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Upcoming events

Humanist Association of Manitoba

Winter Solstice Party Saturday, December 22, 2007

Starts at 4:30 PM. Ends no later than 9:00 PM
Viscount Gort Hotel
1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Everyone Welcome

Dinner may be ordered from the coffee shop menu

Entertainment provided by the Village Green Morris Men dancers
Plus...games, fun and prizes!

Charity of choice: The Sexuality Education Resource Centre
(A collection for our charity will be taken at the party.
Tax receipts are available)

WISHING YOU A SAFE AND
HAPPY HOLIDAY SEASON

Coming Soon
Humanist Association of Manitoba

Annual General Meeting
Saturday, January 12, 2008 at 4:00 PM

After Dinner Speaker: Jim Clark
Topic: Cultural Threats to a Rational Worldview

Mark your calendars!

October Meeting - Ethics and Evolving Better People

If the same drug that substantially improved memory in persons with Alzheimer's, enhanced your memory by a factor of 10, would you be signing up for it? This question, and several others, were posed to us by Dr. Arthur Schafer from the Centre for Professional Ethics at the University of Manitoba.

Most people would agree that if Human Growth Hormone, administered to a child with dwarfism, could increase that child's height, they would have no problem agreeing with that application. But what if that child happened to be born to two people who were just short, or even of average height? According to Prof. Schafer, studies have shown that taller individuals generally accrue societal advantages that may be denied to those who are shorter in stature. Most parents would certainly want their offspring to have every advantage in life.

And especially, what if these new technologies were only available to those who could afford the hefty price? Most of these advances would be extremely expensive, especially at first. Would it only increase the already-large gap between rich and poor? Canada is nothing if not a society which values equal opportunity. Would that not mean that some would have even more of an unfair advantage over others?

Professor Schafer's talk generated much discussion and thought. Those in attendance asked many questions, because most of us had strong opinions about the topics discussed.

One bit of information that I particularly thought was noteworthy was that Botox is now a million-dollar industry here in Canada. And it's not just women of a "certain age" (let's say over 50), who are undergoing this procedure, but those in their 30's, and even their 20's.



Professor Schafer (left) with HAM president Barrie Webster

Professor Schafer ultimately made the point that some of the more traditional arguments against technology (such as we're "playing god") may no longer hold much sway. Instead, he suggested that two main objections would be the aforementioned violation of the 'equality of opportunity' that we consider part of Canadian society, as well as the long term safety of these technologies. Since most of them seem to be pharmaceutically based, the question may be whether or not these drugs are truly safe in the long term, especially since the scientists who research these drugs are in the employ of the drug companies. (Vioxx, anyone?)

In my mind, all of these opportunities for self-modification and "improvement" raise the greater question of why can't we accept ourselves just the way we are? Our strengths reside in our uniqueness, and appreciating the different gifts we all possess. The world would be a poorer place if we were all cookie-cutter copies of each other. With all of these opportunities to make ourselves smarter, or more attractive, or taller -- none of these options would make us "morally" enhanced. Instead of ironing out facial wrinkles, wouldn't it be nice if there was a pill to make us more
(Continued next page)

Ethics (Continued from page 2)

confident, or kinder or more compassionate?

Professor Schafer cited the following works as further reading for those interested in the topic:

- The Case Against Perfection, by Michael J. Sandel
- Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People, by John Harris

Thank you, Professor Schafer for an engaging and provocative evening that was enjoyed by all present.

UPDATE: The books mentioned in this article have just been added to the HAM library. They'll be available to sign out at the Winter Solstice party.

Walking with Dinosaurs

A few weeks ago, I watched dinosaurs in 3D at the Imax theatre. Last Friday evening, I saw dinosaurs "live" and in person at the "Walking with Dinosaurs" show at the MTS Centre. I have to admit, I was overwhelmed by the experience, and almost moved to tears.

Not since "Jurassic Park" burst on the scene in late 80's, with its premise of somehow bringing these magnificent beasts back to life, have I been struck so deeply by the wonder of creation. And by creation, I do mean the evolution that occurred on this planet over the vast reaches of time. It hardly seems possible that these animals thrived for over 160 million years.

Despite the vast expanse of 65 million years or so that separate us, dedicated paleontologists have made enormous advances in our understanding and knowledge. From fossil remnants (among other things), science has helped us learn everything from what these creatures ate for lunch, to whether or not they cared for their young.

When I think of the countless generations and the miniscule (but cumulative) changes that occurred over vast

stretches of time, it helps me to realize that every living thing on this planet is connected, and we share a common bond that unites us all at the deepest (molecular) level.

My greatest pleasure was hearing small children around me recognize these beasts, and knowing that another generation was being introduced to one of the greatest wonders we can experience.

The best part is that dinosaurs really haven't disappeared – they are around us every day in their distant, distant descendants – the birds.



Family resemblance? A modern day Shoebill stork (left) and a "terror bird" (a phorusrhacid) from roughly 15 million years ago

Holiday Celebrations

It seems no matter who we are or what our individual beliefs, we all like to have a mid-winter celebration. We here at HAM celebrate the Winter Solstice, in part because it is a universal event that happens to all humans on Earth. But we're certainly not alone in noting the shortest day and longest night. From civilization's earliest records, cultures all over the planet have noticed the shift in the seasons, and noticed the disappearance of the sun, and it's subsequent return. Cultures world-wide have celebrations either based in Solstice or occurring at that time of year.

While we're all familiar with the most common celebrations, there are many more (over 30) celebrations that have been celebrated on or near the Winter Solstice, including:

- **Beiwe Festival** (the Saami, indigenous people of Finland, Sweden and Norway)
- **DōngZhì Festival, Tōji Festival** (East Asia, Vietnam, and Buddhist)
- **Hogmanay** (Scotland)
- **Inti Raymi** (Inca, Peru)
- **Meán Geimhridh, Celtic Midwinter** (Celtic, Ancient Welsh, Neodruidic)
- **Midvinterblót** (Swedish folk religion)
- **Shab-e Cheleh** (2nd millenium BCE Persian, Iranian)
- **Saturnalia, Chronia** (Ancient Greek, Roman)
- **Soyal** (Zuni and Hopi of North America)
- **Ziemassvētki** (Latvian, Baltic)

There are even invented or fictitious celebrations. The sitcom Seinfeld introduced the world to "Festivus", a holiday invented by Reader's Digest

writer and editor Dan O'Keefe. While it had its origins in fiction, real people around the world have their own Festivus celebrations.

While not so well known, the webcomic Nukees spawned "Agnostica", a holiday for agnostics, which was invented by the strip's creator, Darren "Gav" Bleuel. On this holiday, party attendees dress up as their favorite scientist of yore.

We even have a new celebration just for Humanists. The first "HumanLight" celebration was held in New Jersey on December 23rd, 2001. According to it's website, HumanLight is a Humanist's vision of a good future. It is a future in which all people can identify with one another, care for each other, behave with the highest moral standards, and work together toward a happy, just and peaceful world.

And on that note, at this time of year, no matter what you celebrate, we wish you health and happiness. Peace.

For more information, follow the links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_solstice

<http://www.festivusbook.com/>

<http://www.agnostica.com/>

<http://www.humanlight.org/>



"Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all."

- Linus Pauling

BullShit Party



A good time was had by all at HAM's latest Bullshit party, held on November 22nd.

The group screened episodes on Creationism and on Cryptozoology (which is the search for animals believed to exist, but for which conclusive evidence is missing – such as Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster).

There were even fireworks (visible from the roof of the building), to cap off a great evening.

Thanks to our hosts, Jeff and Leslie, for another entertaining event.



Membership Renewals

Just a reminder that it's almost time to renew your memberships to HAM and/or HAC (Humanist Association of Canada).

All HAM memberships are valid for one year, and all are up for renewal as of January, 2008. The fee will remain at \$45 for a household membership, and \$25 for an individual membership.

You will be receiving a renewal notice shortly, according to our treasurer,

Helen Friesen. Please note that you are encouraged to renew your memberships separately. The HAM membership on a separate payment, forwarded to us, and the HAC membership payment and form sent directly to their office.

Separating these two items will greatly simplify the renewal process.

If you have any questions at all, please contact Helen at heljohn at xplornet dot com.

Book Review

Big Death – funeral planning in the age of corporate deathcare

Reviewed by Barrie Webster

Doug Smith, “**Big Death – funeral planning in the age of corporate deathcare**” Fernwood Publishing, Halifax & Winnipeg, 2007 ISBN 978-1-55266-240-3 (soft cover) 175 pp.

This book arose from the dedicated detective work of a member of the Funeral Planning and Memorial Society of Manitoba. Norm Larsen is a retired lawyer, teacher, and drafter of provincial legislation. He is also a past member of the executive of the FP&MS, and the data he gathered during his visits to almost all of the funeral homes in Winnipeg and his understanding of the legal system provided the impetus that led to Smith assembling this very useful book. The format is readable and informative.

Everyone is going to die. That is certain, but the end of life's journey

can bring unnecessary financial stress to a family unprepared for dealings with the deathcare industry (as Larsen and Smith call it). What is really required? How do you decide what you should you ask your surviving family to do with your body? What are the options? Where are the major costs and financial pitfalls? What really matters? Where are the innovations that may change what you might choose to do in the future? How do you begin to make a plan? These and many more questions are answered by Smith in a concise book that keeps you reading.

Smith's book is well organized, written in an engaging style, and composed from a Winnipeg point of view (although it is quite applicable to Canadians in centres elsewhere). Priced at under \$20, it belongs in every family's library and should be read by all.

“Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error.”
- Thomas Jefferson

