



# The Enlightenment

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## Thinking and Questioning



### Rodin's The Thinker

This Special Issue of *The Enlightenment* asks two important questions. How do Humanists offer comfort to those dealing with pain and suffering, and what should be the future aims of Humanism? The first article by Dr. Rod Martin, President of the Humanist Association of London and Area, is entitled, "What Can Humanists Say to the Mothers of Newtown?" "Whither Humanism?" is the title of the second article by *Enlightenment* editor Donald Hatch. Answers do not come easily to either question and comments from readers are welcome.

# **What Can Humanists Say to the Mothers of Newtown?**

Rod A. Martin

*A talk presented at the meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area on Feb. 13, 2013.*

We were all horrified by the senseless and brutal slaughter of 20 young children and 6 educators at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT this past December. In the aftermath of this horrific event, we are all left grappling with questions, trying to make sense of how something like this could happen and how it can be prevented in the future. There are many aspects of this incident that we could discuss, such as the American love affair with guns, the culture of violence portrayed in movies and video games, and so on. But my main concern at this time is how we as Humanists might respond to the suffering and sorrow of the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandparents, friends, and neighbours of those young, innocent children whose lives were snuffed out in such a cruel way. What does Humanism have to offer to people who are suffering such unspeakable anguish?

If one of these grief-stricken parents was a relative or close friend of one of us, what could we as Humanists say to console them? I think this is a very important question for us to think about, and it applies not only to the grieving in Newtown, but to all forms of suffering that we encounter in our own lives and in the lives of others that we know. Thankfully, most of us will never have to deal with such horrific trauma as experienced by these families in Newtown, whose lives have likely been changed forever, and who may never fully recover. But most of us do have to deal with some degree of suffering at various times in our lives. Many, if not most, of us have already experienced periods of grief, sorrow, anxiety, distress, depression: the death of a spouse, the death of a child due to disease or an accident, the death of a loved one by suicide. We've had our own share of experiences with illness, disability, and pain. And all of us need to confront the reality of our own death, which will come inevitably sooner or later. How do we as Humanists deal with suffering in our own lives, and how do we respond to others who are suffering?

This is one area where religions seem to do especially well. In the aftermath of the Newtown shooting, there was abundant evidence of the way religious faith can provide comfort, support, and hope to people in distress. Two days after the shooting, an interfaith service was attended by President Obama, along with clergy members from various Christian denominations as well as other religions. Religious people of every stripe descended on Newtown to offer practical aid and comfort. Prayer vigils were held, signs everywhere said "pray for Newtown," and many of the survivors attested to the way their religious faith and fellow believers helped them with their anguish.

More than one Christian blogger pointed out that Humanists, atheists, and agnostics were notably absent in the days following Newtown, suggesting that Humanists have nothing to offer in a situation like this. There was even an article in the New York Times two weeks later asking "where were the Humanists?" To be fair, there were some Humanist groups who organized gun-control rallies, or collected donations to help with the funeral expenses, and there may have been many others who lent their support without any fanfare. By and large, though, Humanists were not very visible.

If Humanism is a substitute for religion – and I believe it is – then we need to grapple with these issues, both for ourselves and in our responses to other people. We need to prepare ourselves mentally and emotionally to cope with times of suffering that will inevitably come into our own lives. In those long dark nights of the soul, when I am confronted with my own impending death, or

grieving the death of a loved one, what thoughts would be comforting to me? In my response to others, what words of consolation can I give to comfort those who are going through times of great difficulty, pain, or sorrow? Religious clergy and chaplains go to hospitals, prisons, and nursing homes to minister to people who are suffering. They offer prayers, words of encouragement, and consolation. What would a *Humanist* chaplain be able to say or do in these circumstances?

Before addressing these questions, it might be helpful to think about what *religion* has to offer people at times of grief and suffering. At one level, it can be argued that the senseless suffering resulting from events like the Newtown massacre is a serious challenge to religious faith. How can a God who is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing allow such terrible suffering to exist? This is the well-known problem of evil that is one of the classic arguments against the existence of God, first enunciated by Epicurus many centuries ago. And indeed, this conundrum has caused some former religious believers to lose their faith after going through traumatic experiences. However, during such times of suffering and grief, most believers find great comfort and solace in their religion, which only serves to strengthen their faith.

I think there are two main elements of what religion has to offer at times like this, and these are two areas where we as Humanists could perhaps do a better job. The first is a sort of *cognitive framework* that allows the person to maintain a sense of coherence and meaning, and the second is a *supportive, caring community*.

First, the *cognitive framework*. When people are faced with unexpected traumatic events – the death of a loved one, being diagnosed with a terminal disease, even the loss of a job or a divorce – the person's whole frame of reference may be turned upside down. Everything they thought was true and real and certain seems to be gone; they lose their moorings, their sense of coherence. At these times people seek some sort of cognitive framework that can help them restore their sense of stability and identity. Most religions provide such a framework for making sense of the many seemingly senseless and horrible things that happen and cause so much suffering. This is likely one of the reasons why religions have arisen in the first place. For example, the central tenet of Buddhism is that life is suffering. The whole Buddhist belief system is built around how to deal with this central reality of suffering.

Christianity teaches that suffering is permitted by God for some reason, but that ultimately it will be eradicated. At a time like the Newtown shootings, when a child has been brutally murdered, a Christian minister would reassure the grieving parent by saying something like the following: "Although we cannot make sense of this tragedy, God is still in control; in his infinite wisdom he has allowed it to happen. We can't know the ways of God. But your child is now in eternal peace, enjoying happiness for eternity, and you will rejoin your child one day. Just think of the joy you will have on that day. It's important now for you to go on living to fulfill God's purpose in your life" – and so on.

As Humanists who don't believe in God or heaven, we can sneer at these empty words, viewing them as nothing more than wishful thinking and delusions. We can take pride in the fact that we are more reality-based, more rational, more scientific. When faced with questions about suffering, we can respond at an intellectual level with rational, scientific answers. We can point out that suffering is a natural consequence of the fact that the world is governed by scientific laws. These laws account for such things as cancer and disease-causing bacteria and viruses; natural disasters like earthquakes and tornados; and even mentally deranged individuals. There is no rational meaning to it: terrible random events can happen to anyone. Suffering is just a consequence of

being part of this natural universe. To put it bluntly and colloquially, we could say what I have heard one fellow Humanist say: “shit happens, get over it!”

This response may be scientifically accurate, but of course it wouldn't provide any consolation to a grieving parent. And it certainly wouldn't give them any reason to consider Humanism as an attractive alternative to religion! This type of response remains focused only on the level of reason and intellect. It fails to acknowledge that beneath these questions is a profound human need that all of us share, Humanists included. We all need a cognitive framework to help us cope with the pain and uncertainty of life. We need a sense of coherence, meaning, and purpose to make sense of our own life experience.

So what kind of cognitive framework can Humanism offer? We have no simple, trite answers. There's no denying that life can be cruel, difficult, and painful at times. Humanism suggests that, while there is no *ultimate* meaning to life, we can each *create* a meaningful life for ourselves. That sense of meaning can come from our relationships with other people, being a parent or grandparent, a spouse, a friend. It may come from the things we do to try to make the world a better place, in our immediate family, in our work and volunteer activities. Seeking to help others in some way; seeking to grow and achieve one's full potential in life.

In sum, for a Humanist, meaning in life comes from seeking to live a life of integrity, responsibility, honesty, and courage. Caring for others, being generous, kind, empathic, helpful. Being involved in something you enjoy; feeling fulfilled. All of this can bring a sense of consolation in times of suffering and loss. We can remind ourselves, “I have lived well; I have lived with integrity; I have nothing to regret.” Even in grief, we can still go on; we still have something to live for. If facing death, we can look back with satisfaction on a life well lived.

In response to the mothers and fathers of Newtown more particularly, a Humanist response must first involve listening with empathy and compassion to their pain, sharing their grief, and validating their sorrow. As appropriate, it might involve saying things such as the following: “Your child's senseless death has left a gaping hole in your heart. With the care and support of those who love you, over time you will find the strength to carry on. Grieving takes time – don't try to rush it; you need to go through a process of healing. Cherish your child's memory. Be grateful for the joy she brought into your life during her short time with you. Let this memory inspire you to go on living. Hold her in your heart, and let her be your inspiration. Take solace in the time you had with your child and the fact that you tried to be a good parent for her. You are not to blame for anything that happened; you gave her your love. Don't let this loss eat away at you, leaving you bitter and empty. Let your life be filled with all the goodness that was your child.” Of course, words like these need to be said with sensitivity, care, and compassion.

The second thing that religion has to offer in times of suffering and tragedy is a *caring, supportive community*. When clergy and members of a congregation come together to pray and give words of comfort to the grieving, to some extent the actual words they say may not be as important as the simple fact of their presence, the demonstration that they care, that they are there to provide support and encouragement. In times of sorrow and loss, it makes a huge difference to know that you are loved, that you are not forgotten, that there are people who will stand by you and help you. This is what psychologists refer to as *social support*. It can involve many things. It could be helping with practical matters such as bringing over a casserole, helping with household chores, running an errand. It may involve providing a listening ear, empathically, supportively and non-judgmentally. It can be giving a hug, holding a hand, offering words of comfort. There is a good deal of research demonstrating that this sort of social support has significant beneficial effects on

people's mental and physical health. Other research reveals that one of the most important functions of religion is the provision of a caring, supportive community.

So when we ask ourselves what can Humanists say to the mothers of Newtown, we need to also think about how we might offer this sort of supportive, caring community to our members and to others around us. Humanism excels at addressing intellectual questions. We're good at talking about science and rationality; we like to debate and argue about the existence of God and various political, social, and philosophical questions. These are all very important, but there's more to human life than the intellectual. If Humanism is to be an alternative to religion, I believe we need to address the emotional and social needs of humans as well as the intellectual.

This is a challenge for Humanism. Greg Epstein, the Humanist chaplain at Harvard, who wrote the book *Good without God*, also emphasizes the need for a greater sense of community. He points out that Humanists are proud of being people of reason rather than people of faith, but he argues that we need to see reason as a means to an end, not an end in itself. He says, "We need to think of reason in the service of compassion – caring, being cared-about, a life of meaningful connection. Reason itself is the tool. When we see it as the end-product we miss the point."

To bring this closer to home, what are the implications for us as members of HALA? We have monthly meetings where we listen to interesting speakers talking about stimulating topics and we have good times of discussion. This is very important and valuable. But should we be thinking about how we can be more of a caring community? Besides nourishing our minds (which is very important), should we also try to address people's emotional and social needs? Should we be thinking about some other sorts of topics that we could have speakers talk about in addition to science, perhaps topics having to do with mental health, emotional well-being, or relationships? Or social causes that we might get involved in in a practical way, such as helping people who are disadvantaged or homeless? Are there things we could be doing to help us get to know one another better? We have our summer and winter solstice parties, which are enjoyable times of socializing. Should we try to have more frequent opportunities for getting together on a social basis? It may be that most of us already have our own family and friends who meet our needs for social support outside of HALA. But that may not be the case for everyone. Perhaps we should try to become more aware of when one of our members is sick or grieving or dealing with unemployment, or other kinds of difficulty, and ways we could offer them help, support and comfort.

We each come to HALA looking for different things, and this may not be what everyone wants. But my own desire would be to see HALA become a little more of a place where people experience nurturance, where they feel supported and cared for, where they feel they can be themselves and know they will be accepted and respected. To me, that's what Humanism at its best is all about.

In conclusion, what can we say to the grieving mothers of Newtown? We can begin with ourselves and the people around us who may be in need of encouragement and comfort. The problem of suffering is one that I think we Humanists really need to confront. We don't have simple answers based on wishful thinking like religious people do. But we do have a conceptual framework for finding hope and meaning in life. And we have the potential for compassion and for building a caring community, offering empathy, encouragement and support to one another in this often uncongenial and painful world.

## Whither Humanism?

It is now ten years since I first heard about Humanism. At that time a friend invited me to a Humanist meeting and, being impressed, I decided to find out more about this movement. Checking on the Internet, I learned that most Humanist groups have a vision and a set of common sense principles that offer rational guidelines for adhering to an ethical secular way of life. Having doubted for many years what my church was asking me to believe, I found it refreshing that Humanism was a world-view and life stance entirely free of the supernatural. Subsequently I joined a national Humanist association expecting to find a large cohesive organization with some influential clout when it came to the promotion of a secular society.

What I found instead was an organization of less than a thousand paid up members, which to me was surprising in a country the size of Canada. To be sure, there were positive attributes. These people organized great conferences, published interesting articles, and provided a network of Officiants who were able to conduct secular rites of passage for non-religious persons. But I also noticed that some members seemed to want to do little other than spending time bashing religions and shouting from the rooftops that there is no God. And that was about it. There was no nationally known highly respected spokesperson that the media would automatically gravitate to to solicit an opinion on matters affecting separation of church and state, or on other topics of concern. Nor were there a sufficient number of members to form a critical mass that could generate respect and be listened to by the general public. In fact, if you asked the average person what they knew about Humanism, you would probably be greeted with a blank stare.

So perhaps it is time for a new and different focus in order to form a larger, more active organization that is listened to by the general public. Assuming it is agreed that there must be complete separation of church and state, and that a prosperous secular society with a minimum of religiosity that provides freedom and “the good life” for its citizens is what to aim for, how may this be achieved? Are there any examples of societies that come close to this ideal? The answer is yes and they are in Northern Europe.

In the Scandinavian countries there is an archetype of democratic socialism that seems to work well. These secular societies provide their citizens with a good education, as well as social safety nets that avoid anxieties if families experience setbacks. Scandinavians seem to know how to maintain strong economies, while providing citizens with the means to be able to pay taxes in order to supply essential social services. Income inequality is low, and people seem to be satisfied with living modestly by avoiding purchasing things they do not need. And take note, surveys show that citizens in these secular countries with a minimum of religiosity are among the happiest people in the world.

A common thread that stands out in secular societies is low income disparity. In a book entitled *The Spirit Level*, authors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett display numerous graphs comparing income inequality in developed countries by analyzing various factors including poverty, mental health, physical health, obesity, educational performance, teenage births, life expectancy, violence, imprisonment, community life, social relations, social mobility, and trust. Almost without exception, the secular countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland are at the low income inequality end of the trend line with regard to the life style characteristics listed above. The United States, with a high degree of religiosity, is nearly always at the high income inequality end of the trend line. Countries including Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are usually nearer to the favourable, rather than the unfavourable section of the graph.

Another common thread is that all four of these democratic countries appear to have found the right balance in regard to socialism. They have managed their economies in such a way as to provide sufficient capital to afford government sponsored social safety nets, and the citizens are willing to pay the taxes necessary to deliver these amenities.

And another factor of great importance is low military spending. Scandinavian countries have relatively small militaries. These countries do not engage in preemptive wars, their activities are mostly related to peace keeping. Low defense spending helps greatly as a means of being able to pay for the social safety nets. Contrast this with the United States, the country that set out to police the world. U.S. defense spending is gargantuan, thereby leaving little for social safety nets or for compensating citizens who have experienced devastation from hurricanes, tornados or earthquakes. And as already mentioned above, a lack of social safety nets leads to more religiosity and higher income disparity, making it difficult for a secular society to materialize.

An excellent understanding of what it is like to live in a thriving secular society can be obtained from sociologist Phil Zuckerman's book *Society Without God*. Zuckerman spent fourteen months living in Denmark and Sweden and the results of his research after interviewing 150 Danes and Swedes are summarized below:

Zuckerman found that "society without God is not only possible, but can be quite civil and pleasant. And contrary to the claims of certain outspoken, conservative Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity, in reality Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies." He goes on to say, "It is crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and establishing and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept to a minimum, and children can be loved in warm homes--without God being a central component of everyday life."

Phil Zuckerman acknowledges that a much-attenuated cultural Lutheranism continues in Denmark and Sweden. Most Danes and Swedes still pay the church tax (though they can easily opt out), have church weddings, and baptize their children even though they rarely darken the door of a church. Most Danes and Swedes regard themselves as Christians, though like Thomas Jefferson, they regard this simply as being a good and moral person and pay no attention to traditional creeds. "Benign indifference" is the term Zuckerman uses for the Scandinavian approach to religion, and he emphasizes that this indifference is neither hostility nor plain atheism; religion is simply a non-topic.

It is important to note, as Zuckerman points out, that a low incidence of factors such as homicide rates, levels of violent crime, levels of disrespect for human rights, political instability, levels of distrust among citizens, etc, leads to a high degree of security and benign indifference. Denmark and Sweden rank third and seventh on the 2007 Global Peace Index. (Norway ranks first). A low degree of security generally typifies societies that tend to be more religious. For example, the United States ranks ninety-sixth on the aforementioned index.

It is also important to note that Zuckerman makes it perfectly clear that traditional religion fades in a society, not as a result of aggressive atheist activity, but as a result of a society achieving a high

level of personal security. The conclusion follows that prosperous secular societies with low-income disparity are more likely to provide the “good life” for their citizens than those societies with a high degree of income inequality and a high level of religiosity. But which comes first? This is really a no-brainer. Obviously you will not reduce religiosity, leading to a secular society, without first establishing a large prosperous middle class and low income inequality.

Now the foregoing is not to suggest that the Scandinavians live without concerns. For one thing, they are dealing with a serious Islamic problem in figuring out how best to integrate Muslim immigrants into their society. And they constantly face the challenge of maintaining their prosperity in a world dealing with financial instability and mounting debts in some countries. But the recent past experience of the Scandinavian countries does provide evidence that secular societies materialize, “not by aggressive atheist activity, but as a result of a high level of personal security,” as Philip Zuckerman has stated.

So what can Humanists learn from the Scandinavian experience, assuming that the overall objective of Humanism is to aid in the establishment of a prosperous secular society with a minimum of religiosity? For starters, Humanists need to stop wasting effort on bashing liberal religions and tone down preaching about the non-existence of God. Instead, Humanist organizations need to get political and get involved in issues that threaten separation of church and state. Humanists must resist the efforts of those politicians who want to reverse hard won achievements on women’s right to chose and gay and lesbian rights. At the same time they must fight for the right to die with dignity and oppose the public funding of religious schools. In doing so, the undesirable influences of religious fundamentalists and the Catholic Church will be minimized. And perhaps most imperative of all, it is absolutely necessary to elect political leaders whose aim it is to bring about the prosperity needed to provide citizens with a first rate education, and the desired social safety nets. Under these conditions, religiosity will decline and society will become more secular. Conclusion: the principal raison d’etre of Humanist organizations should be the establishment and maintenance of a prosperous secular society with a minimum of religiosity and maximum separation of church and state. But Humanists cannot do this alone. They must work with other likeminded organizations in order to achieve these sought after ends. (DAH).

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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 Wednesday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, 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](http://www.humanists-london.org).