



THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF NEW MEXICO NEWSLETTER

January 2016

A Chapter of the American Humanist Association

<http://humanistsocietyofnm.org/>

<http://hsnm.wordpress.com>

president@humanistsocietyofnm.org

HSNM Meetings in Albuquerque

HSNM meetings are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.

Saturday, January 9th

HSNM Informal Meeting 10:00 AM - Noon

For HSNM members and their guests. For invitation or questions, please contact Ananda Parnell at 505-480-6377.

Highland High School Library
4700 Coal SE

Park in the SouthWest parking lot at Jefferson and Coal
There will be signs to guide you from there.

Refreshments provided.

Saturday, January 16th

HSNM Topical Discussion 10:00 AM - Noon

TBA

Special Collections Library 423 Central Ave. NE

Saturday, January 23rd

HSNM Speaker Meeting 10:00 AM - Noon

Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial

Special Collections Library 423 Central Ave. NE

Meetings by HSNM Affiliates are held throughout the month.

For more information please visit their websites.

Atheist Skeptical Kingdom of Albuquerque (www.meetup.com/ASK-Atheist-Skeptical-Kingdom-of-Albuquerque)

New Mexicans for Science and Reason (www.nmsr.org)

Freedom from Religion Albuquerque
(<http://www.meetup.com/FFRABQ/>)

Santa Fe Atheist Community
(<http://www.meetup.com/Santa-Fe-Atheist-Community>)

Roswatheists (<http://www.meetup.com/Roswatheists>)

Next Speaker Meeting:

December 20 was the anniversary of a very special day! “The anniversary of what?” you ask, “Vaspasian claims the title of Emperor in the year 69?” No. “The release of ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ in 1946?” Nope. “Uri Geller’s birthday?” Nooooo. Hint: It’s not the day that would live in infamy, but it did mention “breathtaking inanity.” Ah, now you guessed it. It’s the tenth anniversary of *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, when intelligent design went on trial! Our meeting will start with a viewing of the PBS’ Nova “Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial”. Following, we’ll ask for your thoughts about the debate between evolution and intelligent design: should it be taught in secular schools and what’s happened in the ten years since *Dover*. Please come, watch and participate.

Road Runner Results!

At last year’s Human Light Party we raised \$390 and gathered food donations for the Road Runner Food Bank! Thanks goes out to Jerry Wesner for delivering the donations to the bank.

The Humanist Society of New Mexico
A Nonprofit Corporation

A Chapter of the American Humanist Association
Member of The New Mexico Coalition of Reason

The purpose of HSNM is to promote ethical,
naturalistic, democratic Humanism among its
members and within its community.

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Ananda Parnell: President
Randall Wall: Vice President/Speaker Programs
Cynthianne Yabut: Secretary
Zelda Gatuskin: Past President
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Send Newsletter submissions to:
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HSNM dues are now
paid separately from AHA dues, visit www.
americanhumanist.org for more information
about the American Humanist Association.

Humanism is an ethical philosophy that derives
its principles from science and reason rather than
theology. It asserts the worth and dignity of ev-
ery person, advocates personal liberty tempered
by social and environmental responsibility, and
promotes democracy, compassion, and justice. It
sees human beings as natural organisms, whose
values arise from culture and experience and
holds humanity responsible for its own affairs.

What Is Happiness?

by Zelda Gatuskin, HSNM Past President

Are clams really happy? And if so, why? The phrase
“happy as a clam” is a truncated form of “happy as a
clam at high tide,” which explains the clams’ source of
contentment - feeling safe, being left alone. At low tide,
the clam is in danger of being dug up and eaten. Until
I went googling for “happy as a clam,” I had in mind
something along the lines of a happy, simple organism
drifting along the sea floor unencumbered by thought or
worry. Simple and satisfied, that is what “happy” means
to me in this world of complexity and competition.
Happy as a clam as opposed to irritable like an oyster,
who must constantly worry bits of grit into precious
gems. Now I find out that the clam also has its worries,
and is only happy in high tide when it is safely moving
with the waves.

Even the simplest creature has stress. Staying alive is
always at the top of the To Do list. I’m looking for that
feeling of happiness that goes beyond, “Whew! Avoided
disaster that time.” Humans, the most complex creatures,
are capable of solving our survival problems very well.
Our failure to do so reflects a failure of vision and will,
not a lack of knowledge or resources. (We’ve conquered
hunger but not greed.) As a result, for all of our superior
survival skills, we are still stressed out, tired, angry,
insecure and worried. When we speak of “escaping” we
are not referring to predators but our own overactive
minds. Thus the many meditative practices, physical
regimens like jogging and biking, not to mention all
manner of herbs, foods, drinks and drugs that are used
to quiet the usual stream of fretful thoughts. Sadly,
“happiness” in the twenty-first century too often equates
to putting the brain in “off” position, because we have
been so depleted by anxiety and muddlement from
constant exhausting worries.

Thinkers across the ages have sought the formula for
Utopia, that happy society where social good and
personal freedom are in balance. We already know
that the formula starts with keeping people safe and
secure. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
clearly enumerates our fundamental needs. Filling
those needs, for all of humanity, must have seemed a
remote possibility at the time the UDHR was enacted
in 1948. It seems less so now, given our industrial and
technological advances. In fact, it seems quite doable, if
we could divert all the resources we spend on destroying

people, places and cultures to protecting them.

I don't know anyone who has been "happy as a clam" lately. Some are sitting pretty at high tide, while others burrow under, but we are all keenly aware of how the tide turns, and that at any time our own "turn" may come. We are not happy with the world. We are not able to be mindless of it. What we, as individuals and as nations, do next matters more than it ever has in human history, because our influence spreads so much farther, so much faster. That is certainly a good reason to be fearful of those who wish us ill, but it should also encourage us in our personal activism, whatever form that takes. We are not clams at the mercy of the tides, we each have some power, and together we have quite a lot. Let's use it for good, and learn to be both happy and mindful.

The Charms of Faith: How to Understand Faith-Talk Naturalistically (and Charitably)

by Andy Normal

Humanist Network News at AmericanHumanist.org

Is faith a good thing? In past columns, I have argued that we must outgrow our reliance on faith: that despite its reputation as a virtue, it is actually an obstacle to moral progress. In this and future columns, I hope to elaborate my critique, and shape it into one that the world's faithful cannot ignore.

Perhaps this is a fool's errand. Doubts about the wisdom of faith have circulated for thousands of years, and still, billions of our fellow humans take faith to be ethically permissible, even virtuous. There are signs, though, of a new openness to the possibility that faith is morally problematic. The clearest sign is the popular success of Sam Harris's hard-hitting polemic *The End of Faith*—a bracingly direct argument that, in a world with weapons of mass destruction, faith is a luxury our species can no longer afford.

While I do not have Mr. Harris's wit or rhetorical skill, I think I can accomplish something more modest. My aim is to construct a case that is so patently fair-minded that dismissing it as strident or doctrinaire is simply not an option. Where the power and urgency of Mr. Harris's writing causes many to write him off, a more patient and understanding treatment may prove harder to brush aside.

Let us begin by trying to understand why faith is such an important part of so many lives. We non-believers are often quick to paint faith as one or another kind of cognitive failing: the result of childhood brainwashing or an inability to face facts (such as one's mortality), a product of willful self-delusion, a deficit of scientific or logical acumen, etc. Accurate or not, such characterizations make believers guarded and defensive, and consequently less willing to rethink their positions. In the interests, then, of respectful and genuinely transformative dialogue, let's try a different tack. Let's look at how faith—and faith-talk—actually function in people's lives, and attempt to understand how it aids and enriches those lives.

Some religions would have us believe that faith triggers a chain of supernatural events: faith pleases God, who reciprocates by stamping the believer's ticket to heaven. It is hard for us nonbelievers to see how anyone can take such claims seriously, and I am inclined to think that "believers" themselves only half believe them. The religious folk I talk to, at any rate, are better described (as Daniel Dennett has hypothesized) as "believers in belief"—unable to take God-talk both literally and seriously, but able, nonetheless, to believe that the pretense of belief—suitably reinforced by religious pronouncements, practices and communities—helps to uphold moral standards. I suspect that, among relatively well-educated religionists, "believers in belief" outnumber true believers.

In any case, the worldly functioning of faith-talk plays a critical role in reinforcing the beliefs and attitudes of the faithful. Now if you listen to such talk, both sympathetically and intently, you will find that exhortations to "have faith" function in at least three distinct (but often entangled) ways. Faith-talk is used to cultivate psychological health, it's used to promote social cohesion, and it's used to exempt certain beliefs from critical scrutiny. We seculars are particularly attuned to the last of these functions, and are rightly concerned about the harms that frequently attend such functioning.

As we shall see, the concept of faith works to immunize certain orthodoxies from scrutiny and humanizing reform, thereby blocking moral progress. We'll take a closer look at this phenomenon later. The point at present is that believers are more attuned to the first two functions of faith-talk, and more aware than we

seculars tend to be of their associated benefits. Frequent exposure to beneficial uses of faith-talk, in other words, can create a deep, visceral impression of faith's value and importance. It is important for seculars to understand this, for the impression can make it hard for believers to countenance faith's darker dimensions.

So how, exactly, does faith-talk confer psychological and social benefits? "Have faith!" is used, like "Hang in there," to comfort the afflicted and forestall crippling despair. It's used to encourage, shore up confidence, and inspire hope. It's used to bolster flagging resolve. Comfort, hope, courage, confidence, resolve, avoidance of despair—these are genuine human needs, and important elements of psychological health. Religions have long used faith-talk to nurture positive outlooks and attitudes, and there is evidence that it works. Some studies, for example, have found that religious people tend to be happier than nonreligious people.

It is not clear, however, that supernatural assumptions play any essential role in the mood-boosting power of faith-talk. Could suitably designed secular language, with accompanying rituals, work equally well, or perhaps better, to help people remain resolutely hopeful? Or would subtracting out the supernatural agent drain the exhortations of psychological benefit? It's worth noting that people sometimes use expressions like "Hang in there" and "Keep hope alive" to comparable effect, but we don't really know whether naturalizing faith-talk would result in an equally effective mechanism.

The religious also use faith-talk to promote social cohesion. Human beings are social animals, and the fundamental challenge of social existence involves finding a recipe for peaceful coexistence and fruitful collaboration. Key ingredients in any such recipe, of course, are trust and commitment—arguably the most important stabilizers of social contracts. By extolling faith, and urging one another to "keep the faith," co-religionists seem to induce unusually high levels of interpersonal trust. And this, too, seems to work; in one ingenious study, the mere mention of words with

religious overtones was found to "prime" test subjects to be more trusting.

In a related study, religious words primed test subjects to be more generous and observant of shared commitments. Thus, religious communes tend to last twice as long as secular ones, and the most long-lived institutions on the planet are all religious. (Nations, corporations, nonprofits, political parties—none of these secular institutions come close to rivaling the Catholic Church, let alone Judaism, for longevity.) Co-religionists achieve levels of solidarity that nonbelievers rarely match, and researchers are now hypothesizing that our propensity for faith may have evolved because it reinforced the social solidarity our ancestors needed to survive. If, as seems to be the case, a strong need for social cohesion is actually coded into our genes, then reliance on faith could just be the brain executing an ancient evolutionary logic: one more powerful and primordial than conscious reason. If so, the faithful merit sympathetic understanding, and more respect than "strident" atheists often accord them.

Can we naturalize faith-talk without compromising its capacity to function as a social "glue"—as a bonding agent for moral communities? Again, we don't know. Some religious societies are riven by sectarian tensions, and some secular societies (e.g. the Scandinavian countries) are comparatively cohesive and free of societal dysfunction. The evidence we have, however, remains inconclusive. The matter merits further study.

In the next installment of *Brainstormin'*, we'll look at the third function of faith-talk—its use to suppress doubt and dissent—and examine its perils and seductive allure.

Let's Lighten Up

What should you do when you see an endangered animal eating an endangered plant?

George Carlin

Food For Thought Quote

"Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact."

Henry James