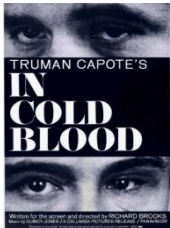


Tricia Wallis runs Farnham Humanists' book club. *Humanistically Speaking* has asked her to list books that in her opinion are a 'must read' for any reader over the next two months, and here is her choice.



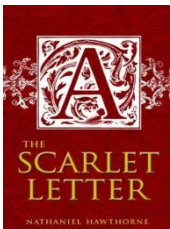
THINGS FALL APART (Chinua Achebe) (1958)

Set in Nigeria late 1800s. The tragic struggle of Okonkwo, a great warrior and tribal leader, who becomes overwhelmed and defeated by Christian missionaries and western values. A fascinating study in 'cultural relativism'.



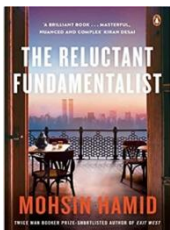
IN COLD BLOOD Truman Capote (1966)

A brilliant 'New Journalism' novel depicting the 1959 murders of a wealthy farming family in Kansas by two drifters. But who do you end up sympathising with? Compulsive and challenging.



THE SCARLET LETTER, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850)

Set in puritan Massachusetts 1642-1649. The story of Hester Prynne who conceives a child, after an adulterous affair, and is publically shamed by the enforced wearing of a large scarlet A. Hester struggles in the aftermath of this humiliation to create a life of repentance and dignity.



THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST Mohsin Hamid (2007)

A fascinating 'frame' story examining a non-western perspective of religious fundamentalism. A man called Changez tells a nervous American stranger about his love affair with an American woman and western values and his eventual abandonment of both...

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Ronnie Reflects



Young Humanists Editor **Ronnie Barr** reflects on a series of events over the summer which have had a profoundly negative impact on young people

To say that the past few months have had a massive impact on people in the UK would be a gross understatement.

Across the country, and indeed across the globe, people have been rushing to quarantine themselves with their families, some having lost their jobs and been left without a source of income, others having to isolate themselves where they may be subject to abuse. One group that stands out amongst all the commotion are the students. Schools and universities have been forced to resort to remote learning and while this has been successful in some regards it's certainly no long term solution. Not everyone has access to the resources they need to learn from home; they may have unreliable internet or no internet at all (a problem I know all too well!) meaning they can't attend lessons or they may not have the same level of support from family that others do to be home-schooled.

The physical impossibility of attending school has meant that the government cancelled exams for the year and while at first that may have seemed like a weight off students' shoulders this could not be further from the truth.

In the five months between exam cancellations being announced and final results being handed out the government had to come up with a new way for students to be assessed with plenty of time for this new system to be tested for reliability... and yet come results day everything that could have gone wrong did. An algorithm was created to predict the final grades for young people across the country; students were ranked in order of ability and students' results from previous years were used, with hardly any weighting towards the teachers' predicted grades and the students' previous marks. Throughout the five months there were repeated warnings of Ofqual that

were immediately brushed off until results were published, and all hell broke loose.

The government had hoped that the new algorithm would stop grade inflation and would be an accurate reflection of what students would have achieved had exams taken place. Instead, some subjects had half of students achieving A*s and As whilst others had their grades dramatically lowered. There was a mass outcry with claims that the algorithm had not been tested prior to results being given and that young people from rich, privately-educated backgrounds were being favoured above those from less affluent areas.

Although results were ultimately changed to match the centre-assessed grades it's been left to schools and universities to pick up the pieces. Many more students are now meeting their offers and the government has had to withdraw the cap on university places to ensure all can attend. However, not all universities are able to honour every offer that's been made. Universities only have so much campus space, onsite accommodation, and staff members to meet demand and the influx of students will put a strain on this.

This series of events over the past few months has understandably had a profoundly negative

impact on young people. There are those who feel left behind and unable to cope with remote learning. There are students who still feel hurt and angry after the uncertainty with their results. There are young people struggling with their mental health during lockdown but with far less support available to them. There are university students who feel forced to take a year out and that remote learning just isn't worth the tuition fees. As a young person and student myself I've seen it first-hand: friends being forced to stop mental health support because there's too much demand, fellow students waiting months for a response from tutors and other university staff.

Right now we need to be here for each other more than ever. We've worked hard to ensure that as many people as possible can cope during the lockdown and carry on normally but more still needs to be done. Maybe coming up with a new algorithm for calculating grades is a little above your skill level but taking the time to listen to and support your friends and family can make a world of difference.

EUROPEAN YOUNG HUMANIST MONTH

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