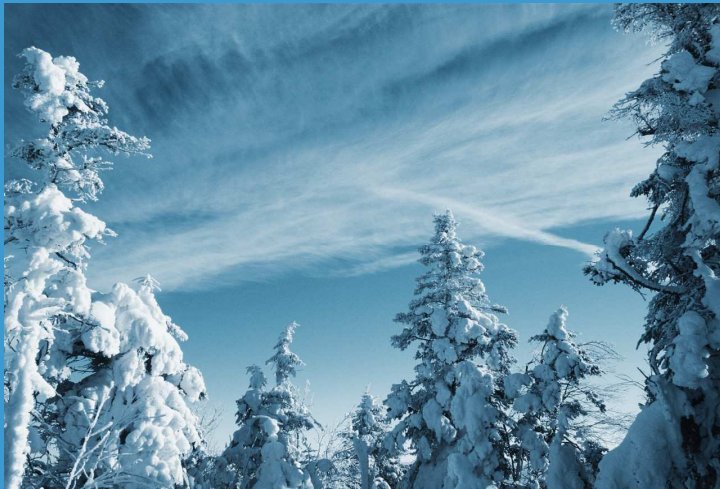


Manitoba Humanist



*In seed time
learn, in
harvest teach,
in winter
enjoy.*
William Blake

Published by and for the
Humanist Association of
Manitoba

*“We are beyond
belief”*



www.mb.humanists.ca

OUR SOLSTICE PARTY ROCKED!

We had an incredible turnout at our Solstice Party at the Eat! Bistro. Close to 40 souls showed up to celebrate the shortest day and longest night with us.

The food was great, the venue cozy, the entertainment grand, and the company jovial.

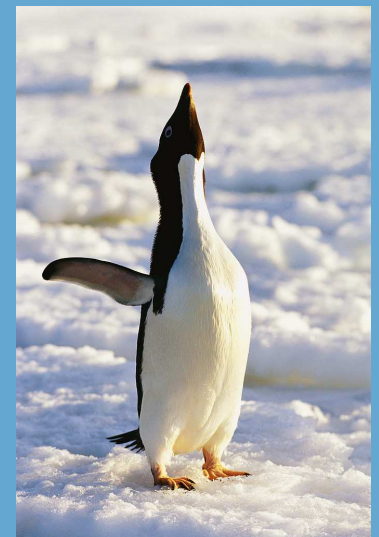
Scott Carnegie entertained everyone with his close-up magic. People were challenged by Myrna Donald's "famous scientists and mathematicians" for our parlour game. Bill Nye was pretty easy – Banting & Best wasn't so easy! (Except for one young person who guessed his identity too easily - four times!)

Of course, we carried on Barrie Webster's Solstice tradition, with Jeff Olsson giving a short talk on the topic.

Brian Fairbanks was clearly on a lucky streak! After winning 2 door prizes – when his number was drawn again for a third! – he said "Enough! Let someone else win!"

It was also great seeing some new faces come out for the party. We do hope you enjoyed yourselves, and that you'll return to some of our meetings in 2011.

Best of all, everyone donated generously to our charity of choice - the Spence Neighbourhood Association. The evening's donations



*Enjoy all the seasons –
But bundle up out there!*

totalled \$450, so with HAM's donation of \$200, that means we raised \$650 for a very worthy community organization. Thank you so much for your generous support!

UPCOMING ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

HAM's Annual General Meeting is fast approaching. We meet this Saturday, January 8th, at the Canad Inn Polo Park. The AGM itself begins at 4:00 p.m. followed by the speaker and then the meal. (Aalto's buffet – individual bills)

Our President, Jeff Olsson, will be speaking on the topic of "How Do We Know Anything" In other, larger words, epistemology. While that sounds serious, it just means the theory of knowledge. He'll also be mentioning Africa, so stay tuned!

As always, at our Annual General Meeting, HAM holds elections for places on the Executive Committee.

This is where you, the members, get to participate by voting people into various positions. Not all positions are up (they are 2 year posts).

If you think you fit any position or know someone who does, please notify any of the current execs. To qualify as a candidate, you must be a paid-up member for at least the previous 6 months.

Open positions are:

- President
- Vice President
- Newsletter Editor
- Librarian

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

2010 was a wonderful year and it looks like 2011 will be an even better one. We have found a new home for our meetings at the CanadInns

Polo Park, we had a successful Atheist Film Festival at the Park Theater in Winnipeg and a number of our members traveled to The Amazing Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada. In January P.Z. Myers came to speak to our association drawing almost 300 people out for the evening. Throughout the rest of the year we had a number of great speakers who challenged our thinking, explained the wonders of science and helped us to see how it is that humans impact each other through our culture and through our religions.

This spring I traveled to the Atheist Alliance International conference in Copenhagen, Denmark where I met Richard Dawkins. I also chatted with P.Z. Myers, James Randi, Dan Barker and many more of the great thinkers of our movement at this meeting. We developed the Copenhagen Accord, a document that explains how we value democracy and basic human rights for all people in all societies, regardless of religious inclination. In Copenhagen it was readily apparent that we value freedom from religion as much as freedom of religious belief.

So where do we go from here?

In the upcoming year I plan to lead our executive as we continue to develop our community by building an informal alliance with the Winnipeg Skeptics, University of Winnipeg Atheists, the Unitarians and as many secular organizations as we can reach. We need to rekindle our alliance with Humanist Canada and the Center For Inquiry. The intent is not to evangelize humanism so much as it is to foster a diverse sense of community and develop a better understanding of our humanity. We need to be seen as a secularizing force within the fabric of Canada.

As it stands today, we have a diverse and vibrant humanist community in Manitoba that reaches out to most parts of our society, including our universities. But have we gone far enough? In my opinion we need to redouble our efforts as we work to make a safe place for non-religious people to discuss their ideas and enjoy each others company. We have much work ahead of us!

I hope that you had a wonderful solstice season and wish you a happy new year!

*Jeffrey Olsson,
President, Humanist Association of Manitoba*

TREASURER'S MESSAGE

We started the year with \$3,246.12 in the bank and as of December 31, 2010 our bank balance was \$3,472.92. Our income in 2010 came from membership dues (\$1,635), meeting collections (\$476), and donations (\$1,311). Our thanks and appreciation go to all those who donate to HAM! Tax deductible receipts were mailed as donations were received.

Our income and expenses in 2010 were basically equal. Our donation income was up from 2009 but so were our donations going out. I'm happy to report that we were able to donate \$200 to Oxfam, \$200 to the Rainbow Resource Centre, and \$200 to the Spence Neighbourhood Association. These donations were a total of \$500 more than we donated in 2009.

Some expenses increased significantly from 2009. We were forced to move our regular meetings to places where we were charged for the rental of the room when before we were used to meeting at places where the hotel didn't charge anything for the room but depended on all of us to buy a meal. Those hotels changed their policies. PZ Myers was our guest speaker at our last year's AGM and we covered his costs, which contributed to the increase in guest speaker expenses. Our collection at that meeting was not quite enough to fully cover the costs, but what a great meeting that was!

Once again it's been a pleasure to keep the books for HAM this year and I thank all of you for the privilege.

*Helen Friesen
Treasurer, Humanist Association of Manitoba*

MEMBERSHIP DUES REMINDER

The new year is once again upon us, so it's time to renew your HAM membership.

Memberships are good for the entire year, and, remember, prices have remained as they were - \$25 for individuals and \$45 for households.

If you haven't renewed your membership dues by January 8th, remember, you won't be able to vote at the Annual General Meeting.

UPCOMING EVENT: IMAGINE NO RELIGION IN KAMLOOPS, B.C.

Just in case you were looking for an excuse for a vacation in beautiful B.C.:

IMAGINE NO RELIGION. May 7th, 2011, Kamloops Convention Centre, Kamloops BC, Canada.

A one day conference featuring the following speakers: PZ Myers, Nate Phelps, Christopher diCarlo, Stuart Bechman, Jen McCreight and Brian Dalton, aka Mr. Deity.

Event Organizers: Kamloops Centre for Rational Thought and Okanagan Centre for Inquiry.

Event Website:

<http://imagineno religionkamloops.com/imagineno religionkamloops/Home.html>

Location: 1250 Rogers Way, Kamloops, BC,

BOOK REVIEW

God's Brain

By Lionel Tiger & Michael McGuire
Prometheus Books, 215 pages, \$31
Review by Neil Schipper

Why is it that in virtually every time period and place where human societies have existed, do we find religion of one kind or another? Supernatural authority figures, other-worldly

kingdoms, and fantastic creation stories, each impossible to either verify or refute with finality. Rules about food, clothing, and sex. Rituals for prayer and meditation.

In *God's Brain*, anthropologist Lionel Tiger and Psychiatrist Michael McGuire, both accomplished, well published elder statesmen in their fields, start with the observation that, with its historical ubiquity and perhaps 80% of the people on the planet now following some religion, it must be a *natural* phenomenon.

According to Tiger and McGuire, to really understand religion in the large and in all its variety, one needs to look at the brains in the heads of those who experience it.

When you look, you find that life's stresses – thwarted plans, boredom, navigating competitive and hierarchical social relationships, coming to terms with the deaths of loved ones and the impending death of the self – these take a neurophysiological toll.

The stress influences rates of production and depletion of neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin, making us feel crummy. And religion provides a remedy, or as they put it, it *brainsoothes*: religious gatherings offer moments of calm, of solidarity with a familiar and welcoming group; accepting a supernatural authority reduces anxieties over hierarchy; following dictates set out in authoritative texts eases the turmoil of messy moral decisions, with forgiveness offered for transgressions; and belief in an afterlife dampens the dread of the inevitable.

So how well do they make their case?

Much of what they write is uncontroversial to the point of banality. The brain, we now well know, is active “24/7”. It's involved with everything we do: cutting an orange or looking out the window, fist-fighting or sleeping.

There's a lingering artificiality in how they select for discussion peoples' experiences and feelings, not much in the way of empirical support, and a failure to address alternate interpretations.

In contrast to much discussed books of recent years which were highly critical of religion (Harris, Dawkins, etc.), this book tries to turn down the heat of the culture war by championing more of a bird-watcher's stance.

They profess admiration for the creative energy religion motivates. They also acknowledge that the religious mood has encouraged great fractiousness in human history, and has played (and still plays) a role in closing minds against ways of understanding life and universe supported by rich and comprehensive evidence.

Tiger and McGuire's understanding of religion's emergence in the ancestral past does appear to carry some persuasive power (a nice meme they offer is that the brain evolved to *act*, not to *think*), but their attempt to promote this view as one deserving prominence in conversation about religion in the world we live in is questionable. Strategies that keep the brain on an even keel within a nonreligious life are increasingly available and have certainly advanced in influence in recent centuries.

Reading *God's Brain* is a lot like listening to an affable professor who's clearly enthused with his own speculative ideas, but prone to verbosity, repetition and wearing you down with mildly relevant anecdotes.

This book also turns out to be difficult to read, but not for the reasons you'd expect. Its discussion of technical topics like neurotransmitters and brain function is quite tame compared to what you'll find in many books and articles that cover similar territory.

We sometimes compliment a book by saying that “the sentences fly off the page”. In this book, sentences frequently need to be pried off:

“It is necessary to be aware of the different gradations of color in sacred costume and what their wearers mean to the ideas of religion's meaning.”

A stray clunker that made it past an editor under time pressure? Try this then:

“The percentages of informal rules that are often large do not unambiguously and agreeably have their source in religion.”

There are likely great insights to be gained by gazing at religion through a neurological lens, but more cogent books than this may be needed to launch that notion further into the mainstream.
- Neil Schipper

RANDOM FACTOID – THE ORIGIN OF JANUARY

January is often considered the month for deep reflection. We look back at the year behind us, bemoaning our regrets and celebrating our successes. And then, we look forward to the future year. We make well-meaning resolutions and hope for the best.

So, in this way, we’re all a little bit like Janus, the Roman god for which January is named. Janus is usually depicted with having two heads that face in opposite directions. One looks back to the year departed, and one looks forward to the new and uncertain year ahead.



The god Saturn bestowed upon Janus this ability to see into the future and past.

His name comes from the Latin word *ianua*, which means “door.” Janus is the god of doors, gates, doorways, bridges, and passageways, all of which symbolize beginnings and ends. Janus also represented transition, such as the time between youth and adulthood.

- from *Dictionary.com*

UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, January 8, 2011

Annual General Meeting
Location: Canad Inn Polo Park
Time: 4:00 p.m. for the AGM
Speaker: Jeff Olsson
Topic: “How Do We Know Anything”

Saturday, February 12, 2011

Regular Meeting
Location: Canad Inn Polo Park
Speaker/Topic: Dustin Geeraert, speaking on Darwin and other topics

Saturday, March 12, 2011

Regular Meeting
Location: Canad Inn Polo Park
Speaker/Topic: TBA

Executive:

Jeff Olsson, President
Neil Schipper, Vice President
Helen Friesen, Treasurer
Heather McDonell, Secretary

Members at Large:

Myrna Donald
Barry Hammond
Donna Harris
Jake Peters
Grant Rogerson
Scott Shabaga
Sophie Shulman

Newsletter Editor:

Donna L. Harris
ham_librarian@yahoo.ca

We're on the Web!

See us at:

mb.humanists.ca



Yes, I would like to BECOME A MEMBER of the Humanist Association of Manitoba

New Member Renewal

Membership Category:

- Individual Membership \$25.00
- Individual Limited Income \$10.00
- Household Membership* \$45.00
- Household Limited Income \$15.00

* After July 1st, just pay ½ the yearly fee for the rest of the year. After October 31st, pay full fee and get the entire next year.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ Province: _____

Postal Code _____

Telephone#: _____ Cell #: _____

Email address: _____

*Household Memberships: Please give the names of all additional Humanists in your household 18 years or over:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

DONATION (Tax receipts issued for all donations of \$10 or more)

I would like to make a donation to HAM of:

- \$10 \$20 \$30 \$50 \$100
- Other: _____

PAYMENT: Cheque Money Order
 Visa Mastercard Amex

Please complete the following if paying by credit card:

Account No. _____

Expiry Date: ____/____

Name on Card: _____

Signature: _____

Please make cheque or money order payable to:
Humanist Association of Manitoba and mail to:
*Humanist Association of Manitoba, 7 Pinehurst Lane,
Mitchell, MB, R5G 2J3.*

Or bring your form and the fees to any HAM meeting and give it to Helen Friesen, or any member of the executive.