



The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the
Humanist Association of London and Area

Visit Our Web Site at www.humanists-london.org

Volume 10

Number 2

Special Issue
February 2014

How I Became a Humanist

At the January 8th meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area, members Goldie Emerson and Rod Martin spoke about how they became a Humanist, and what Humanism means to them. Their bios are shown below and their complete presentations are contained in the following pages.



Goldie Emerson

Goldwin (Goldie) Emerson began his teaching career in 1950 in a one-room rural elementary school. Later he became a principal in schools in Northern Ontario and London. In 1965 he became a professor in the Faculty of Education at Western University, where he is now Professor Emeritus. Goldwin has a Bachelor of Arts (Western), Bachelor of Education and Master of Education (University of Toronto), and Ph.D. (University of Ottawa). Since retiring, he has lectured in the United States, Canada, and China on the philosophy of the American educator, John Dewey. His interests include travel, art and carving. Goldwin writes a column on Spirituality and Ethics in the London Free Press and has also written several articles in the Humanist Perspectives. He is a life-member of the Humanist Association of Canada.



Rod Martin

Rod Martin was born in Kitchener and grew up in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. After high school he attended a Bible college in Toronto where he met his wife, Myra. After marrying they moved to Quebec to do pastoral work with a French-language Evangelical Christian church. Over several years, Rod had growing doubts about his Christian beliefs and eventually decided to leave the ministry and resume his education. He completed a PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Waterloo in 1984, and has been a professor of psychology at Western since then. Rod has been a member of HALA for about 5 years. He and Myra have three adult children and 6 granddaughters.

How I Became a Humanist

By Goldie Emerson

Thanks for this opportunity to talk about why and how I became a humanist. I won't spend very long on talking about my religious background prior to turning to humanism. This is partly because my experiences with organized religion have been quite unremarkable.

As a 10 and 11 year-old child I remember sitting through some very long sermons in a small Presbyterian country church. It was perhaps fortunate for me that this particular church closed down due to small attendance and to the fact that about 10 years earlier the United Church was formed in 1925. As you may know the United Church absorbed members from the Presbyterians as well as the Methodists and the Congregationalist churches.

Later, as an early teen I attended a nearby Pentecostal Church. For a short time I found their members to be energetic in their singing, their prayers and even their lively sermons. It was not unusual for one of the members who not only stood on his chair, but reached his hand upward in prayer. He believed this method of prayer made him closer to God. Compared to the Presbyterians there was a rather refreshing atmosphere of unpredictability to each Sunday service.

As I grew a little older I began to look more critically at what Pentecostals were saying and believing and it was not long before I stopped attending their services. I then went to the United Church for the next 20 years. The United Church ministers, generally speaking, were much more open to thinking freely about religion than did most of their congregants. When they were asked awkward questions such as whether or not they believed in a literal hell, or whether one had to be baptized to get to heaven or whether they really believed in evolution they were guarded and careful in their answers. It was as though they didn't really believe some of the things their members expected them to believe, but they didn't want to alienate any of their supporting members.

My next religious choice was the Unitarian/Universalists. Generally, Unitarians were an intellectually oriented group and I particularly enjoyed the wide variety of topics they talked about and also the questions and discussions at each meeting. Their meetings were somewhat similar to our present humanist meetings. When the Unitarians decided to hire a full-time minister the pattern of their meetings seemed to change. Although they still possessed intellectual curiosity, they became less free in exploring all topics and became more attuned to whatever their ministers at the time felt were the most appropriate ideas that would be accepted by most of their members, most of the time. Funding a minister and financing a church building were always large financial concerns. Thus, the practical matter of balancing the beliefs of members ranging from atheists on one hand to semi-religious Christians on the other hand became a difficult, but, high priority.

When I turned to humanism, I felt free to think and act in ways that I could honestly accept. Here are a few of the main ideas of humanism that appeal to me.

1. Humanism offers me freedom along with responsibility. I am free to choose the values and morals I treasure most. Yet I am also responsible for the choices I make.
2. Humanism makes me feel connected with nature, with my world, and even with the vastness of this universe. I am a living part of all that is.

3. Humanism makes me grateful for this life and the opportunities I have been given. Mathematically, the chances of my being born as the individual I am, are infinitesimally small, but precious. This is not meant as a pompous statement. The same claim can be made by all humanists and, in fact, by all humans.
4. Humanism gives me hope. While fundamentalist religions hold back progress, humanism slowly creeps into main line religions. I even find some hope in the present pope. Most of his statements, made to purposely shake up his Council of Cardinals, are really humanistic. In some respects, he is, perhaps, a humanist without knowing it.
5. Humanism has a deep history and respect for science. Science, like humanism, asks us to question, to explore, to be curious about life, and to be willing to look at new evidence. These same principles that motivate science also encourage humanists to appreciate art, music, literature, and the steady development of our individual selves.
6. Humanism sensitizes us to our common humanity. It encourages us to look on people of other sexual preferences, ethnic backgrounds, male/female inequalities, health problems, and other differences in our human capacities with humane and kindly acceptance and concern.
7. Humanism engages in choices that can make our lives fuller and more complete. These include the exploration of euthanasia, stem cell research, good medical care, adequate housing, wholesome and plentiful food, and care for the needy.
8. Humanism explores ways of maintaining peaceful solutions to world conflicts.
9. Humanism promotes a healthy ecology and a vibrant environment.
10. Humanism is against bullying, violence, unfairness and unkindness.
11. Humanism emphasizes living to the fullest in the here and now rather than the uncertainty of an improbable afterlife.
12. Humanism eliminates the uncertainty that comes with feelings of having been born in sin and needing God's forgiveness.
13. Humanism encourages us to be rational and to make use of our human abilities to face everyday problems and to find everyday joys that enrich our lives.
14. Humanism teaches us to take control of our lives and our choices.
15. Humanism frees the human mind from superstition, mythology, religion, belief in miracles, and freedom from ignorance.
16. Humanism frees the mind from the untestable claims that there is a 50/50 chance that God exists.
17. Humanism frees the mind from the idea that only religious people can have moral and ethical principles.
18. Humanism teaches us that claims that God is unexplainable and incomprehensible are, in fact, no evidence and no explanation of God's existence at all.

19. Humanism stresses the importance of this life here and now.
20. Humanism holds the belief that a good mark of intelligence is the ability to live with the uncertainty of unanswered questions.
21. Humanism regrets that about 1/2 of Americans reject the concept of evolution.
22. Humanism works toward the goal of people being informed, reflective, alert, responsive, eager for understanding, and for achievement of the good.
23. Humanism strives to draw the best from, and make the best of, human life, in the span of one human lifetime.
24. Humanism works on the premise that there are no supernatural agencies in the universe.
25. Humanism denies the religious claims of some that it is right to hate gays, to deny health care and education to women, or to practice genital mutilation, or to amputate limbs as a punishment. It is wrong to stone adulterers to death, or extol suicide bombing or other terrorist acts.
26. Humanism, unlike some religious claims, does not advocate murder and torture for those who disagree with them.
27. Humanism believes that moral ideas have their life in the relationships among human beings in social settings. Morals and ethics are not handed to us by God.
28. Humanism, according to A. C. Grayling, “feeds the hearts and minds of followers with love, beauty, music, sunshine on the sea, the sound of rain on leaves, the company of friends and the satisfaction that comes from successful effort. Humanism believes that people should be free to think for themselves.”
When I am asked why I am a humanist, I wonder why we are not all humanists advocating for a better world?

How I Became a Humanist

By Rod A. Martin

My family background is Mennonite. Both my parents were born into Old Order Mennonite families in Waterloo County, Ontario. If you travel along the country roads around St. Jacobs and Elmira, you'll see people in plain dark clothing riding in horse-drawn buggies, living on prosperous farms without electricity, telephones, or other modern conveniences. You'll also see the name *Martin* on nearly every second mailbox. These people are all related to me in one-way or another.

However, my maternal grandparents had left the Mennonites long before I was born, and had converted to a small Evangelical Christian denomination known as the Plymouth Brethren. In doing so, they believed they had been born again, and had come to know God in a personal way by accepting Jesus Christ as their personal saviour, and it was in this faith that I was raised.

My father was a long-distance truck driver, and when I was six years old we moved from Kitchener to Sault Ste. Marie in northern Ontario, where he had found a job hauling loads of steel from the mill there to southern Ontario. Trucking was a difficult occupation, he was away from home for days at a time, and

he was not paid well. My mother was a stay-at-home mom, and I was the oldest of five children, all crammed into a tiny three-bedroom house in one of the poorer areas of the Sault.

Growing up, I knew what it meant to be poor: we sometimes had barely enough food, and we often wore second-hand clothing. Nonetheless, my memories of my childhood are generally positive, with carefree days of building forts in the bush with my friends, cycling to distant swimming holes and fishing spots, and exploring the town.

Although she had only a grade 8 education, my mother was an intelligent woman and an avid reader, and from her I and all my siblings gained a love of reading as well. Books became our ticket to a larger world of ideas and knowledge far beyond the constraints of our physical surroundings. I credit my mother for giving me a thirst for knowledge and love of learning that eventually took me far away from the world in which I was raised.

The focal point of our life was our Christian faith and the church. For the most part, while growing up my experience of religion was very positive. Our church was a close-knit community of people who cared for one another and helped each other in many ways. They believed in a God of love, and they sought to live a life of devotion to God, behaving ethically and responsibly, showing charity to others, and seeking to win others to their faith. For us, religion provided an all-consuming philosophy of life, a framework for viewing the world, and our purpose for living, which brought an inner sense of peace and contentment. I also witnessed the power of this faith in transforming people's lives; individuals who had been alcoholics and wife-abusers became sober, caring, productive citizens after coming to the faith.

Nonetheless, in looking back, I recognize that I started having doubts about it all at an early age. Along with the many positive aspects of this faith, there was a negative side: a narrowness and rigidity of thinking, and a legalistic, judgmental attitude. We were not allowed to go to dances or movies, drink alcohol, smoke, or play cards, and of course sex outside of marriage was completely taboo. We believed in creationism, thought that Darwin's theory of evolution was a lie from the devil, were violently opposed to legalized abortion, and would have been horrified at the idea of gay marriage.

During high school I was increasingly conflicted about my faith. This inner conflict had partly to do with intellectual doubts, but likely also with some feelings of attraction to all those supposedly sinful activities that my classmates were enjoying, like drinking and smoking, dancing and going to movies, which looked to me like more fun than going to church.

When I graduated from high school, I wasn't sure what to do with my life. Although my grades were among the highest in my graduating year, the idea of going to university was foreign and unimaginable, something that we thought only rich people could afford. After a miserable year of working at various jobs, including delivering milk door-to-door and labouring in the steel plant, I decided to go to Bible college in Toronto. Perhaps the study of the Bible and theology would help to dispel my doubts and put me back on the straight and narrow path of unwavering Christian devotion.

At Bible college I met my wife Myra, who had grown up in London, Ontario, in an evangelical Christian church similar to my own. We were married two years later, and shortly after our marriage we moved to Sherbrooke, Quebec, where we continued our education at a French-language evangelical Christian Bible school to prepare for ministerial work among Francophone Quebecers. I had enjoyed learning French in high school, and dreamed of becoming completely bilingual and immersing myself in the Quebecois culture. According to the Protestant faith I had grown up with, the Roman Catholic religion was an aberration of Christianity, and Catholics were lost souls living in idolatry and ignorance. So our goal was to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the heathen Catholics of Quebec and convert them to the true faith.

For the next four years we lived in Quebec and I worked in the ministry, conducting church services and preaching sermons every Sunday, performing marriages and funerals, leading Bible studies, youth groups, and summer camps, and doing evangelism work – *tout en français*.

Through it all, I continued to read books about theology, history, and science, and my doubts continued to grow. I became increasingly uncomfortable with the growing realization that much of what I had been taught to believe and was now teaching to others had no foundation in reality. Finally my doubts became so intense that I couldn't continue, and we moved back to Ontario where I decided to continue my education. My work as a pastor counseling church members and my own inner emotional struggles had given me an interest in psychology, and I decided to pursue this field of study. Over the next eight years, I completed a Bachelors, Masters, and PhD in psychology, while Myra and I began to raise our family of three children, and Myra also completed a diploma in nursing.

After finishing my PhD in 1984 I got a faculty position in the psychology department at the University of Western Ontario, and Myra and I have lived and raised our family here in London ever since. In the intervening years, I gradually let go of my Christian faith. It was a long process of first moving to a more liberal Christian theology and then eventually coming to the realization that I am an atheist. Letting go of the faith was not an easy thing for me to do. As I've said, there are many positive aspects of religion that were attractive to me – the sense of community, the philosophy of life that provides a sense of meaning and courage in the face of difficulty and adversity, the ethical values that give direction to life. Becoming an atheist for me was like experiencing the death of a loved one; I had to go through a long grieving process that lasted several years.

My wife is still a Christian, although at the more liberal end of the spectrum now, and we have learned to accept and respect one another while maintaining our differing views. About seven years ago I discovered the Humanist Association of London and Area, and here I feel that I have found a group of people with whom I share a common world view and a sense of kinship. I greatly appreciate the warm friendships that I have made here at HALA.

In thinking about what Humanism means to me, I still value the positive aspects of religion that I experienced while growing up, and I think many of these are possible without requiring a belief in God, the supernatural, or an afterlife. To me, Humanism is not merely a rejection of God and religion, but something much more positive and life-affirming. I think of Humanism as a way of life that can take the place of religion for atheists and agnostics. Ideally, I think Humanism can provide that caring and supportive community, and a context in which each one of us is encouraged in our quest to live a good and meaningful life. Humanism can encourage us to develop a coherent philosophy of life, drawing from the insights of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers such as Epicurus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, as well as religious thinkers like the Buddha, to develop a secular form of spirituality and ethics.

I'm not interested in bashing religion, but in building links and finding common ground with believers, and working together with them to try to make this world a better place for everyone. I've always had a strong awareness that I have only one life to live, and at the end of it, I want to be able to look back and feel that it was not wasted, that I lived it thoughtfully and well, and that in some small way I left the world a better place. That to me is the essence of Humanism.

Editors Note This is the fourth HALA meeting in which members have given presentations on “How I Became a Humanist.” This format has proved to be very popular and will no doubt be repeated at future meetings.