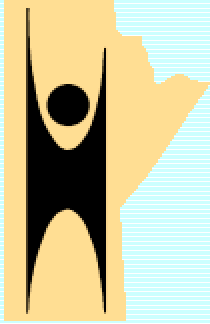


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Manitoba Humanist



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Association of
Manitoba

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mb.humanists.ca

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Humanist Association of Manitoba

Upcoming events

Humanist Association of Manitoba

Annual General Meeting Saturday, January 12, 2008

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Meeting (Members only) 4:00 p.m.

More information on page 6

Dinner and Speaker (Everyone Welcome) 5:30 p.m.

Attendees may order dinner from the Coffee Shop menu

Guest Speaker: Jim Clark

Professor of Psychology, University of Winnipeg

Topic: "Cultural Threats to a Rational Worldview"

Mark Your Calendar!

Brunch with Sophie

Sunday, January 20, 2008

11:30 a.m. at Lindenwood Manor

Details on page 4

Upcoming Monthly Meetings

Saturday, February 9, 2008

Saturday, March 8, 2008

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Discussion Topics: TBA

Solstice Party Report



Prize winner Stefan Bourrier



HAM member David Parker



The Village Green Morris Dancers in action

On December 22nd, the Humanist Association of Manitoba held a Solstice Party to remember at the Viscount Gort Hotel. Between 45 and 50 people attended, including members of the Village Green Morris Dancers.

Barrie Webster started the evening off with a talk about the history and context of Solstice. Among other facts from his talk – Christianity co-opted Solstice: Some 1600 years ago, Solstice happened on December 25. Emperor Constantine saw that Christianity's celebration on January 6 was not very popular, so he declared that December 25 would be the big day. That date has held constant while Solstice, the celebrated end of the shortest day, moved with Earth's orbit over time to December 21st or 22nd.

Barrie also discussed HAM's long term support of the Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC), and introduced Lori Johnson of SERC. She gave a short talk on SERC's history, mission and work. HAM made a group donation. As well, throughout the evening, guests were able to make contributions as individuals. We at HAM are proud to do our part.

A variation on the classic "musical chairs" game was played. Participants were given the name of some common object. They had to try and retrieve it from the audience (or wherever) and return to their chair. Of course, one chair is removed. The final survivor was Stefan Bourrier. He walked away with a Starbucks gift pack. BTW, Stefan was visiting from Victoria, where he is now attending university.

The evening also included the chance to win more prizes. A drawing for another Starbucks gift pack was made from all completed Solstice Quizzes. As well, earlier in the evening, door prize tickets were given to each person as

they arrived. Everyone allocated tickets to one of five door prizes, including such goodies as The Portable Atheist book, an ecological calendar, a one year subscription to Canadian Freethinker magazine, a Flying Spaghetti Monster T-shirt and other good stuff.

After dinner, it was time for the Village Green morris dancers of Winnipeg. They provided their own accompaniment, with a violin, two pipes and a drum. The dancers themselves are also part of the sound, being loaded with bells and often using sticks to beat time.

They were the highlight of the evening. Morris dancing is traditional English folk dancing. It goes back at least 500 years. It may be related to ancient fertility rites, agricultural variety). Movement is fast and somewhat intricate, and a pleasure to watch. We were told they always do a Solstice dance, and we were pleased that they were willing to come out and perform for us.

The dancers invited any of us who could keep up to join their group. I saw no takers – perhaps a comment on the fitness of the dancers as opposed to the rest of us.

After that, the party began to break up. But not before many pictures were taken, good wishes were exchanged and people took the opportunity to catch up with old friends and new.

- Grant Rogerson

Check out more images from the Solstice party at mb.humanists.ca

Let's Talk about Sex

Recent events have conspired to have me thinking about sex. A lot. Really.

Consider the following:

- The local Sun newspaper ran a multi-part feature on abortion in Canada, with the news that while abortion rates are not increasing, access to abortions is not improving.
- News from the US revealed that the teen birthrate has recently jumped 3%, during the era of an emphasis on abstinence-only sex education.
- The same week, the world learned that Jamie Lynn Spears, Britney's younger sister, wasn't all that innocent herself, as she announced that she was pregnant at 16 years of age.

These stories confirmed for me that HAM's charity of choice for our annual Solstice party – the Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba – was timely and worthwhile.

Now, the following is my own personal opinion (that's one of the great things about humanism – there is no pre-set dogma that everyone must agree with), and others are certainly free to disagree.

I have always been pro-choice in the matter of abortion. And I get riled up when the anti-choice side makes it appear that women just toss off abortions like it's nothing. Of course it's not. People are sometimes faced with very difficult choices, and there may not be an easy answer. No matter what the choice is, there will be lots of emotional scars, and no one else is in a position to judge another individual's decision. The vast majority of women do not make the choice to end a pregnancy lightly. So I was rather dismayed to learn about the possible wait times for abortions in Canada. Those sorts of delays only make a difficult situation worse, and possibly more complicated.

So, while I accept that abortion is sometimes necessary, I would personally prefer that we minimize the need for it in the first place. That's where I think sex education (and SERC) come in. Young people should have all of the information they need to make an informed choice. If that includes the message that it's better to wait until they're in a monogamous relationship – that's fine. Just as long as they're also taught about the various methods of birth control, and given information on topics related to sexuality and reproductive health.

This is the role that SERC plays all across Manitoba. In our province, in particular, those of us who live within the Perimeter highway sometimes forget that many people outside of Winnipeg live in rural or isolated Northern communities, where resources may not even be available, or are next to impossible to access.

So I was pleased to support SERC in their efforts at increasing knowledge in our Province, knowing that our donations will be used to purchase resources for their lending library.

- Donna Harris

SERC's website (www.serc.mb.ca) says it best:

Knowledge is power. Studies show that open discussion regarding sexuality does not encourage young people to start having sex at a younger age. In fact, the sooner we start talking to young people, the better equipped they will be to make responsible decisions, and when they do become sexually active, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviours that could lead to an STI or unplanned pregnancy.

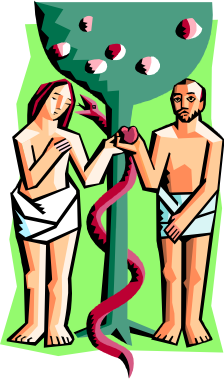
*"Our Mission: Promoting sexual health through education.
Our Vision: A diverse society that celebrates healthy sexuality throughout life."*

- SERC Manitoba



Lori Johnson of SERC at HAM's Solstice party

Clueless in Eden



“God made himself man: granted. The Devil made himself woman.”

-Victor Hugo

God said, "Adam, I want you to do something for me."

Adam said, "Gladly, Lord, what do You want me to do?"

God said, "Go down into that valley."

Adam said, "What's a valley?"

God explained it to him.

Then God said, "Cross the river."

Adam said, "What's a river?"

God explained that to him, and then said, "Go over to the hill....."

Adam said, "What is a hill?"

So, God explained to Adam what a hill was.

He told Adam, "On the other side of the hill you will find a cave"

Adam said, "What's a cave?"

After God explained, he said, "In the cave you will find a Woman."

Adam said, "What's a woman?"

So God explained that to him, too.

Then, God said, "I want you to reproduce."

Adam said, "How do I do that?"

God first said (under his breath), "Geez....."

And then, just like everything else, God explained that to Adam, as well.

So, Adam goes down into the valley, across the river, and over the hill, into the cave, and finds the woman.

Then, in about five minutes, he was back.

God, his patience wearing thin, said angrily, "What is it now?"

And Adam said....., "What's a headache?"

Brunch with Sophie

Everyone is invited to a brunch at the residence of HAM member Sophie Shulman.

The brunch will take place in the common dining room of Lindenwood Manor, on Sunday, January 20, 2008. Please plan to arrive by 11:30 a.m.

There is a fixed menu available with at least a couple of choices, at a cost of \$7 per person.

The address is 475 Lindenwood Drive East.

If you're interested in a lower-key gathering, with good food and conversation, then please come out and join us.

The address is 475 Lindenwood Drive East, just east of the Kenaston Crossing shopping area.

As the number of guests needs to be provided to the dining room, please RSVP to Sophie no later than the Thursday, January 17th. She can be reached at 489-8622 or by email at sbshulman at(@) shaw dot(.) ca.

The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow and Empathy – and Why They Matter

Book Review

Reviewed by Neil Schipper

The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow and Empathy – and Why They Matter

by Marc Bekoff and Jane Goodall, New World Library, 256 pages

We can usually tell pretty easily when the human animals close to us are happy or sad, afraid or angry, and often, it's equally easy to identify these same emotions in non-human animals. With about half of all households in North America having pets, one would think that the notion that animals have real emotions is pretty fully accepted. Apparently things are not that straightforward.

Marc Bekoff is a lauded biology professor specializing in cognitive ethology—the study of animal minds--and an activist for the ethical treatment of animals. He wants more of us to fully appreciate the extent to which differences between animal and man are differences in degree, not kind, and moreover, that when it comes to emotions and even morals, the differences are far less than imagined.

Much of the book contains stories about animals emoting, and there are some pretty good ones. We meet elephants that grieve listlessly for days following the death of a comrade, a dog that spontaneously and with no prior training becomes the “seeing eye” dog to a blind companion dog, wolves that leap with joy upon the return of an individual that had been separated from the pack for several days, and so on.

Drawing upon recent neuroscience research, he describes likenesses among mammal brains across several

species, likeness in structure and function. Not only are certain specialized types of neural cells present to some degree across species, but neurochemical release patterns that are associated with specific emotions in humans also occur in other species under conditions of apparently similar emotional states. It's amazing stuff, but the treatment here is pretty thin.

Both the stories and the neuroscience are used to support the notion that animals do experience, not only the very basic emotions, but quite a wide gamut of them, including things like empathy, jealousy, disgust, longing, selflessness, a sense of fairness and so on.

Along the way, Bekoff describes his own working life, much of which is spent observing animals at play. The goal is to further the understanding of play, an activity that may not obviously seem to enhance an individual's reproductive fitness. He describes his own findings and those of others that support the view that animals play for their own subjective happiness, and, that the *drive* to play is an adaptation that allows animals to practice crucial life skills, like aggressive and defensive manoeuvres, pursuit of a mate, and perhaps most surprisingly, social skills like cooperation and negotiation.

Bekoff laments that despite the mounting evidence, within the scientific community there lingers uncertainty about whether it is sufficiently established that animals have feelings. A hundred and fifty years after Darwin opened inquiry into these matters, first by proposing the interrelatedness of all

Continued next page...

HAM Executive Committee

President:
Barrie Webster

Vice-President:
Barry Hammond

Treasurer:
Helen Friesen

Secretary:
Heather McDonell

Members at Large:
Donna Harris
Jeff Olsson
Grant Rogerson
Sophie Shulman
Miep van Raalte

Book Review (Continued)

life by the evolutionary process, and then more specifically by observing the striking similarity between the emotional expression of humans and that of many higher mammals, this seems surprising.

He suggests a number of explanations for this. One is a reticence by animal scientists to appear non-rigorous to their colleagues. Proving that an animal is having any specific conscious experience relying on anecdote and analogy is considered problematic. Another is a matter of convenience. If the idea of human-like feelings in animals were fully embraced, this would render more serious the need for rethinking the often exceedingly cruel ways that research science uses animals. It would also lead to the questioning of how society at large treats animals raised for our food.

But there are some big questions that the author himself avoids. How

do we reconcile the fact that empathetic and cooperative social-living species are prone to ripping to shreds, on a daily basis, individuals from other empathetic and cooperative social-living species? Surely "having emotions" is not simply an all or nothing feature of living things. Are there any working theories that might allow us to quantify emotional features of species? If not, aren't we just left with a perspective where we can't distinguish, in ethical terms, humans, foxes, worms and mosquitoes?

The author maintains a warm and caring tone throughout—he's an animal lover, has been since he was a kid, and does not try to conceal it—but the book suffers somewhat from what are nearly proclamations of his own compassion. This is a book about emotions that, while borrowing the language of science, appeals in large part to the reader's emotions.

Annual General Meeting – January 2008

On Saturday, January 12, the Humanist Association of Manitoba will hold its annual general meeting (time and location on the front page of this newsletter).

Election of the Executive will be on the agenda, with the slate of candidates as follows.

Barrie Webster and Barry Hammond have agreed to a one-year extension of their positions as President and Vice-President, respectively. Helen Friesen has agreed to continue as Treasurer for 2008, and Heather McDonell will continue as Secretary.

Members-at-large will be Jeff Olsson, Sophie Shulman, Donna Harris, Grant

Rogerson, Neil Schipper, and a to-be-named representative from MASH, the U of M's new student group.

Nominations will remain open until the AGM. The HAM executive invites any member who is interested in being on the executive to contact Barrie Webster at 475-1266. We need new members willing to work on behalf of the organization. While our President and Vice-President have agreed to a one year extension, they are both looking forward to a change in leadership for next year.

Executive members usually attend one meeting a month. Please consider working on the Executive.