



The Enlightenment



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Twenty Years of Humanism in London – 2000-2019

As the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. On December 31st, 2019, the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA) will cease to exist after a sustained run of twenty years.

The organization that became HALA began in January of 2000 when a small group of members of the Unitarian Fellowship of London (UFL) met to organize a study group for the purpose of learning more about and promoting the attributes of humanism. Humanism being:

A proactive life stance guided by the principle of rational thought, scientific inquiry, ethics, responsibility, compassion, fairness and equality, without belief in the supernatural.

This small informal group gradually acquired more members and in late 2003 it was decided to become an affiliate of the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC). Thus, the Humanist Association of London and Area came into being in January of 2004. Membership grew to as many as 80 individuals, meeting monthly and engaging in other activities as well. And now that HALA is coming to an end, it is reasoned that it would be useful to prepare a record of happenings that have occurred over the last twenty years. This is what follows in an article entitled “The History of The Humanist Association of London and Area.” (DAH).

The History of the Humanist Association of London and Area

By Don Hatch

The entity that evolved into HALA began as a small study group at the Unitarian Fellowship of London (UFL) on January 6, 2000, with the following people present: Harold Koehler, Dr. Murray Hoover, Dr. Elvins Spencer, Marianne Nyhof, Camille Van Daele, and Claire Van Daele-Boseret. Dr. Goldwin Emerson, Dr. Bill Chefurka, and Reinhardt Schmoll from Woodstock joined shortly after. The prime mover was Harold Koehler, who served as secretary until he passed away in November 2007. Most meetings consisted of a speaker on a topic related to humanism, followed by a discussion. By 2003, as many as twenty people were attending these meetings. A few of the attendees were also members of the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC) and some of these people suggested that it would be worth investigating the possibility of becoming an affiliate of this organization. A set of Bylaws was drawn up and the group became the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA) in January 2004. The first president was Derek Kaill, who was really the instigator of becoming an affiliate of HAC. The first *Enlightenment* was published in 2005.

As membership grew, it became desirable to move to a larger meeting room, and in September 2008 meetings began to be held at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, a more central location. The format of our meetings remained the same. Attendance gradually grew and it became normal for 40 or more to attend each monthly session. At HALA's ten-year mark at the end of 2009, there were 78 members.

In the autumn of 2009, Goldie Emerson and Don Hatch went through the fairly complicated process of applying to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) requesting charitable status for HALA. We were elated to learn early in 2010 that charitable status had been granted. In order to qualify, we had to draw up a Constitution outlining the purpose of HALA, among other things. In that document it is stated that:

"The purpose of the Association shall be to educate and increase the public's understanding of the principles of secular worldviews, including humanism, through the provision of seminars, conferences, and newsletters."

We considered our regular meetings to be seminars, our special Wolf Hall events to be conferences, and we deemed the *Enlightenment* to be our newsletter. Because we operate in the CRA category of education, we kept this in mind as we planned our activities. Those who donated money to HALA received receipts that reduced their taxes. Most of the money raised by donations went to the procurement of Wolf Hall speakers.

Throughout the years, we have had a wide variety of speakers talking on a variety of topics at our meetings. Many have been from the faculty at UWO and some have been our own members. Others have come from out of town. Many topics in addition to those related directly to humanism and secularism have been presented and discussed. These topics include cosmology, the existence or non-existence of god, multiculturalism, justice, dying with dignity, the economy, politics, ethics, philosophy, and global warming. A number of meetings have concerned various health matters. Why should health be a topic of discussion at humanist meetings? Well, one of the aims of humanists is to strive for a happy and contented lifestyle, and it is hard to be happy when you are sick. In other words, prevention of sickness should be of prime concern not just to humanists, but everybody. In particular, I remember Dr. David Spence telling us that strokes can be prevented by not smoking and by adhering to a proper diet.

Ten or more years ago, we asked three HALA members to tell us how they became a humanist at one of our regular meetings. This proved to be a successful and enjoyable evening, and since then we continued annually to have two or three members tell us how about their journey to humanism, and what humanism means to them. The content of each presentation was usually published in a forthcoming *Enlightenment*.

In addition to regular meetings, there have been other HALA activities. These include special events, social gatherings, our web site, and *The Enlightenment*. The special events were usually held at the Wolf Performance Hall in the London Central Library. The first, held in 2009, was a four-part presentation celebrating Charles Darwin's 200th birthday and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Two of the four presenters were our members, André Lachance and Don Santor. The topic at the two 2011 events was the "Evolution of Belief." Presenters were Gretta Vosper and our own Dr. Rod Martin. In 2012 Tarek Fatah spoke on multiculturalism. The 2013 special event was a debate held at UWO. The topic: "Be it resolved that public funding for Roman Catholic Schools in Ontario be abolished." On the pro side was Justin Trottier of CFI in Toronto, and on the con side was Patrick Dunn, formerly of the London Catholic School Board. Of course, we concurred that Justin won the debate. Two Wolf Hall events were held in 2014.

The first speaker was Dan Barker, a co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation based in Madison, Wisconsin. The topic was "Losing Faith in Faith." Later in 2014, the Reverend Bob Ripley, who became an atheist and left the clergy, gave a talk entitled "Life Beyond Belief: A Preacher's Deconversion." There was no Wolf Hall event in 2015. In 2016 Hemant Mehta, the Friendly Atheist, was the speaker. His topic was "Why Are Young People Leaving Religion?" For 2017 the speaker was Raheel Raza. Her topic was, "How Muslims are Embracing the 21st Century." That was our last Wolf Hall event.

Our social gatherings entailed potluck summer picnics in July and Solstice Celebrations in December. Delightful summer picnics were held at the Chefurkas' rural location for a number of years, then at the Schmolls' in Woodstock in 2012 and at Walter and Laurie's residence in London in 2013. In 2014 the picnic was held at Will Sanderson's home in Sparta, and then for two years at the home of Pauline and Peter Evans. We very much appreciated the hospitality of these members. For the last three years, Carl Goldberg has organized picnics at Springbank Park.



Picnic at the Sanderson's - 2014



Solstice Celebrations have been held at UFL, Tollpuddle meeting room, and in 2011 at the home of Alison and Jon Hore. We are grateful to Alison and Jon for opening up their home on this occasion. For several years Solstice celebrations were held at the 427 Wing near the London airport. In 2017, 2018 and 2019, Solstice celebrations were held at the activities centre at Carl Goldberg's condo complex.

Solstice Celebrations at 427 Wing - 2014

The HALA web site was first developed and maintained by John Pope, who is no longer with HALA. For a few years, the site was maintained by Alison Cunningham, but was later revised and upgraded by Rod Martin who also maintained it. A new web site emerged in 2019 and pod casts of regular meetings also began.

As already mentioned above, the first issue of *The Enlightenment* was published in April 2005, a little over a year after HALA was officially formed. The aims as stated at that time were:

1. To inform members of up-coming meetings and events.
2. To present interesting and sometimes provocative articles that invite comments, discussion, and criticism.
3. To present articles written by our members, and others, that will be of interest to humanists.

As things have turned out, *The Enlightenment* has evolved to be not so much a newsletter, but more of a mini-journal containing articles of a philosophical or academic bent on subjects that hopefully will be of

interest to humanists. Instead of using *The Enlightenment* to advise members and friends of up-coming meetings and events, separate monthly notices were sent out advising of these activities. Meeting notices were also listed on the HALA web site. We have been fortunate that a significant number of our members have contributed articles in various *Enlightenments*. They include Goldie Emerson, Jackie Emerson, Derek Kaill, Tony Hewitt, Don Santor, Rod Martin, Catherine Campbell, Jim Cranwell, Bob Harrington, Kate Balogh, You-Sheng Li, Joyce Orchard, Maria Stuhlemmer, Marianne Nyhof, Garth Santor, Duncan Watterworth, and the author of this commentary. Non-members who have contributed are Reverend Felicia Urbanski, Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova, John K. Nixon, Henry Beisel, Madeline Weld, and Rosslyn Ives. We encouraged all members who like to write articles for the purpose of expressing their views and opinions to send them in.

Another outside activity has been marching in the annual London Pride Parade which we have done for a number of years. HALA is very concerned about human rights issues and supporting the LGBTQ community contributes in this regard. Brad Banks, Esther Goldberg, Brian Prachar, and Sherry Keddie have been the prime movers in this activity. As many as 21 HALA members and friends have participated in Pride Parades. The picture at right shows some of the Pride Parade marchers with their attractive blue t-shirts and colourful umbrellas.



Pride Parade Marchers

Like all non-profit organizations, HALA could not exist without dedicated volunteers to serve on the Board of Directors and work at other positions as well. Over the years, HALA has been fortunate to be able to recruit sufficient qualified and dedicated people to fill all seven positions on the Board of Directors. A few years ago, it became apparent that it was getting harder and harder to find enough volunteers to sit on the Board, and it was reasoned that perhaps what was needed were a few young people to serve and fill vacant spots. We were successful in recruiting three younger people, but two had to leave for personal reasons. The result was that only four directors were available to serve on the 2019 Board and no one was available to take over as president and steer HALA into the future. Nevertheless, the four decided to try and keep HALA afloat with Carl Goldberg as acting president, hoping to recruit a full Board, including a president for 2020. Unfortunately, this did not happen, and the only logical way ahead was to wind HALA up at the end of 2019. And HALA is not unique in this regard. Many non-profit organizations are having difficulty finding volunteers.

Looking back, as a person who joined the UFL study group in its second or third year, I have fond memories of being a HALA member and serving in several positions. We were a group of like-minded people wishing to learn about how to live in a secular democratic society without belief in the supernatural, and I think we succeeded for many years. On hearing about the end of HALA, one long-term member told me, "The ending of HALA is a sad thing. I am fortunate to have been associated with HALA and the people I know as a result of my involvement." A former member told me how becoming a member of HALA helped her in the transition she was going through from being a believer to a non-believer in the supernatural. We were, indeed, a friendly community of secularists trying to follow our purpose as stated above.

As already stated, HALA could not have prospered without dedicated volunteers to serve on the Board of Directors and in other positions. So, at this point I would like to recognize the following: Presidents have

been Derek Kaill, Don Hatch and Rod Martin, as well as acting president Carl Goldberg. Vice Presidents have been Don Hatch, Rod Martin, and Jon Hore. Secretaries have been Harold Koehler, Kate Balogh, Don Hatch, Carolyn Rowland, and Elizabeth Bright-See. Treasurers have been Richard Gibbens, Claire Van Daele-Boseret, Olive Porter, and Brian Prachar. Other Board Members have been John Pope, Goldie Emerson, Bill Chefurka, Walter Heywood, Charlotte Kurn, Terri DeCaire, André Lachance, Peter Evans, Ed Ashman, Dave Mabee, Jim Cranwell, Brad Banks, Carl Goldberg, Sherry Keddie, and Celina Everling. In other roles, Bill Chefurka, Goldie Emerson, and Jon Hore have served on the program committee, and Bill and Goldie, along with Marianne Nyhof, have served on nominating committees. For many years Jackie Emerson dutifully provided tea, coffee and cookies. This task was taken over by Marianne Nyhof for a period and in recent years Imran Atta has kindly looked after refreshments. For a time, Camille Van Daele provided classical music before our meetings. Finally, I want to make special mention of Jackie Emerson's contribution in proof reading and improving my *Enlightenment* articles over the years. HALA is greatly indebted to all these volunteers.

Over the years many photos have been taken at HALA events. Rod Martin has over 150 in his collection. Three of these have been shown above and a few more are shown below.

A Selection of Photos Taken at HALA Events



Peter the Host With Bob, Carolyn and Cam



Happy Picnickers in Peter's Backyard



Happy Pride Indeed



Great Pot-Luck Food at Sparta Picnic

More Photos



Attractive and Informative Humanist Promotions Prepared by Brad Banks



Adriaan Mak at the Keyboard with Singers at a Winter Solstice Celebration