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**Saturday
January 16, 2015**

**Monthly
Chapter Meeting**

**First Unitarian Society
900 Mt. Curve Drive
Minneapolis**

**Doors open at 10:00 a.m.
Program 10:20 a.m.-noon**

HUMANISM:

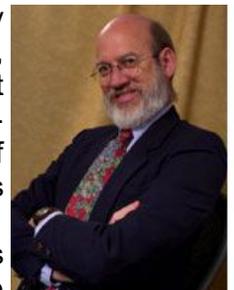
A better life for all through education, democracy, free speech, reason, and science, without reliance on arbitrary dogmas, revelations, and faith.

Humanists of Minnesota Chapter Meeting

***Higher Education:
What's Right and What's Wrong with It
by Dr. Gerald Smith, Northern Iowa University***

Saturday, January 16th, 2016

The brightest students from around the world come to study at our colleges and universities, so ours must be the best, right? But troubles lurk, whether or not we want to look at them. At our January 16th meeting, Dr. Gerald Smith, long-time Humanists of Minnesota member and Professor of Management at Northern Iowa University (NIU), will give us an insider's perspective on these important institutions.



He will identify some of the major problems universities face, the causes of these problems, and some possible remedies. First, a look at the "usual suspects" blamed for rising costs in higher education—for instance, excessive spending on administration, facilities, and athletics. This presentation will look more closely at students and faculty, the key educational players. How does student preparation and motivation affect their performance? Are faculty teaching and research responsibilities properly balanced? Beginning with a discussion of these and other issues he will then turn to how the problems in American higher education should be addressed.

Bring your questions. This is a subject we can all sink our teeth into, and one in which we all have a stake, because both public and private schools of higher education all receive public funds, and together they turn out many of the nation's future leaders. Are these students learning to think logically and to express themselves clearly? To solve problems? To lead? To do research? To invent? To give back to society? Or is the primary focus on getting a job and making a pile of money? What should the purpose of higher education be?

Gerald F. (Jerry) Smith, professor of management at the University of Northern Iowa, received his PhD in Decision Sciences from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. At UNI, Dr. Smith's primary teaching responsibilities involve the teaching of critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making to business students. His research has focused on managerial problem solving, critical thinking, and the challenges of teaching people how to think effectively. An active member of the Humanists of Minnesota, Jerry delivers critical thinking skills instruction through Humanists of Minnesota Meetings and is co-organizer of the popular D-Cubed monthly events. Ω

PRESIDENT'S

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Happy New Year! An apt greeting for the January newsletter and beginning of 2016, right? During this holiday season, no doubt many of us have wished family and friends “good health and happiness” in the New Year. These are time-honored greetings of the season. Plus, living a good life and seeking happiness in the here and now are key aspirations for humanists, agnostics and atheists. But did you happen to read the latest research about happiness not being an indicator of longevity? ([The Lancet, December 9, 2015](#)) Could it be that Scrooge gets the last laugh after all? Aargh!

No need to rush to judgment here. Even the authors of this recent study said more research is essential. And while a million women were in the study (statistically a big deal), it was based on self-assessment (not so reliable a methodology). The study attempted to find some correlation between good health, happiness and mortality—and found none. Even so, quite a lot still needs to be sorted out about human psychology and well-being.

Definitions of happiness and indications of good health are open to interpretation. What makes me happy may not be what makes you happy. And especially as we age, depictions of good health change over the course of our lives. Further, for humanists, happiness encompasses far more than personal well-being. Central to humanist philosophy and experience is that our own happiness is maximized through serving others and working to benefit society. ([Humanist Manifesto III](#))

So what might a Happy New Year look like for a humanist? If you had been at our recent winter solstice Festivus, you would have gotten an earful of political grievances. We had a roomful of “Scrooges” grouching about extensive income disparity, reduction of reproductive rights, global warming denial, gun proliferation, fear-mongering politicians, spineless media and much more. Some might thus think that happiness surely will elude most of us this year.

Hardly. “Happy New Year” is not just a trite greeting for Humanists; it represents our pro-active stance on life itself. Also, it can serve as our New Year’s resolution to re-commit ourselves to accepting responsibility for our lives and the world in which we live. Humanist happiness is more than a pleasant emotional state for which to aspire; happiness is also in the doing of the work that helps create a better world. A world of compassion, democracy, peace, justice and environmental sustainability.

Despite the Scrooge-like complaints at our solstice event, we were still able to truly celebrate the season, our humanist values and enjoy each other’s company. Yes, humanists can have fun even while being thoughtful and responsible. A case in point was our dinner fare for the evening. Almost thirty per cent of the dinners ordered that evening were for the vegan entrée as opposed to the chicken option. That fact elicited a bit of surprise from the event coordinator at the Humanities Center. Really, so many vegan dinners? But nowadays, chefs have learned to make vegan entrees at least as delicious as the meat options—if not more so—and an ever-increasing number of humanists and atheists welcome a vegetarian or vegan meal. Many are making it a complete lifestyle choice.

While eating less meat and dairy is also a worthy new year’s resolution for anyone, collectively that solstice evening, our group helped reduce carbon emissions with our food choices and made an ethical statement to the Humanities Center staff. Certainly working toward the sustainability of the planet and the well-being of fellow sentient beings is one way to create and experience happiness in the coming year.

Others within our organization are ardent advocates of solar energy to ensure the sustainability of the planet. We actually hailed “solar power” in song that solstice night—instilling in our hearts and minds the importance of our values. In coming together as a community of shared values, we see that we are not alone in our resolve; we encourage one another and are inspired by one another. Collectively we change the world; alone—not so much.

Some of us have more resolve in one area of our lives to demonstrate particular humanist values; others have resolve to act and work in totally different spheres of concern. By our collective efforts in summoning our passions and wills to act, we can help change the memes—the norms—of social, political and cultural life toward a more humanist vision and experience of the world. Indeed it will be a happy new year for us when we can help make it a happier new year for all. As you know, even a Scrooge can help with that. Ω

Announcements

DISCUSSION GROUPS ETC.

2nd Friday 5:00 p.m., *Humanist Happy Hour St. Paul*, Green Mill Restaurant & Bar, 57 Hamline Ave S.

4th Friday 5:00 p.m., *Humanist Happy Hour Minneapolis*, Salsa a La Salsa--2841 Hennepin Ave., Mpls.

2nd Saturday 10:30 a.m., *Blasphemers' Brunch*, Pizza Luce, 800 W 66th Street, Richfield

2nd Sunday 2:00 p.m., *Sunday Assembly*. First Unitarian Society. 900 Mt. Curve Avenue, Minneapolis.

1st Sunday, 9:00 a.m.-noon, *Lake Superior Freethinkers monthly meeting*. Radisson Hotel Duluth, Viking Room. For information contact Bill van Druten, (218) 724-4176.

1st Sunday, 10:00 a.m., *Central Minnesota Freethinkers, St. Cloud Coffee Social*. Check their website for details: cmfreethinkers.org or contact them at info@cmfreethinkers.org

Mondays, 5:00-6:30 p.m., *Atheists for Human Rights Happy Hour*, Ol' Mexico Restaurant, 1754 Lexington Ave., Roseville (just north of Larpenteur). Tables on terrace level. Call Paul Craven, (763) 788-8918.

1st and 3rd Mondays, 6:30 p.m., *Freethought Toastmasters Club*, Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1276 Larpenteur Ave. W., St. Paul. Contact George Kane, nup@minn.net or (651) 488-8225.

2nd & 4th Mondays, 5:00-7:00 p.m., *Freethought Dinner Social*, Davanni's, 8605 Lyndale Ave So, Bloomington. Call Marilyn Nienkerk, (612) 866-6200.

1st Tuesday, 11:30 a.m.—1:00p.m., *Freethought Lunch*, Old Country Buffet, County Road B2 between Fairview and Snelling. Call Marilyn Nienkerk, (612) 866-6200.

3rd Wednesday, 11:30 a.m., *Freethought Lunch*, Dragon House, 3950 Central Avenue NE, Columbia Heights. Call Bill Volna, (612) 781-1420.

2nd Thursday, evening, *Rochester Area Freethinkers (RAFT)*, Downtown Rochester Public Library, Meeting Room A. Contact Jim Salutz, jsalutz@aol.com or (507) 280-8012.

OTHER EVENTS

2nd Wednesday, 7:00 p.m., *Humanists of Minnesota Board of Directors meeting*. Open to all members. Contact Audrey Kingstrom at akingstrom@comcast.net.

Thursdays, 7:00 p.m. (during school year), *Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists (CASH)* general meeting. 3rd floor Coffman Memorial Union, 300 Washington Ave. SE, Minneapolis. Contact cash@cashumn.org.

Check out our Meetup events at <http://www.meetup.com/humanism-166>

Death and Dying Series

**First Saturdays of the month (Oct. –June)
Rondo Community Library, St. Paul**

January 2nd @ 10:30 am

Medical Options and Decisions at the End of Life

At this fourth session, we will focus on medical options and decisions at end of life with guest facilitator Dr. David Plimpton of Compassion and Choices. Topics to be covered include treatment options at end of life, talking with your doctor about a POSLT, and exercising power and choice at the end.

This series is designed to help humanists, agnostics, atheists and freethinkers prepare for the final chapter of one's life. While a "good death" may be best secured through living a "good life," we will explore the unique challenges of aging given the potential for increased frailty, debilitating illness and loss of independence—for oneself or for a loved one.

Through facilitated discussion, each session will focus on a particular end-of-life issue from creating health care directives, conducting conversations with family members, considering options for disposition of the body, planning memorial services and making ethical wills or legacy gifts. No medical or legal expertise will be provided, but instead, here is an opportunity to think out loud about our mortality and the pragmatic issues surrounding our impending deaths. For more information about the series, contact Audrey at akingstrom@comcast.net.

"Humanist Views," our weekly Cable program, airs at **6:30 p.m. Mondays** on MTN Channel 75.



Axial Tilt

Humanists/ Atheists Celebrate the Solstice!

by Mary Mcleod, Suzanne Perry and Nathan Curland

On a nippy, blowy night, members and friends of Humanists of Minnesota and Minnesota Atheists gathered for their annual joint Solstice Celebration at the Humanities Center near Lake Phalen in Saint Paul. It was Friday, December 18, so we were jumping the gun a bit, but held a firm belief that unless the earth stops revolving around the sun, solstice *will* come, and daylight *will* eventually grow longer. Indeed, that is something worth celebrating!

The evening began by having a nip or a soft drink in the lobby, being packed cheek-by-jowl, and yelling good-naturedly at each other to make ourselves heard.

There were plaster gargoyles with bent backs supporting the arches in this room -- finely rendered. This is a 1920's building, formerly part of the Gillette Children's Hospital complex. One of the attendees recalled having been a patient there years ago as a child, treated for scoliosis with a cast and traction. Gillette has a long and storied history of treating "crippled children" in Minnesota.

Then the crowd (of about 80 folks) moved into the dining room, a warm room decorated with more arches and gargoyles. The Center's kitchen has a fine reputation, and this dinner did not disappoint.

The after-dinner program began with some warming-up carols -- free from religion -- with a virtuoso keyboard accompaniment by Paul Heffron, who also provided the background music before the dinner.

Then the Solstice Players presented 'The Starry Messenger', a play about a science teacher (Audrey Kingstrom, who also wrote the play) trying to prepare a lesson plan about and with Galileo (BethAnne Nelson, who also directed), with interruptions by an angel (Mary Ann Lindquist), Yoda (Andrew Rosdail), Spock (Troy Stolp), and Buzz Lightyear (Dan Jensen). The rigidly realist teacher was not pleased with the interference by the imaginary characters but eventually came to realize that they serve to fire the imaginations of young minds so they can be inspired by the possibilities that the knowledge of science and the scientific method may someday make real.

As is the custom, many participants brought gifts of goods and dollars to support the secular charity, The Bridge for Youth. Mark Fangmeier, Development Coordinator at The Bridge, was present to accept the gifts, talk about their mission, and warmly thank the group.

As befits "A Festivus for the Rest of Us," each table composed a list of that group's five top political grievances -- from serious (climate change) to light-hearted (not enough women candidates in pantsuits) -- and presented them, to great laughter and applause. It seems there is plenty to complain about!

Finally, we caroled the evening to a close, and headed out into the frigid night, to await the real solstice and growing daylight on December 21. Ω

Pictures by Nathan Curland



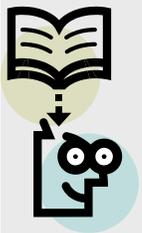
Highlights from the Board



*By Juliet Branca,
Secretary*

From the December board meeting:

- Nancy Somers has generously offered to be on the Finance Committee.
 - The board welcomes any others who would like to volunteer.
- A motion was passed to have Humanists of Minnesota pay the annual \$50 dues to become a member of Second Chance Coalition.
- Mark Thoson and Juliet Branca are writing a proposal for a \$1500 grant from the AHA for the purpose of replicating the success of the Tubman Solar initiative with another, not yet selected, secular non-profit.

Book Review:

***How to Create a Mind: The Secret
of Human Thought Revealed***
(Viking Penguin 2012)

by **Ray Kurzweil**

Reviewed by **Nathan Curland**

I decided to get 'How to Create a Mind' after attending a D-Cubed session on 'Singularity and Human Enhancement', organized by Mark Thoson and Jerry Smith. The excellent discussion motivated me to further investigate Ray Kurzweil's work and that led me to this book. It is a follow-up to his well-known 2005 volume 'The Singularity is Near' which posits that computer technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are progressing at such an exponential rate that by 2045 a computer will exceed the cognitive abilities of a human being resulting in a 'singularity' and changing forever how human affairs will proceed (the

concept of such a singularity was first postulated in the 1950's by the mathematician John von Neumann, who many regard as the father of modern computer architecture).

In 'How to Create a Mind', Kurzweil goes into great detail about what he and other brain researchers have uncovered about how the human brain is organized and functions. He lays out, in a very convincing fashion, a path to create an artificial brain which should very accurately mimic the workings of the human mind. Furthermore, he also delves into the limitations of the brain, most notably the size of the neocortex (limited to about 300 million 'pattern recognizers') and its processing speed. Since these limitations will be easily exceeded by machines in the future, the real skill in creating true AI machines is in the algorithms that model human thought processes.

To demonstrate to us that this is indeed possible, the first 8 chapters are devoted to laying a solid groundwork about what is known about brain function and architecture. Here he deals with how the brain is organized as a hierarchical structure with the neocortex at the highest level and most developed in humans. It is composed of pattern recognition units which are all fundamentally the same, interconnected, and have myriad dendrite connections to other parts of the brain. They also have plasticity, with rarely used connections dying and new ones being created in response to stimulations. The hierarchical structure and huge redundancy in structure makes simulation possible. In exploring our thinking processes, Kurzweil notes that our memories are stored as sequential patterns and modified by our interpretation of previous patterns (a recursive process, easily simulated). As such, they are composed of an elaborate hierarchy of related activities. So is our ability to recognize objects and situations.

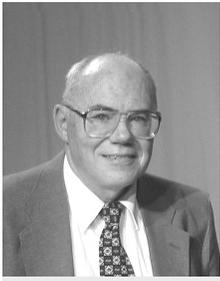
All this is encompassed by what Kurzweil terms the Pattern Recognition Theory of the Mind (PRTM). Into this narrative, he weaves thought experiments, the workings of the old brain, his team's early work on text to speech synthesis, as well as more recent work on speech recognition. He goes on to make a strong case for constructing a biologically inspired neocortex and explaining why the mind operates as a computer. Though his audience is clearly the lay person, the detail contained is likely to overwhelm the average reader (space does not permit me to go into great depth but the notes section contains enormous technical details and consumes 38 pages itself).

So for many, the most interesting sections start at chapter 9, 'Thought Experiments on the Mind'. Here he tackles the basic philosophical questions that will ultimately determine whether we will accept an AI as truly autonomous. What is consciousness and how can we tell if an entity has it? What about emotions -- can they be programmed? Considering the fact that many of our daily actions can become 'automatic', are we truly fully conscious? What is Free Will and does it exist? What do we mean by 'identity' and can a machine be self-aware? Kurzweil goes to great length to show the various positions surrounding these issues. In the end, he concludes that consciousness, free will and identity are emergent quantities of a sufficiently complex system and if the AI ultimately displays these quantities (which he believes they will) we will accept him/her/it as an autonomous being.

Kurzweil has his critics and he devotes a whole chapter to answering them (in my view, quite convincingly). In the epilogue he handles issues of humanity's future, our place in the cosmos and the likelihood of us finding other intelligences. All in all a good and thought provoking read. Ω

Maple Grove Discussion Group:

Saturday, January 9th, 10:00 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.: "Is America Polarized? Experts are Deeply Divided," with Kevin Hawkins. Maple Grove Community Center, 12951 Weaver Lake Rd, room 124, Maple Grove 55311, \$5 donation. Register at landforsale@visi.com or call Laurie at (763) 420-6350.



Freethought History:

Humanism and American Business

Paul Heffron, Chapter Historian

The first generation of American Humanists who issued the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 were primarily Unitarian ministers and academics in philosophy and science. Representation of people in industry and business was lacking and the Manifesto advocated a radical change from a profit-seeking to a cooperative economy. Not surprisingly, American Humanism through the years has not included or appealed to economically-oriented Americans and remained a very small, progressive, philosophically-oriented as-

sociation of non-theist dissenters.

In a 1942 book, *The Age of Enterprise* by Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller, a new interpretation of American history made it evident why the humanists were not representative of American society. The book opened with a quote of a Tammany Hall boss to the muckraker journalist, Lincoln Steffens, a humanist hero: "Ever heard that business is business? Well, [in America] so is politics business, and reporting—journalism, doctoring—all professions, arts, sports—everything is business." We might add: and that includes religion. The book's starting point was an obvious observation: "We have been primarily a business people, and business has been most important in our lives." (p.2) The book went on to trace American history as a story of industrial and business enterprise.

Ironically an agnostic freethinker and philosopher, Herbert Spencer, greatly influenced the American business community in the Gilded Age. Spencer applied the biological theory of Darwin to the social world of modern industry and commerce. It was all about the survival of the fittest, which resonated with businessmen, whether Christians like Rockefeller or freethinkers like Carnegie, and was just what they needed to justify their attainments.

The humanists of the 20s and 30s were among those who rejected the Social Darwinism of Spencer and his many disciples in America. They were among those who were appalled by the conditions of rampant industrial capitalism and were drawn to a version of socialism in the face of the Great Depression.

Most freethinkers of the 19th century and the Humanists of the 20th century didn't manage to carry on the economic theories of the Enlightenment rationalists of the 18th century, most prominently expounded by Adam Smith. The Enlightenment freedom, reason and progress included a rejection of the royal control and ecclesiastical restrictions of the economy and culture in favor of the promotion of free market, individual enterprise and individual moral responsibility.

Maybe we are at a time when humanists and other freethinkers can carry on the Enlightenment tradition and both support and critique business and industry and do so wisely with reliance on science, reason and a sense of humanity. In so doing we might attract more people from our society, in which all our enterprise and labor are functionally our primary business, and also contribute to economic developments that make for human well-being. Ω

Upcoming Critical Thinking Club Meetings

Saint Paul Chapter. Sunday, January 3, 10:00 a.m. to noon: "Is America Polarized? Experts are Bitterly Divided," by Kevin Hawkins. Riverview Highlands Senior Living Apartments, 1834 South Mississippi River Blvd.

Saint Paul. Cost :\$3/person

West Metro Chapter. Saturday, January 23rd, 10:00 a.m. to noon: "The Benefits of Tai Chi," by Paul Ryberg. Ridge Point Apts. Meeting Room, 12800 Marion Lane W., Minnetonka.

Stillwater Chapter. Monday, January 11th, 7:00 p.m.: "Is America Polarized? Experts are Bitterly Divided," by Kevin Hawkins. Family Means Bldg., 1875 Northwestern Ave, Stillwater.

For additional information, visit:

www.meetup.com/Critical-Thinking-Club/calendar

HUMANIST NEWS & VIEWS

Editor, Nathan Curland

Editorial Committee - Brad Bolin, Dale Handeen, Mark Thoson

Articles, letters, event notices and other writings are welcome. Send to: editor@humanistsofmn.org with the word "newsletter" in the subject line, or to P.O. Box 582997, Minneapolis, MN 55458-2997. (E-mail submissions are preferred.) All submissions must include the writer's full name, postal address, telephone number and e-mail address. All submissions become the property of this newsletter and cannot be returned. Submission deadline is the 22nd of the prior month.

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Cable Program

Scott Lohman's guest for the December taping was Janet Conn of Compassion and Choices Minnesota. The discussion included the current state of Aid in Dying legislation in Minnesota. Catch the program on our website:

www.humanistsofmn.org



Picture by Nathan Curland

L to R: Janet Conn, Scott Lohman

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January 2016

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(For categories at RH and above, married couples or domestic partners will be considered as one membership, if you so indicate.)

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- (RI) Regular Individual, \$40.00
- (RH) Regular Household, \$60.00
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- (BN) Benefactor, \$500.00
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*Full time students at an accredited institution can receive a complimentary subscription

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1777 T Street NW
Washington, DC 20009-7125
www.americanhumanist.org

Council for Secular Humanism
PO Box 664
Amherst, NY 14226
www.secularhumanism.org

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(for special announcements, blogs etc. Keeps you in touch!)

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