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Manitoba Humanist

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President: Barrie
Webster

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Editor: Catherine Ousey

Upcoming events

HAM Monthly Meeting
Saturday November 18 at 5:30 PM

The Viscount Gort Hotel
1670 Portage Ave.

Dinner may be ordered from the coffee shop menu

Speaker: Pat Frain

Topic: Compassionate Care at HSC

Winter Solstice Party

Saturday, December 9

4:30 PM

The Viscount Gort Hotel
1670 Portage Ave.

More info in the next newsletter
Mark your calendars!

Members tackle important issue

At the October Monthly meeting, members of the Humanist Association of Manitoba heard a talk by Ivan Pokus on the topic of Religious Exercises in the Public Schools.

He informed the meeting about his involvement in the case of Chris Tait, a high school student who refused to stand up for the Lord's Prayer at his school. That case resulted in some changes to the Manitoba Public Schools Act and to Department of Education regulations.

In spite of the changes that made it illegal to conduct religious exercises during the school day, many schools in Manitoba continue to hold religious exercises.

A recent case in Garden Valley School Division has demonstrated that some schools are not obeying the laws and regulations. This case involved a high school in which the administration encouraged the parents to support a petition to include religious exercises in the opening exercises of the school day. This is clearly against Dept. of Education regulations. Such petitions must be solely created and circulated by parents. It is also a violation of the regulations to conduct such religious exercises during the school day, a situation that has been confirmed to exist in several Manitoba public

schools.

Another recent case involved a substitute teacher who was vocal against religious exercises in the schools.

Members heard about unsuccessful attempts by HAM to have the Manitoba Human Rights Commission take up the fight against religion in public schools. HAM executive members who met with Human Rights investigators were told that nothing could be done unless an individual was willing to be the complainant in a specific case.

Mr. Pokus also informed the members about a meeting with a senior official of the Department of Education. The Department appears unwilling to hold the school divisions accountable for their non-compliance with the regulations.

Mr. Pokus told the meeting that he was hoping to persuade HAM to support him in his plan to sue the government of Manitoba and the Department of Education for not forcing schools to obey the laws.

HAM members raised many questions about this issue. Would HAM be expected to provide financial support to the proposed lawsuit? How

would support for such a suit affect our charitable status? Would individual members of HAM be subjected to invasions of privacy or threats? Might some HAM members' jobs be at risk?

HAM's treasurer informed us that we are permitted to participate in action without jeopardizing our charitable status as long as we don't support or attack a political party. The answers to other questions were unclear.

A resolution to create a committee to discuss the issue was passed unanimously. Member Ivan Pokus volunteered to be on the committee. He also told us that he will contact Chris Tait, who is now a lawyer, to discuss possible actions.

HAM president, Barrie Webster, has issued a call to members to get involved. "We need more people on the committee," he said. "Anyone interested in this very important issue is urged to contact myself or Mr. Pokus."

To email Barrie Webster: bwebster@mb.humanists.ca

To email Ivan Pokus: ipokus@shaw.ca

"...some schools are not obeying the laws and regulations."

HAM executive passes newsletter policy

At their October meeting, the Executive of HAM passed a resolution accepting a new policy on the newsletter.

Humanist Association of
Manitoba Newsletter
Policy

The Humanist Association believes in Freedom of Speech.

The primary purpose of the newsletter is to inform the membership and to provide a forum for the expression of humanist opinion. Diversity of opinion will be encouraged.

The secondary purpose of the newsletter is to promote humanism and publicize a humanist point of view to other humanists and non-members.

The task of the newsletter editor is to publish news and opinion articles with editing for the consideration of space and copyediting.

All HAM members will be entitled to receive the newsletter, by electronic transfer where possible. Any member who requests a paper copy by Canada Post will receive one. Non-

members may request an electronic copy. Prospective members without electronic access may be sent a paper issue by mail. The editor may decide to send copies to anyone if it is in HAM's interest.

New Books in the HAM library

Intelligent Thought: Science Versus the Intelligent Design Movement
John Brockman

Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought
Pascal Boyer

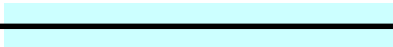
Time, Love, Memory: A Great Biologist and His Quest For The Origins of Behaviour
Jonathan Weiner

Why Darwin Matters
Michael Shermer

Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless
Steve Salerno

Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity: Get Out The Shovel
John Stossel

These and other books are available to be borrowed at monthly members' meetings.



Member Profile: Heather McDonnell



If you know Heather McDonnell's email pseudonym is "vetgirl" you can probably guess what she does for a living. She is a veterinarian working at the McRae Animal Hospital. She has always loved animals, had many pets as a child and now helps other people care for their pets.

Born in Winnipeg into a small family, (she only has one brother), she attended Royal School, Charleswood Junior High, and Oak Park. Her post-secondary education was at the University of Manitoba, where she earned a degree in agriculture as a pre-requisite to her veterinarian training at the University of Saskatchewan. She attributes at least some of her motivation to her mother's job.

As a nurse, Heather's mother provided the role model of a caregiver.

Heather still has many pets: two rabbits named Scooter and Pedro, 3 birds and some fish. She shares the pets and a home with two roommates.

Heather says the best part of her job is, "...educating people. I like to make a difference in the long term about helping people care for their animals."

If she could change one thing about her job, she would create a system of subsidized health care for pets.

"After all, research shows that pets improve the health of their owners," she says. "I often can't give the care to animals that I would like to, because the

owner can't always afford it."

Heather came to Ham when her friend, Stefan Bourrier, invited her to a HAM meeting.

"I realized I've always been a Humanist, so it was natural to join HAM," Heather states. She comes from a family that values thoughtfulness and doesn't support dogma. "My parents always encouraged their children to make up their own minds about religion. They told us we could decide for ourselves when we were eighteen."

Heather has been involved with the Outreach committee and has agreed to run for the job of secretary at the AGM.

Book review

Title: *The Ethical Imagination: Journeys of the Human Spirit*
Author: Margaret Somerville
Publisher: House of Anansi Press, 270 pages, \$18.95
Ethics the Way Nature Intended
By Arthur Schafer

Margaret Somerville doesn't do wishy-washy. It's no surprise, therefore, that this book – the CBC-radio Massey Lectures for 2006 – is chock-a-block with sharp-edged opinions.

A sampler. Somerville is opposed to gay marriage. She wants abortion back in the Criminal Code. Neither single people nor homosexual couples should be permitted to adopt children. Embryonic stem cell research and therapy should be banned. Euthanasia and physician assisted suicide are inherently wrong. She opposes technologies which would dramatically extend the length of time we live and she's against the use of modern genetics to enhance the intelligence of our children.

This package of views is fairly standard for someone who is, like Somerville, anchored in Catholic natural law tradition. It also corresponds closely to the prescriptions favoured by "Bible Belt" Protestantism.

In an effort to persuade us of the correctness of her views, Somerville adopts what she calls a "secular-sacred" moral framework. Her declared goal is to define a way of doing ethics which will appeal to almost everyone, thereby producing "a shared ethics".

The methodology she champions works something like this. Begin with the assumption that we live in a harmonious universe. God or Nature has things under control and we will only create chaos if we disturb the natural order. Our job as human beings is to understand our place in the grand scheme and then keep to it. Once we understand "where we fit in the cosmos" we will understand the "meaning of life".

Evolutionary biologists, of course, tell a somewhat different story: The universe consists of atoms bouncing around in the void, and it is only through a process of natural selection and genetic mutation, *not* divine planning or "intelligent design", that order makes its appearance. Accordingly, if we accept the findings of biological science then knowing what the world is like does not tell us automatically how the world ought to be. Indeed, one doesn't need to be a Darwinian to recognize that malarial mosquitoes and devastating earthquakes, though part of nature, are scarcely carriers of inherent goodness.

To see what's wrong with Somerville's "secular-sacred" ethics a bit of historical perspective will assist. Throughout the medieval period most Europeans were confident that the divine right of Kings was an absolute principle of nature. Slavery was "seen" as the natural condition of Black people, and

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subordination of women to men was "recognized" as exactly what nature intended. That is, appeals to the sanctity of nature, like appeals to the will of God, can be made to yield any conclusion that dominant groups wish to defend.

Somerville's argument that same-sex couples should be denied the right to marry - because they do not represent "a naturally, inherently procreative relationship" - would lead us, by parity of reasoning, to deny marriage to opposite sex couples who are infertile, or to couples who intend to remain childless. Somerville's anti-gay-marriage argument is also dangerous because it puts us on a slippery slope. Somerville herself favours "civil unions" for gays, but religious fundamentalists, in both Canada and the USA, having labeled homosexuality as

"unnatural" then use this label to justify the criminalization of all homosexual conduct. Small "l" liberals might agree with conservatives that the vagina is, sexually-speaking, the "natural" place for penis-insertion; but, if consenting adults wish to explore other orifices then where's the harm? Pierre Trudeau, himself a believing Catholic, made precisely this point when, as Justice Minister (in 1967), he eliminated Canada's sodomy law, arguing that "[t]he state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation".

Although Somerville's book defends many highly illiberal positions and offers a creaky and confused ethics to guide our thinking, it also offers a number of points on which liberal and conservative moralists should be able to agree. For example,

she understands that marketplace forces and the greedy materialism they promote can easily lead to empty lives for the winners and terrible oppression for the losers. She also understands that if we are to flourish as a species we must develop a much stronger sense of community and social justice.

What Somerville doesn't understand is that ethics is about making the world a less terrible place for humans and other sentient creatures. It's not about keeping everything in its ordained place.

*Arthur Schafer is
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for Professional and
Applied Ethics and a
professor of philosophy
at the University of
Manitoba.*

Seen on a button at the HAC Conference: Any book worth banning is a book worth reading.