

# Ontario Humanist Society

# Newsletter

Summer 2011

Volume 1, Issue 4

## Quotable Humanists

Morality is doing what is right regardless of what we're told. Dogma is doing what we're told regardless of what is right.

- Elka Enola

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## Message From the President

### Summer Issue

Dear OHS members,

I am writing this message to OHS members and friends as I pack up 30 years of my life preparing to go west from the Town of Streetsville to the City of Hamilton. It isn't quite as far a journey as my ancestors took in 1907 when they migrated from Russia to Toronto. Nevertheless, the challenges seem as great to me as theirs must have to them in an earlier era. So what are the challenges for a 65-year-old woman in my circumstances? Broadly philosophical: making peace with the rigours of aging. From a practical perspective, the challenge is acknowledging the slow deterioration of capacities that result in the failure to meet obligations that were formerly a 'piece of cake.' What is lost is the wellspring of energy that once was taken-for-granted and what is found instead is a crisis of confidence in oneself. Hardly a fair trade, but nevertheless, my experience.

My concern is what the future holds going forward and I am

moving closer to my children so that they can manage the end result without having to dispose of my goods (a lifetime of clutter) as well as my last remains. The goods have gone to garage sales now. As to my demise, I have a plan: 'dying with dignity.' This is a euphemism that first surfaced with the hospice movement where it meant having excellent pain control so that one might live comfortably to the last moment. It has come to mean the choice to end one's own life with assisted suicide in the face of terminal illness, unbearable pain and the loss of oneself in dementia. The struggle for this right is playing out in three challenges now before the British Columbia courts led by the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association and the Farewell Foundation. Dying with Dignity Canada (DWD) worked closely with BCCL in the preparation of their case and appeared with the Farewell Foundation in B.C. Provincial Court DWD's interest in these cases to present the scope of interested parties.

OHS has an interest in supporting Dying with Dignity Canada as they challenge the

laws that constrain our choices in what is, in fact, a personal choice about our health and self-determination over our own bodies. In a recent letter to members, they quoted Sue Rodriguez who in a landmark case before the Supreme Court asked "Who owns my life?" She was denied the right to assisted suicide. Let us hope that the current cases have a better outcome in respect of our human rights. You can read about these cases on the DWD website: [www.dyingwithdignity.ca](http://www.dyingwithdignity.ca). Please think about joining them as a member. DWD also provides comfort and counselling to individuals and their families, who wish to plan ahead for the possibility of dementia or terminal illness.

Gail McCabe, PhD RSSW

President, Ontario Humanist Society

## Newsletter Team

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## Need to Contact OHS?

- Website: <http://ontariohumanists.ca/>
- Call: 1-877-343-7323
- E-mail: [info@ontariohumanists.ca](mailto:info@ontariohumanists.ca)

## Report on the AGM Forum

By Anne Goodman

In conjunction with this year's Annual General Meeting, the OHS co-hosted a public forum entitled, "Revolution 2011: Global Youth and International Trends, Human Rights, and the Impact of Social Media & Democratic Values". The other sponsoring organizations were InterChange: International Institute for Community-Based Peacebuilding ([www.interchange4peace.org](http://www.interchange4peace.org)) and the Transformative Learning Centre (TLC) (<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/tlc/>).

A panel of 4 young people was selected to give a range of views and perspectives on this

important and very relevant topic. The panel represented a diversity of international and Canadian voices. Anne Goodman, a member and officiant with OHS, and co-director of the TLC and President of InterChange, acted as moderator for the session. Each panelist spoke for about 5 minutes, and then had the opportunity to reflect on the remarks of the others. The session was then opened to the floor for questions and discussion.

All in all, there was a lively and wide-ranging discussion, covering topics such as: the role of women; unity among religious

groups; a welcome sense of national pride, hope; the historical context behind the revolutionary moments; the high expectations the risings have created and the need to build sustainable peace over the long term; the key role of education and its role in democracy; identity issues; the potential of successes in North Africa to inspire people in other politically oppressive countries; the role of internet technology and social media; and some of the similarities, differences, hope and opportunities in different parts of the world, including Canada.

## Contacting the OHS Board of Directors

By Bob Hope

OHS was founded with the principle of transparency and membership communication. To

make sure our members can easily communicate with their Board of Directors, OHS now has all mail sent to [info@ontariohumanists.ca](mailto:info@ontariohumanists.ca), first being screened by our Board

Secretary, Ruth Henrich. Any mail sent to the Board's attention will be presented to our Board at their next planned meeting.

## Ethical Actions

By Matthew Bin

With the provincial election quickly approaching, it's important that we humanists not only educate ourselves on the issues and platforms that each party represents, but also bring those issues forward to others, both within OHS and beyond.

The OHS Ethical Actions Committee continues to disseminate information on issues that humanists need to be aware of. Stories of note, often needing the

urgent support of humanists, are posted regularly on the OHS website blog -- if you haven't checked it out yet, go to [ontariohumanists.ca](http://ontariohumanists.ca) to read it, and subscribe to updates by e-mail or in your blog reader. We are also starting to post issues on our new OHS group and page on Facebook.

But we need your help in finding issues that are important to humanists, whether on the local, provincial, or international level. Did you recently have an interesting speaker or discussion group about

issues that might be coming up in the election? Are there resources you would like to share with other groups to aid their discussions in lobbying? If you have something that other humanists need to be aware of, please send a link to: [ethicalconcerns@ontariohumanists.ca](mailto:ethicalconcerns@ontariohumanists.ca) We will be happy to promote it to other humanists through the blog.

## Updates

### OHS Ceremonies Program Updates

By Mary Beaty

We are pleased to announce that Bryce Healey has completed the final stages of approval as an officiant, and has joined the Humanist Officiant group at OHS. Bryce will be serving the Ottawa area. This brings our compliment of licensed OHS officiants to 16. We continue to serve a wide area of Ontario, from the Golden Horseshoe, to Peel, Grey Bruce, Kitchener-Waterloo, London,

Owen Sound and Red Bay, Muskoka, Lanark and Ottawa. We welcome further enquires from Humanists who are interested in our program. Please see the OHS website under "Becoming an OHS Officiant" for further information.

In the spirit of Humanist cooperation, we have an active online discussion group, and we are building online resources for our

officiants on the OHS website, including a repository of Humanist ceremonies for weddings, baby-namings, memorial services and other occasions, so that we can further share our knowledge and skills.

## Book Review

### You're Not As Crazy As I Think: Dialogue in a World of Loud Voices and Hardened Opinions by Randal Rauser

By Erroll Treslan

For those interested in ratcheting down the enmity between Christian conservatism and secular humanism, I commend the recently published *You're Not as Crazy as I Think* (available at [www.amazon.ca](http://www.amazon.ca)). The author, Randal Rauser is an engaging and bright theology professor at Taylor Seminary in Edmonton. Rauser caught my attention because he is just as comfortable lecturing to colleagues such as William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga at the Evangelical Theological Society as he is skewering Calvinists on his entertaining blog: [www.randalrauser.com](http://www.randalrauser.com).

The title says it all as Rauser pleads his case for the pursuit of truth over dogma and entrenched

opinions. In a pleasantly accessible manner, he explains how everyone needs to overcome their confirmation biases (i.e. deferring to presently held beliefs and unfairly discriminating against evidence that may rebut those beliefs). His overriding theme is that those we disagree with rarely arrive at their diametrically opposed positions because they are either cognitively or morally deficient. He then embarks on the heretical (at least from the perspective of his constituent audience) exercise of examining the beliefs of liberal Christians, evolutionists, animal-rights activists and (Thor forbid) atheists in order to press his case that any of these worldviews can be reasonably defended.

Make no mistake, Rauser is a Christian apologist and wedded to a system of beliefs that some may consider delusional. But there's the rub - he's not delusional. He's smart, impassioned and, most importantly, he's a breath of fresh air in a world of loud voices and hardened opinions.

Erroll Treslan is a litigation lawyer, a member of the Grey-Bruce Humanist Association and Irreligiosity columnist for the Owen Sound Sun Times.

### Reviewers Wanted!

Have you read a book or seen a movie that would be of interest to other humanists? Let us know! We feature short reviews by our members every month.

Send your ideas or submissions to: [terri@rbhope.ca](mailto:terri@rbhope.ca).

## Profile of a Humanist: Ronald de Sousa - Part Two

By Cortney Pasternak

In this second part of a two-part interview, we get to know Dr. Ronald (Ronnie) de Sousa. Dr. de Sousa is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto.

If there is no god and no afterlife, what gives life meaning?

Meaning can only be created by our own individual mix of chance and choice. That meaning matters as much as anything should: there is no such thing as "cosmic meaning", and the absence of cosmic meaning matters not at all.

The idea that God, or an afterlife, can give our earthly life meaning is an absurdity and a cruel delusion. It has always been encouraged by shamans, priests, tyrants, protecting the power their supposed knowledge confers over the ignorant masses. The idea of the afterlife being a source of meaning is doubly offensive.

First, because if we have eternity before us, nothing can have any meaning at all. Eternity is time enough to do absolutely anything and absolutely everything. Thus nothing, in the context of eternity, can seem more important than anything else. Nothing is urgent anyway, since there are no longer any life or death choices to be made, and for the rest, well, nothing ever needs to be sacrificed to anything else. And what gives life meaning is the consciousness that some choices matter, and that some options must be sacrificed absolutely even if they are regretted.

Secondly, looking to the afterlife for the meaning of this one implies that in itself, this life has no meaning. It is merely instrumental. Even a religious mind can easily see how crass that is: for it implies that God's entire creation is actually intrinsically worthless. It is only an instrument, stepping stone to something else that is of value. That God might be a source of value and meaning is also a sad, demeaning thought. For it implies that the point of my life is, much like that of a slave's life, outside me altogether, lying in the aims, purposes, and incomprehensible

designs of a completely different and alien being, one variously and contradictorily described as intelligibly perfect, and as perfectly inscrutable and unknowable. There is no meaning in life as such: objectively, a human being's life has no more meaning than an ant's or an elephant's. In every individual life, meaning comes from the emotional, social, and intellectual passions that rule that particular life. Our passions, in fact, are what give our lives meaning.

With the recent major political changes taking place in parts of North Africa and the Middle East, how might a Humanist understand how believers use their belief to harness that kind of social power?

I don't know: that is a vast question that is quite beyond my competence. But I strongly suspect that the real force responsible for both the good and the evil that religion has been praised or blamed for throughout history has really nothing to do with religious belief as such. The effective causal factor is tribal or group fervor. Religious dogmas are only, as it were, passwords used by members of one tribe to identify one another in contradistinction to aliens. All religions are correct in this one belief: that all the other religions are irrational superstitions. According to Scott Atran, an anthropologist who has made a deep study of suicide terrorists, such people are motivated not by religious fanaticism and promises of an afterlife in the company of 70 virgins, but by the sort of solidarity that binds football teams and fraternities. In other words, the effective political impact of religion is due to their social binding function, not to any particular content of the dogmas. This explains, incidentally, why the savagery of religious wars and the conviction with which they are fought on all sides is completely independent of what each sect believes. If that is true, then religious belief matters only indirectly: as just one kind of glue that can make masses cohere and move them to behave like crowds rather than like self-interested individuals.

If there is one issue most pressing to Humanists in 2011, what might that be?

Most humanists are not so much interested in denying God as in promoting reason. This proves extraordinarily difficult, because the power of religion is emotional, and people are generally very bad at reasoning about their emotions. In fact, people are not very good at reasoning of any kind when the conclusion of an argument contradicts their prior convictions. Unfortunately, it seems that our educational system, far from promoting critical thinking, is largely designed to suppress it. Besides swallowing the absurdities of religious dogma, children are expected to pretend belief in all kinds of lies: that their parents always know best; that marijuana is worse for you than jail; that young people wouldn't have sex with one another or with older people unless they were "abused", that monogamy is a normal human condition. So why not also believe, or pretend to believe, that a man who is his own father chooses to subject himself to torture in order to relieve you of the guilt resulting from the actions of someone else several thousand years ago, who got caught in a sordid case of entrapment by a sadistic, power-crazed imaginary being?

The most important concern of a Humanist, then, should be early education in critical thinking. An excellent practical step is one that has long been recommended by the philosopher Daniel Dennett, and which has actually been recently put into practice in Québec: and that is that all children should be given a comprehensive religious education, in the sense of learning about all the main religions that have battled one another in the world. Such knowledge would enable children to become aware of the arbitrariness and variety of religious beliefs, and make it less likely that they should allow themselves to be indoctrinated into one set of irrational beliefs simply on the ground that everybody around them repeats them as if they were true. The likely effectiveness of such a policy is well attested by the unsurprising fact that the Catholic church has vigorously objected to this new proposal for descriptive religious instruction. Clearly mere access to such knowledge would deprive them, as well as any other single dominant religion in any particular location, from benefiting from their position as the only game in town.