



THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF NEW MEXICO NEWSLETTER

November 2015

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, November 14th

HSNM Informal Meeting 11:00 AM - 1:00 PM

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

Albuquerque Center for Peace and Justice, 202 Harvard SE.

Refreshments provided.

Saturday, November 21st

HSNM Topical Discussion 10:00 AM - Noon

Morality and Computer Technology

Special Collections Library 423 Central Ave. NE

Saturday, November 28th

HSNM Speaker Meeting 10:00 AM - Noon

HSNM General Membership Meeting

led by HSNM President Ananda Parnell

see President's Message

Free and open to the public

Botts Hall, Special Collections Library

423 Central Ave. NE, Albuquerque

Humanist Minute: TBA

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>)

President's Message
by Ananda Parnell

Our November Speaker meeting will be used as a General Membership Meeting and all HSNM members and prospective members are urged to attend. Bring your questions and ideas for the HSNM Governing Board. We will be reviewing our meeting schedule, formats and locations, and we need your input. There's a lot to talk about. I am especially interested in your thoughts about moving more of our activities to Highland High School, where we could more easily be joined by the Humanists of Highland (most students do not have transportation to travel far from the campus). Closer involvement with the Humanists of Highland would support these brave and inquiring students; and they have a lot to offer us as well with their boundless energy and eagerness to do humanist work in the community.

Also at our November meeting, we will devote some time to remembering our friends who have passed, most recently Leland Franks and Jack Fuller. If you are

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.

Officers/Committees

Ananda Parnell: President
Randall Wall: Vice President/Speaker Programs
Cynthianne Yabut: Secretary
Zelda Gatuskin: Past President
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line for Newsletter submissions is the third Friday
of each month. Website submissions may be sent
to president@humanistsocietyofnm.org. HSNM
dues are now paid separately from AHA dues, vis-
it www.americanhumanist.org for more informa-
tion 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.

missing someone who used to be part of HSNM, please
come share your thoughts and memories of these special
humanists.

If you have specific questions for myself, the GB or the
membership that you would like to have addressed at
the meeting, please let me know.

Obituary for Leland Franks

Leland Franks, 87, passed away peacefully on Tuesday,
October 13, 2015. Born on May 11, 1928 in Huntington,
WV to Nora Beldner and Harold Franks, Leland grew
up in WV and graduated from Logan High School.
He moved to ABQ in 1953 from Lexington, KY after
graduating from UK Law School. The Army called him
to Albuquerque, and he stayed. He began his career as
an accountant but soon changed to law. Self-employed
for most of his career, he had many distinguished clients.

A past president of the Humanist Society of NM, he
enjoyed going to their meetings. Up until about six
months ago, he would go hiking every Sunday with a
group of Humanist friends. Leland and his wife would
take his children and grandchildren to CO on annual
vacations for a number of years, and many great
memories were made on those trips.

He was preceded in death by his mother Nora B. Franks.

Surviving are his loving wife Judy; daughter, Lela
Tomlinson, of WA; son Adam (Sandra), of WA; daughter,
Vivian (Calvin) Wisemann, of ABQ; and step-son Dan
Engler of PA. Also survived by his five grandchildren:
Amanda Franks, Jacob (Amanda) Franks, Aaron,
Carlee, and Celina Wisemann; and his two great-
grandsons and one due in November to Celina
Wisemann and Daniel Duran; step-grandchildren Josh,
Nic and Jacie Engler and four step-great-grandchildren.
Also survived by his cousin, Michael (Susan) Rancer and
half-sister Linda Beebe.

Learning from Leland

by Zelda Gatuskin, HSNM past president

Our dear friend and devoted HSNM leader, Leland
Franks, died on October 13. When Leland spoke so
movingly at Jack Fuller's memorial not long ago, he
knew his own time remaining was very short. Loyal,
caring and courageous to the end, Leland led by

example. Leland will be remembered for so many fine qualities, among them his gentle nature and sharp wit. We should remember, too, that Leland had a lot to do with the practical side of building and sustaining our organization. He had a special mission these past couple of years - since really, really, really retiring from the board - which was to make HSNM more like a family. He recognized that the expansion of HSNM's membership and activities had led to an organization quite different from that small group of friends who used to meet in a living room to talk about progressive ideas. His answer: Invite everyone to his living room. The ice cream social he and Judy hosted in 2014 was a great success, and there were plans for another in the works when Leland's health took a turn. The reception held at Leland and Judy's home on October 18 was not exactly the carefree event we had looked forward to, but once again Leland did succeed in bringing folks together. Leland made us all feel loved, he loved HSNM, and he performed his many duties with diligence, a smile and a light heart. He really was a Happy Humanist. When we are missing him, let's try to be more like him.

Humanism's Moral Depths: An 'Abraham and Isaac' Story for Nonbelievers

by Andy Norman

www.americanhumanist.org

The biblical story of Abraham and Isaac poses a crucial test for believers. If God commanded you, as he did Abraham, to slaughter your own son, would you do it? If, like Abraham, you'd plunge a knife into his chest, then congratulations! You've passed the test! Your faith is true, your priorities correct, and you understand the kind of unquestioning devotion that God demands of us. That, presumably, is the moral of the story: unthinking obedience above all.

The story pits devotion to God against basic moral decency and celebrates the subjugation of the latter to the former. This speaks volumes about the value system at the heart of the so-called "Abrahamic" faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So what if you have to traumatize your son, or even kill him, to win God's favor? The former is temporary, the latter is forever. What's a child's life worth, next to eternal salvation? The Bible's answer is clear: not much.

In fairness to the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths, most would fail God's test. They don't allow the official

priorities of their faith to derange their value systems so completely. For this, we can thank goodness. (No, really: copycat expressions of Abrahamic devotion would presumably be much more common were it not for our innate, and evolved, sense of goodness.) Of course, those of us with a functioning moral compass are apt to regard Abraham as having failed a basic test of moral decency. Celebrate Abraham for traumatizing his son? Now that's crazy, not to mention morally abhorrent! The Abraham story is a litmus test for us, too.

The story of Abraham and Isaac compels believers to reflect on the relative importance of two cherished values—care for family and obedience to God. Which value, it implicitly asks, is more fundamental? The Bible itself clearly celebrates Abraham's priorities, urging believers to adopt a similar ordering of values.

Can a comparable story shed light on the priorities of humanists? Imagine the following actually taking place: one fine day, the clouds open up, and God appears, manifestly there for all to see. He (assuming he's male) descends to earth, speaks to us, and apologizes for being hard to reach. He performs miracles at will and cheerfully submits to a battery of scientific experiments. Incredulous scientists come up with ingenious ways of testing his supernatural credentials, and again and again, the results come back positive: God's properties turn out to be utterly unlike those of the natural entities we've come to know. Science and Nature publish articles detailing the findings, and God's existence becomes a matter of scientific consensus. The ranks of believers swell dramatically. Imagine, however, that controversy still rages on the atheist blogs. Lifelong atheists are split, some renouncing what they now regard as the "failed hypothesis" of atheism. A small minority issues frantic calls for atheists to stand their ground.

The story, of course, brings core humanist convictions into conflict. Suppose you had to choose between your commitment to atheism and your commitment to open-mindedness (or if you prefer, your commitment to being responsive to the evidence)? Which, it implicitly asks, is the more fundamental conviction?

What would you do? I know what I'd do: I'd believe. I dislike being proved wrong, but I'd get over it. I'd swallow my pride and do the epistemically responsible thing. Why? Because I'm a humanist; evidence persuades us.

I don't think I'd be alone. We can say, with utter confidence, that the overwhelming majority of humanists and atheists would do the same. Why? Because our commitment to open-mindedness runs deeper than our atheism. Impassioned "new atheists" are often accused of being as dogmatic in their unbelief as believers are in their belief. Atheism, some say, is just another religion. But is this true? The accusation's absurdity can be dramatized by imagining how truly dogmatic atheists would respond to the situation.

Suppose that a band of hell-bent atheists rally to defend their worldview. "True atheists," they tell themselves, do not lose their resolve in the face of evidence. Their commitment can withstand such shocks. These (imaginary) "true atheists" take pride in their tenacious conviction, and compile a set of stories honoring the strength of their heroes. One of these tells the story of Skepticus, the father of true atheism. Skepticus was there when God descended from the clouds. He examined God personally, and replicated all the relevant tests. The evidence became overwhelming, but heroically, Skepticus held out. He refused to believe, always demanding more proof. Imagine Skepticus being revered for his heroic closed-mindedness, as Abraham is celebrated for his heroic obedience. Perhaps the story of Skepticus becomes a litmus test for inclusion in the ranks of the "true atheists." If you can't show similarly skeptical resolve, say the true atheists, we don't want you in our club.

If atheism were a religious stance, this is what it would look like. But of course, this is not how atheists respond to evidence. In fact, the scenario is patently absurd. This testifies, I think, to the injustice of the "dogmatic atheism" charge.

We humanists, then, are unlikely to face the question of whether doctrinaire atheists belong in our club. But we can pose the hypothetical question: If we did have to make such a decision, what would it be? I advocate an inclusive humanism, and generally urge humanists not to exclude anyone who is open to being persuaded. But

I would, somewhat reluctantly, exclude our imaginary doctrinaire atheists. Why? Because they're resolutely unpersuadable. You can have a productive conversation with someone who is open-minded, but you can't with someone who isn't. Far better, in other words, to flip the "true atheist"'s litmus test on its head, the same way we inverted the Abraham-and-Isaac test. Skepticus didn't pass a test for true atheism, he failed a basic test of humanism.

This thought experiment shows us what I think is important about humanism: atheism is not central to who we are. Open-mindedness, on the other hand—the willingness to be persuaded—is essential. Our primary commitments are to open-mindedness, inquiry and evidence. Our atheism, where it exists, is secondary.

Commitment to open-mindedness is a curious thing, for openness appears to be the very opposite of commitment. The two seem to be in zero-sum tension: more of one looks to necessitate less of the other. What does it mean, anyway, to be committed to openness? That we're resolutely irresolute? That we tolerate even intolerance? That we avoid commitment? That we avoid unconditional commitments? And what of our commitment to open-mindedness? Is it conditional or unconditional? Does a conditional commitment even count as a commitment?

There is a profound puzzle here, and humanist integrity—and humanist courage—demand its solution. How can we be resolutely open-minded, and still have the courage of our convictions? In coming installments of *Brainstormin'*, I'll take a closer look at the nature of humanist conviction, and explain how it differs from theistic faith. For in this difference lies humanism's signature contribution to human civilization. Civilization desperately needs humanism's solution to this puzzle, for it is the key to a sustainable future. We humanists must learn to regard it with justifiable pride, and champion it without apology.

Food For Thought Quote

"We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility of our future."
George Bernard Shaw