

Manitoba Humanist

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Barrie Webster, President (and guest editor for this issue)

January 14, 2006 Meeting

Viscount Gort Hotel, Route 90 and Portage Ave.

5:30 pm meet & greet for 6:00 dinner

Discussion topic: "Coming Out as a Humanist"

Phil Veldhuis – resource person

In Memory of Dennis Ousey

By Barrie Webster

Dennis Ousey died of brain cancer on Friday, December 16, 2005. He had been seriously ill for just under three weeks. His discomfort, more than anyone would wish, was relatively short. We hoped against hope that there would be a treatment that would restore him to his usual ebullient good health, but it was not to be.

Dennis and Catherine joined the Humanist Association of Manitoba in 2002. It is hard to speak of one of them without speaking of the other.

It was not long before they each began to contribute to making HAM run efficiently (and joined the executive in 2003). We came to depend on their enthusiasm in the smooth running of HAM. In 2004, Catherine became Secretary and Librarian, and subsequently, Dennis became the Editor of the newsletter. The newsletter was already in fine form (and he came to the job partly by default), but it was not long before his somewhat blustery, creative enthusiasm began to take its effect. The *Manitoba Humanist* name was his and he began to enjoy putting it together and getting it out to the membership each month.

Dennis was always there to help make sure that things proceeded smoothly. In early 2004, it

became necessary to relocate the venue for meetings and Dennis volunteered and spent hours finding the right place with the right meal structure for us. That was how we began to meet at the Viscount Gort Hotel. Before long, the hotel got used to our needs and we began to hold our executive meetings there, too. The pattern worked so well that, when Dennis was ready to pass on the job of making the monthly arrangements, there was a tradition to carry on, and it did.

It was during the early part of 2004 that Stefan Bourrier and friends joined HAM and Dennis took Stef under his wing. HAM also benefited from this relationship and the proportion of younger people in HAM blossomed. Through Meetup meetings, Dennis and Stef acted as the nucleus to attract others who would find a home in HAM.

Dennis was a big teddy bear of a man and made it his business to provide support to others who were in need of assistance. It is tough to realize that he will no longer be there to provide that support.

We will miss Dennis terribly, and will remember him for all of the things he meant to us. We will grieve and remember the good times that he, with Catherine, brought to us.

Coming Out as a Humanist

By Barrie Webster

At the November meeting, our guest speaker, Phil Veldhuis, philosopher (and beekeeper), spoke on the topic, "What do you say after you say that you are an atheist?" The talk was received with enthusiasm and the discussion was lively.

On January 14, we will be extending the discussion to the whole area of Coming Out as a Humanist. Many of us encounter colleagues every day who are of different beliefs and it is sometimes a difficult judgment call as to whether to reveal our own beliefs and non-belief.

In November, Mr. Veldhuis laid down the foundation for our January discussion by telling us that there were three responses to be expected from people of religion who had just been told that the person they were talking to was an atheist.

1. "If you don't believe, how can you have any foundation for morality?"
2. "If you don't believe in God, what gives your life meaning?"
3. "If you don't believe in God, how can you have a spiritual life?"

For a reminder about the philosopher's responses to these questions, see the December newsletter. To extend the application of the answers and to learn pointers on becoming more comfortable socially with your Humanism (and/or atheism), come and participate in the discussion on Saturday, January 14. Mr. Veldhuis has agreed to return and help us through the rough spots as we deal with this highly relevant issue for Humanists who want to live in harmony with their neighbours.

Why I'm Happy I Evolved

By Olivia Judson

If chimpanzees observed New Year's Day, they would have much to reflect on. In 2005, they joined humans, chickens and mosquitoes, as well as less famous occupants of the planet, on an exclusive but growing list: organisms whose complete genomes have been sequenced.

What would they make of this news, I wonder? Perhaps they would resent the genetic evidence that they are related to us. Or perhaps they would, as I do, revel in being part of the immensity of nature and a product of evolution, the same process that gave rise to dinosaurs, bread molds and myriad organisms too wacky to invent.

Organisms like the sea slug *Elysia chlorotica*. This animal not only looks like a leaf, but it also acts like one, making energy from the sun. Its secret? When it eats algae, it extracts the chloroplasts, the tiny entities that plants and algae use to manufacture energy from sunlight, and shunts them into special cells beneath its skin. The chloroplasts continue to function; the slug thus becomes able to live on a diet composed only of sunbeams.

Still more fabulous is the bacterium *Brocadia anammoxidans*. It blithely makes a substance that to most organisms is a lethal poison - namely, hydrazine. That's rocket fuel. And then there's the

wasp *Cotesia congregata*. She injects her eggs into the bodies of caterpillars. As she does so, she also injects a virus that disables the caterpillar's immune system and prevents it from attacking the eggs. When the eggs hatch, the larvae eat the caterpillar alive.

It's hard not to have an insatiable interest in organisms like these, to be enthralled by the strangeness, the complexity, the breathtaking variety of nature.

Just think: the Indus River dolphin doesn't sleep as you or I do, or indeed as most mammals, for several hours at once. Instead, it takes micro sleeps, naps that last for a few seconds, like a driver dozing at the wheel.

Or consider this: a few days after its conception, a pig embryo has become a filament that is about a yard long.

Or: the single-celled parasite that causes malaria is descended from algae. We know this because it carries within itself the remnants of a chloroplast.

It's not that I have a fetish for obscure facts. It's that small facts add up to big pictures. For although Mother Nature's infinite variety seems

incomprehensible at first, it is not. The forces of nature are not random; often, they are strongly predictable.

For example, if you were to discover a new species and you told me that the male is much bigger than the female, I would tell you what the mating system is likely to be: males fight each other for access to females. Or if you discover that the male's testicles make up a large part of his weight, I can tell you that the females in his species consort with several males at a time.

Suppose you find that a particular bacterium lives exclusively in the gullets of leeches and helps them digest blood. Then I can tell you how that bacterium's genome is likely to differ from those of its free-living cousins; among other changes, the genome will be smaller, and it will have lost sets of genes that are helpful for living free but useless for living inside another being.

Because a cell is a kind of factory that produces proteins, and because proteins can have a variety of components, some of which are cheaper to synthesize than others, you might expect that proteins that are mass-produced are made from cheaper components than proteins that are constructed only occasionally. And you'd be right.

The patterns are everywhere. Mammals that feed on ants and termites have typically evolved long, thin noses and long, sticky tongues. A virus that is generally passed from mother to child will tend to make its host less sick than one that readily jumps from one host to another via a cough or a sneeze.

When I was in school, I learned none of this. Biology was a subject that seemed as exciting as a

clump of cotton wool. It was a dreary exercise in the memorization and regurgitation of apparently unconnected facts. Only later did I learn about evolution and how it transforms biology from that mass of cotton wool into a magnificent tapestry, a tapestry we can contemplate and begin to understand.

Some people want to think of humans as the product of a special creation, separate from other living things. I am not among them; I am glad it is not so. I am proud to be part of the riot of nature, to know that the same forces that produced me also produced bees, giant ferns and microbes that live at the bottom of the sea.

For me, the knowledge that we evolved is a source of solace and hope. I find it a relief that plagues and cancers and wasp larvae that eat caterpillars alive are the result of the impartial - and comprehensible - forces of evolution rather than the caprices of a deity.

More than that, in viewing ourselves as one species out of hundreds of millions, we become more remarkable, not less so. No other animal that I have heard of can live so peaceably in such close quarters with so many individuals that are unrelated. No other animal routinely bothers to help the sick and the dying, or tries to save those hurt in an earthquake or flood.

Which is not to say that we are all we might wish to be. But in putting ourselves into our place in nature, in comparing ourselves with other species, we have a real hope of reaching a better understanding, and appreciation, of ourselves.

Olivia Judson is an evolutionary biologist at Imperial College, London. This op-ed article, New York Times, Jan. 1, 2006.

Joke?

George Bernard Shaw supplied complimentary tickets to Winston Churchill with the following note: "I am enclosing two tickets to the first night of my new play. Bring a friend... if you have one." The reply: "Cannot possibly attend first night. Will attend second... if there is one."