



The Enlightenment



**The Newsletter of the
Humanist Association of London and Area**
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Marie Curie – Physicist, Chemist and Agnostic

Maria Sklodowska was born in Warsaw Poland in 1867, the daughter of a secondary school teacher. Her mother, a staunch Roman Catholic, died when she was twelve. Her older sister had died two years earlier and after these two losses, she gave up Catholicism for good and became an agnostic. Her father was an avowed atheist. At the age of 24 Maria moved to Paris to continue her studies in physics, chemistry and mathematics. After achieving her advanced degrees, she began her scientific research. Early on she devised the theory of radioactivity and discovered two new chemical elements, polonium and radium. In 1895 she married Pierre Curie, an instructor at the Paris School of Physics and Chemistry, a scientific partner she could depend on. Together they worked laboriously on refining pitchblende ore and obtained sufficient quantities of radium to allow for the study of its properties. While busy with research, they found time to raise two daughters.



Marie Curie

In 1903 Marie and Pierre shared a Nobel Prize in Physics with Henri Becquerel for research on radiation. She was the first woman to be awarded a Nobel Prize. Sadly, Pierre Curie was killed in a street accident in 1906, but she continued her research and later became the first female professor at the Sorbonne. In 1911 Marie was awarded a second Nobel Prize, this time in Chemistry for the discovery of radium and polonium, the only woman to receive 2 Nobel Prizes.

Marie Curie was well acquainted with the prominent scientists of her day including Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, and Planck. She was a particularly close friend of Einstein, and in fact their families once vacationed together. Einstein supposedly remarked that she was probably the only person who was not corrupted by the fame she had won. She was a brilliant, emancipated, and independent woman. In 2009, a poll voted her the most inspirational woman in science.

Marie toured the United States in 1921 and 1929 raising funds for research on radium and its use in the field of medicine. President Harding, on behalf of the women of America, presented her with one gram of radium in recognition of her service to science and medicine. After a brief illness, Marie Curie died in Savoy France in 1934 in her 66th year. She is buried in the Paris Pantheon beside her husband Pierre Curie.

President's Remarks

This is the second *Enlightenment* that focuses on science. The cover features Marie Curie, undoubtedly the most famous woman scientist that has ever lived. She is the second woman to appear on an *Enlightenment* cover. (The first was Simone de Beauvoir). On pages 3 and 4 there is a review of Richard Dawkins' latest book, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. This book is an outstanding science lesson, substantiating the reality of Darwinian evolution on our planet. Dawkins' hope is to convince doubters that there is now indisputable proof that evolution is a scientific fact and that Creationism and Intelligent Design are not plausible. Our Richard Gibbens attended a Dawkins lecture on September 29th in Toronto, and on page 4 is a picture of Richard Dawkins answering one of Richard Gibben's questions. An article entitled *Science as a Force for Morality* by Goldie Emerson begins on page 5.

Ever since HALA was formed, the Unitarian Fellowship of London has been graciously printing notices of up-coming HALA meetings in their Newsletter, *The Chalice*. From time to time UFL has asked to have notices appear in *The Enlightenment*, and we have been pleased to reciprocate. On page 9 is a notice about the UFL Officiant services that are available to everyone, as well as a UFL invitational article by interim minister Rev. Felicia Urbanski.

Page 10 features a humanist interest story about a unique way of saying thank you (other than "Thank God") after a serendipitous experience.

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Thursday of the months September to July inclusive at 8:00 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. The *Enlightenment* is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

Visit our web site at www.humanists-london.org

New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary Dave Mabee at (519) 697-6010, e-mail davemabee@rogers.com Membership fees are listed below.

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Single	\$40	\$22	\$20	\$10
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Book Review
The Greatest Show on Earth
By Richard Dawkins

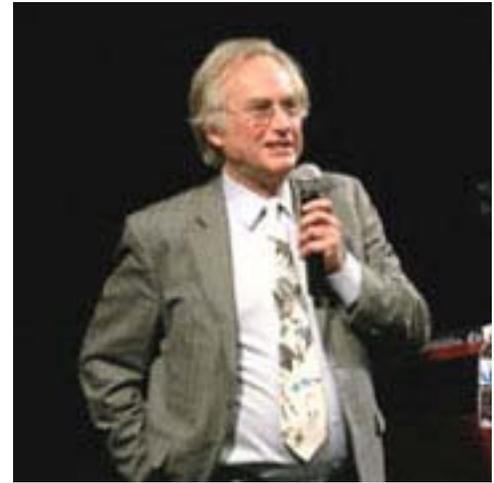
What a fabulous and appropriate title for a book on evolution! The adjectival phrase, “The Greatest Show,” is by no means an exaggeration, because evolution and natural selection are high on the list of scientific subjects that engender and instill feelings of awe and wonder in those that study these phenomena. Many lay readers also experience these same feelings.

At the outset Dawkins states that this book is not an anti-religious discourse. This subject was thoroughly dealt with in his last book, *The God Delusion*. He wrote *The Greatest Show on Earth* because none of his previous books on evolution dealt specifically with the “evidence” for evolution and this gap needs to be filled. And what better time to issue this beautifully illustrated volume than in 2009, the year celebrating Darwin’s 200th birthday and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

In the Appendix of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, are two tables listing the results of surveys conducted by Eurobarometer in 32 different European countries. Table 1 lists the responses to the question, “Do you believe in the proposition that human beings, as we know them, developed from earlier species of animals?” The answers ranged all the way from 85% who replied affirmatively in Iceland to only 27% in Muslim Turkey. Western European countries were the highest, the eastern countries the lowest. Great Britain was a respectable 79%. The question posed in Table 2 was, “Do you believe the proposition that the earliest human beings lived at the same time as dinosaurs?” The replies ranged from 9% in Sweden and Switzerland to 42% in Turkey. Great Britain was surprisingly high at 28%. A recent Gallop poll in the U.S. revealed that 44% of Americans believe humans and dinosaurs coexisted some time between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. Yes indeed, this gap of ignorance needs to be filled. Dawkins knows, of course, that brain-washed died-in-the-wool creationists will not likely be inclined to read his latest best seller, while at the other end of the spectrum, he knows that in many instances he will be preaching to the converted. His hope is, however, that the undecided in the centre will read his book and become convinced that the evidence for evolution through natural selection is so overwhelming that it is impossible to refute.

One of the most convincing proofs for evolution lies in the fossil records. Over the eons the fossilized remains of both plants and animals have been laid down in multiple layers of sedimentary rocks, the oldest at lower levels and the younger at higher levels. In various parts of the world these layers are exposed and accessible for paleontologists to examine. In no case have fossils of more developed forms of life been found in the same or lower levels than less developed forms. The challenge for evolution scientists is, of course, to establish accurate dates for when the various layers of rock were laid down. Fortunately there are a number of “clocks” available for dating the rocks and subsequently the fossils. These include radioactive decay, including carbon 14 techniques, and even tree rings. Using these and other methods, scientists have now determined that the universe is close to 14 billion years old, our solar system is about 4 ½ billion years old, simple life forms developed around 2-3 billion years ago, dinosaurs lived 60 million years ago, homo erectus first appeared about 1 million years ago, and homo sapiens (we) appeared much later, about 100,000 years ago. Organized civilizations did not emerge until around 5,000-6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and Egypt. These time frames are vastly different from the 6,000-10,000 years that creationists like to claim as the age of the earth.

In *The Greatest Show on Earth* Dawkins makes an important distinction between natural evolution and what he calls artificial evolution. All wild animals and non-domestic plants have evolved over long periods of time through natural selection. As Darwin realized from observing tortoises and finches in the Galapagos, different species evolved over extended periods of time under differing conditions. Artificial evolution, on the other hand, occurs over much shorter periods of time and is brought about by human involvement. Domesticated animals, agricultural crops and horticultural plants are all the result of artificial evolution. The numerous breeds of farm animals and domestic pets we observe today are the result of humans influencing the selection of breeding stocks for specific desired qualities. Likewise, the varieties of grains, grasses and legumes now grown by farmers are the result of artificial evolution.



**Dawkins in Toronto Answering
Richard Gibben's Question**

One of the most striking examples of artificial evolution is found in the canine family. All the domestic breeds of dogs are descendants of one wolf or perhaps a few wolves. The contrast we observe today in the difference between a Chihuahua and a Great Dane is truly amazing. And these breeds evolved over relatively short periods compared to the time frame for natural evolution. The same contrasts are evident in the plant kingdom. As a result of plant breeding most domestic agricultural and horticultural plants are larger than their natural ancestors. Look at the difference between wild strawberries and those we purchase in the supermarket. And look at the wide variety of roses that have been developed. Yes, the current plethora of domestic animals and plants provides another substantiation that evolution is real.

Another convincing proof for evolution cited in *The Greatest Show on Earth* is the brilliant research carried out over more than twenty years by Michigan State University scientist Richard Lenski and his colleagues using e coli bacteria. Bacteria reproduce very rapidly and so far 45,000 generations have occurred during this research. This is equivalent to about one million years of human evolution. Over twenty plus years Lenski and his associates have been able to observe the evolution of new strains of e coli, thus confirming the reality of natural selection and the phenomena of random mutation.

For further proof of evolution we can look to the work of Russian geneticist Dimitri Belyuev who has bred silver foxes for tameness. After only six generations some of the offspring exhibited signs of tameness, and after thirty-five generations, most of the offspring resembled tame dogs in many respects.

Dawkins' scientific writing ranks right up there with the work of Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, both of whom sought to educate the general public about the wonders of science. Anyone objectively reading *The Greatest Show on Earth* would be hard pressed not to be convinced of the reality of evolution through natural selection while discarding any thoughts of believing the spurious arguments of creationists. This book is sorely needed, especially in the United States, where incredibly 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, 44% of the population believes in creationism thanks to the teachings of the religious right constituency.

The question is, however, how many of the readers Dawkins is trying to influence, will persevere and take the time to absorb all the details? Only time will tell. Even though I have taken courses in biology and genetics, I found that it took considerable effort to absorb some of Dawkins' more complicated explanations, and I feel there is a danger that the book is written a bit above the level of the readers he is trying to reach. But I trust I am wrong. The book has been at or near the top of many best-seller lists, so it is to be hoped that a good number of doubting readers will be convinced that Darwin indeed was right. (DAH)

Science as a Force for Morality?

By Goldwin J. Emerson

Historically, religion and philosophy have been regarded as the protectors and arbiters of moral values in our society. Consequently, many who seek moral guidance look to the disciplines of religion or of philosophy or sometimes to our legal system so that they can be guided on moral issues. The short answer to the question of whether or not science is moral, immoral or amoral is that science can be all three depending upon how it is used.

When we look at lists of notable humanists we often find that many of our forebears made important contributions to science. On the other hand, science is sometimes regarded within religion circles as being incapable of dealing with moral matters. It is thought in many religions that, at best, science is amoral, if not immoral, in its approach as it proceeds in a dispassionate and objective manner seeking to discover new knowledge, new inventions, and new insights into the world around us.

In this article I would like to present a different view of science ----. one that suggests that there is much about the methods of science that make it well-suited to guiding us in moral matters if we allow it to do so.

Let us consider a definition, or at least a description, of moral behaviour. In a simple sense, morals have to do with right and wrong behaviour----- with what are regarded as good and bad actions and thoughts. Good morals are what society approves while bad morals are what society disapproves. Morals have to do with the *mores*, customs and taboos of a society.

While one society will differ from another there is fairly general agreement that violence, murder, theft and lying are examples of immoral behaviour. Kindness, honesty, respect for other's rights, and helping those less fortunate than ourselves are examples of good moral behaviour in most societies.

There are many aspects of science that make it well-suited to complementing the kinds of moral codes that are appropriate for guiding humanity in constructive social behaviour. It is not by accident that the words, *science* and *conscience*, look very similar when they are written side by side. They are etymologically related. Science concerns itself with knowledge and conscience has to do with the coming together or the balancing of knowledge for the social good. Let's now consider a number of qualities of good moral systems whether or not they are rooted in religion, philosophy, or legal sanctions, and see whether or not science complements these qualities.

1. Knowledge

A good moral system ought to be based on accurate knowledge. For example, if one claims that it is immoral for commercial interests to pollute our air or our water, or that we are depleting our forests, or that the rate at which we are fishing in our oceans is unsustainable, then it is necessary to be able to accurately measure whether or not we are in fact doing harm to our environment. Similarly, is smoking bad for society? Does it really increase the rate of lung cancer and emphysema? Science can help us to be accurate in our knowledge in these matters.

Moral systems which disregard scientific knowledge rely instead on hearsay, tradition, economic gain, or ignorance and may often be misguided.

2. Flexibility

A good moral system should be flexible enough to change along with the changes in the society that it is meant to serve. There are times when following longstanding moral traditions may in fact turn out to be irresponsible and immoral. History is full of moral codes that have upheld sexual inequalities, prohibition of inter-racial and inter-religious marriages, harsh physical punishments for children, human slavery, and an ethic that supports the view that the rich deserve to be rich and the poor deserve to be poor.

We can think of ongoing changes in morality in terms of a conveyor belt analogy. Society moves along in the manner of a continuous conveyor belt and every few years new moral imperatives are added to the changing social ethic of the day. At the same time, some of the old moral imperatives fall out of favour and are removed. As a young child raised in a Presbyterian tradition, I recall that my mother firmly believed that wearing a hat to Sunday morning service was not only an expected social convention, but more than that, for her, it was a moral necessity. That moral package has for the most part disappeared from the moral conveyor belt. A number of years ago it was not only a social expectation backed up by the laws of our country that stores and businesses should remain closed on Sundays, and it was also a strong moral imperative. That moral imperative has now been taken off the moral conveyor belt. On the other hand, new moral imperatives have been added. Thirty years ago relatively few householders composted their garbage or carefully sorted out appropriate piles of materials which could be placed at the curb in blue box containers. More and more, this custom has changed from a social expectation to a moral obligation.

The self-correcting nature of scientific knowledge is compatible with the need to be flexible in moral codes. In fact, science can give us some direction as to what gets added and what gets removed from the moral conveyor belt. Science can help people understand the need to recycle and reuse materials such as aluminum cans, plastic bottles, etc. that otherwise would be thrown into huge garbage dumps. Science is not only compatible with moral flexibility, but it can be a useful tool in offering some constructive directions for change.

3. Consistency

In case it may seem that I am now contradicting myself because I just finished talking about flexibility, I should state that consistency is not the opposite to flexibility. Perhaps rigidity and flexibility are opposites, but it is entirely possible to be consistent and flexible at the same time. For example, good parents may likely hold the view that each of their children is of equal worth and each is to be treated with equality as an overall principle. Yet, one child may be talented in music, another may be interested in engineering, and their remaining child may be gifted in athletic pursuits. In order to treat each child with equal opportunities suitable to their own best interests, parents will need to treat each one differently and flexibly.

By consistency in morals I am referring to an even-handed application of moral principles in such a manner that regardless of one's gender, social position, educational level, physical abilities or disabilities, the same principles apply equally. Unfortunately this kind of consistency has often been lost sight of in the past. History is full of examples of moral systems that accommodated themselves to the acceptance of violence and war as suitable ways of resolving conflict, and to the acceptance of slavery, homophobia, racial prejudices, child labour, etc. In science, the principles of objectivity and a disinterested pursuit of truth fit in well with a moral system that is fair, just and consistently equitable.

4. Caring

Caring, concern for others and compassion are at the very core of every good moral system. Caring is the "*sine qua non*" of morals which contribute to the positive development of good societies. Science offers many examples of care and concern for the improvement of the human condition. Perhaps the most direct examples can be found in the areas of emotional and physical health care. The main thrust of psychiatry is devoted to understanding people's emotional needs and to offering medical care in these areas. In the matter of physical health, scientific knowledge is used to alleviate pain, to prolong life and to help people live with meaningful freedom and enjoyment.

Of course, the counter argument to what I have just said is that the same scientific principles of nuclear medicine that assist in clinical diagnosis can be used to produce nuclear weapons. In 1945, Albert Einstein said, "The unleashing of the power of the atom has changed everything but our modes of thinking.....The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem; it has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one". Similarly, studies in genetics may help doctors understand how some diseases can be cured, but genetics can also be used in producing agricultural crops where we are not yet certain of what the longstanding results may be for either animals or humans. While it is true that science can be used badly, on balance, science has had more beneficial results than negative ones. There are few of us, particularly in humanist circles, who would really wish that we could return to a pre-scientific era. If we can combine science with the important moral imperative of caring we are likely to be much better off than we would be without science.

5. Non-Authoritarian

Good moral systems avoid authoritarian pronouncements such as, " Do as I say, not as I do", or "This action is right or good because I say so". A better approach is to attempt to have people understand why one action is better than another. Hopefully, an appeal to reasoning in morals will be more effective in the long run than appealing to changes in behaviour through fear, guilt, ridicule or threats of divine or human punishment.

In science there are no theories or authorities that are so entrenched that they are fixed in place for all time. For more than two hundred years Sir Isaac Newton's laws of motion stood the test of time. They were mathematically precise under normal conditions here on earth, but when Albert Einstein put forward his theories of relativity in the early 1900s, it was found that Newton's equations required modification when dealing with velocities approaching the speed of light. Prior to 1945, chemistry and physics textbooks stated that atoms were indivisible, but the atomic bombs exploding over Hiroshima and Nagasaki proved that atoms can be split and textbooks were modified accordingly. This self-correcting nature of science does not lend itself to trusting authoritarian pronouncements for once and for all.

It is emotionally comforting to believe, as many moral systems claim, that there are certain unchangeable truths. Love, honesty, justice and forgiveness immediately spring to mind as timeless and suitable moral values. However, even if we were entirely correct in selecting these virtues we still need to think rationally about how such values fit into our ever-changing social environment. Above all, we need to be humble about claiming that we know what the unchanging truths are or that we are the authorities on how such timeless values are to be applied to our present changing society.

6. Inclusiveness

Good moral systems should be applicable to a wide range of ethical topics. Frequently Sunday morning evangelists concentrate on a few topics such as sexual morality, the evils of homosexuality, and the inherently sinful nature of human beings at the moment of their birth and hence their need for salvation. Much of their attention and time is directed to these areas. In this

respect they are similar to some talk show hosts such as Jerry Springer whose programs focus upon an endless variation of sexual themes. However, topics such as environmental protection, racial equality, women's rights, child poverty, world peace, equal opportunities for everyone to receive good health care or good education or proper housing are dealt with very infrequently by many television evangelists or by extreme right-wing political leaders.

7. The Golden Rule

Treating others as we would want to be treated ourselves is a very important concept in moral systems. All of the world's major religions espouse this essential component. In addition, moral philosophers from Confucius and Plato to more recent writers and philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, Benjamin Spock and Carl Sagan have stated the same principle in their own words as did Immanuel Kant in his 17th century categorical imperative. That is, "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law". Put more simply, "act in such a way as you wish everyone else would act". However, it's easy to get the golden rule wrong. We have probably all had the unfortunate experience from time to time of finding that even with the very best of intentions of helping someone whom we saw as needing our assistance we found that our efforts were sometimes either misunderstood or unappreciated. That is, sometimes we make mistakes and our actions turn out badly so if we're not sure how to act correctly ourselves, it's even more difficult to determine how we would wish everyone else to act --- a dilemma which prompted the humourist and playwright George Bernard Shaw to quip, "Do not act as we would wish others to act for their tastes may be different from yours".

So in order to apply the golden rule we need to pay careful attention to the results of our actions--- a truth recognized by the pragmatist philosopher and humanist, John Dewey. In other words, whether an action is socially good and morally beneficial depends upon the results of our actions. When it comes to measuring and evaluating results this is where science can be helpful. For example, are the genetically altered seed grains produced and controlled by the Monsanto Company helping or harming society? Is the sale of genetically modified and irradiated food moral or immoral? Further scientific knowledge is needed in order to measure the results before we can proceed in a morally responsible manner.

8. Proactive.

Good moral systems tell us in advance how to proceed. Poor moral systems wait until things turn out badly for society. Then they condemn the actions of the past when it's too late. Scientists such as David Suzuki are telling us today that the harm we do to our environment will have bad effects for society in the future. Medical scientists tell young smokers today that smoking tobacco will be injurious to their health in the future. Science is one of the best means by which moral systems can be proactive.

Science offers important cautions about the effects of global warming and the attendant problems that we can expect in our environment as we continue to deplete our rainforests and to increase the areas of desert expansion throughout the world. And as our desert areas increase we can expect an attendant lessening of our arable land, more erratic weather patterns, and consequently more starvation and a reduced ability to feed a rapidly growing world population.

Such dire warnings of trouble ahead may at first seem to be simple warnings about practical and prudent matters that have only to do with political or economic issues, but they also have implications for very fundamental and traditional moral issues. Issues of greed, sharing, caring for others, and being good stewards of the world are involved. Science can help to enhance our ability to be more proactive in our moral decisions at the same time as we become more able to think clearly and act wisely to solve problems which in the past were often

mistakenly thought to be problems brought upon us by random acts of nature rather than as a result of human action or inaction.

9. Motivational

Good moral systems not only tell people what to do but they motivate people to want to act in an ethically correct manner. The words motivation and emotion are etymologically related and both convey the idea of moving people to action. Moral systems use a wide variety of motivators. These range from fear, guilt, shaming, naming, ridicule, punishment, legal sanctions, shunning and isolation, to much more kindly approaches. Rewards, approval, acceptance, gratitude and even sainthood are on the positive side. A moral system which includes science offers the additional rewards of satisfying both our curiosity and our search for truth and meaning, and an awareness of our universe and our place within it.

In some sense, I am preaching to the converted. A quick computer search of well-known humanists indicates that many were scientists and all had at the least a strong respect for science. You will no doubt be familiar with most of the following partial list of scientists who were either humanists or affiliated with humanist thought: Copernicus, Leonardo da Vinci, Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Marie Curie, Julian Huxley, John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Jerry Wilson, Carl Rogers, Carl Sagan, Jonas Salk, Lawrence Kohlberg, Isaac Asimov,and the list goes on and on.

In conclusion, can science help us to be moral? Yes, science can provide the knowledge from which we are able to make better moral decisions if we care to do so. In fact, trying to be moral without science limits our view of morality to that of following the traditions, customs and taboos of the past and to repeating not only the good, but the inadequate morals that have held humanity back. Can science help us be moral? Perhaps a more important question is, can we be moral without science? In today's scientific era I think not.

Officials to Lead Life's Milestone Celebrations

There are important occasions in life when we invite family, friends and colleagues to honour and/or rejoice, be it relating to a wedding, a child dedication, an anniversary, a memorial or a funeral.

The Unitarian Fellowship of London (representing a liberal, non-creedal religion) has two officiants, Edna Anderson and Joyce Orchard, who are trained (as was the late Bill Watson) in leading secular services for those occasions. They create these ceremonies in consultation with, and incorporating the input of, those requesting their services.

For information call Edna Anderson at 519-951-6389 or Joyce Orchard at 519-455-9309.

Invitation to HALA Members to Visit the Unitarian Fellowship of London

At the Unitarian Fellowship (UFL), we are proud of our history of over 60 years in the London community, and proud of the many accomplishments of our Humanist founders and members. Ours is a liberal, open-minded "living tradition" that draws from many sources, including "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit." The variety of different perspectives that people bring to the Fellowship has enriched the tapestry of our diverse faith community, creating lively discussions along with respectful sharing. We affirm the dignity and power of the human individual to carve out one's own destiny and to derive standards and values from one's own experience of life in light of the experience of others. You are most welcome to visit us for any event, particularly for Sunday morning services at 10:45 a.m., with concurrent programs for children and youth. We are at 557 Clarke Road, between Dundas and Oxford (near Toyo Tire). Phone our office for more information: 519-451-0424, email our Interim Minister, Rev. Felicia Urbanski at felicia.urbanski@rogers.com Our website is www.unitarianfellowshipoflondon.org

A Bucket of Shrimp

It happened every Friday evening, almost without fail, when the sun resembled a giant orange and was starting to dip into the blue ocean. Old Ed comes strolling along the beach to his favourite pier with a bucket of shrimp clutched in his hand. He walks out to the end of the pier where it seemed he almost had the whole world to himself. The glow of the sun is now a golden brown and everybody is gone, except for a few joggers on the beach. Standing on the end of the pier, Ed is alone with his thoughts and his bucket of shrimp.

Before long, however, he is no longer alone. Up in the sky a thousand white dots come screeching and squawking, winging their way toward that lanky frame standing on the end of the pier. And soon dozens of seagulls have enveloped him, their wings fluttering and flapping wildly. Ed stands there tossing shrimp to the hungry birds. As he does, if you listen closely, you can hear him say with a smile, Thank you! Thank you!

In a few short moments the bucket is empty, but Ed does not leave. He stands there lost in thought, as though transported to another time and place. Invariably one of the seagulls lands on his sea-bleached, weather-beaten hat – an old military hat he has been wearing for years. When he finally turns around and begins to walk back toward the beach, a few of the birds hop along the pier with him until he gets to the stairs, and then they too fly away. Old Ed makes his way down to the end of the beach and then on home.

If you were sitting there on the pier, with your fishing line in the water, Ed might seem like just another old codger, lost in his own world feeding the seagulls with a bucket of shrimp. Most people would probably write old Ed off, but that would be a mistake, because they would do well to get to know him better.

You see, his full name is Eddie Rickenbacker. He was a famous hero back in World War II. On one of his flying missions across the Pacific, he and his seven-member bomber crew went down. Miraculously, all of the men survived, crawled out of their plane, and climbed into a life raft. Captain Rickenbacker and his crew sailed for days on the rough waters of the Pacific. They fought the sun. They fought the sharks. Most of all, they fought hunger. By the eighth day their rations ran out. No food. No water. They were hundreds of miles from land and no one knew where they were. They needed a miracle. That afternoon they held a simple devotional service and prayed for just such a miracle. They tried to nap. Eddie leaned back and pulled his military cap over his nose. Time dragged. All he could hear was the slap of the waves against the raft. Suddenly Eddie felt something land on his cap. It was a seagull.

Old Ed would later describe how he sat perfectly still and planned his next move. With a flash of his hand and a squawk of the seagull, he managed to grab it and wring its neck. He tore the feathers off, and he and his starving crew made a meal – a very slight meal for eight men – out of it. Then they used the intestines for bait. With the intestines they caught fish, which gave them food and more bait.... and the cycle continued. With that simple survival technique, they were able to endure the rigors of the sea for 24 days until they were rescued.

Eddie Rickenbacker lived many years beyond that ordeal, but he never forgot the sacrifice of that lifesaving seagull. And he never stopped saying, "Thank You!" That's why almost every Friday night he would walk out to the end of the pier with a bucket of shrimp and a heart full of gratitude.