



Humanist Society of New Mexico



February 2010

<http://humanistsocietyofnm.org/> fmarch@thinkwellassociates.com

Quotes of the Month

There is no squabbling so violent as that between people who accepted an idea yesterday and those who will accept the same idea tomorrow.

Christopher Morley

I do not want the peace that passeth understanding. I want the understanding which bringeth peace.

Helen Keller

Upcoming HSNM Meetings

Meetings are free and run from 10:00 to noon
(except where noted)

Saturday, February 13th

Informal Meeting

General Discussion

Visitors please contact Fred March at 505-323-6784
for details or questions.

Refreshments: Laverne Rison

Summit Apartments, 3901 Indian School NE

Saturday, February 20th

Topical Discussion

Humanist Activism

Special Collections Library, 423 Central Ave. NE

Saturday, February 27th

Speaker Meeting

The Basic Instinct:

*A History of the Concept of Freedom and
Its Application*

Atilla Csanyi

Humanist Minute: TBD

Refreshments: None

UNM Law School, Room 2406, 1117 Standford NE

HSNM Family Co-op

Alternative Children's Sunday School

Call 505-292-4375 for meeting times

Santa Fe Humanists

Saturday, February 6th, 10:30am

Is Death a Choice?

Community Room, La Farge Branch of the
Santa Fe Public Library, 1730 Llano St.

For more information contact Bill Weihofen
(505) 988-1343

Humanism is an ethical philosophy that derives its principles from science and reason rather than theology. It asserts the worth and dignity of every person, advocates personal liberty tempered by social and environmental responsibility, and promotes democracy, compassion, and justice. It sees human beings as natural organisms, whose values arise from culture and experience, and holds humanity responsible for its own affairs.

**The Humanist Society of New Mexico
(HSNM)**

A Membership chapter of the American
Humanist Association.

The purpose of HSNM is to promote ethical,
naturalistic, democratic Humanism among
its members and within its community.

Officers

Frederic March: President

Bill Little: Vice President/Programs

Jerry Wesner: Past President

John Waldrop: Treasurer

Carolyn Kaye: Secretary

Ron Herman: Director of Classes

Randall Wall: Newsletter Editor

Janet Johnson: Book Club

Ted Cloak: Community Liaison

Phil Smith: Webmaster

Membership Director: Open

Social Coordinator: Open

Publicity Director: Open

Family Co-op: Open

Subscription to HSNM Newsletter, published
monthly, accompanies AHA/HSNM
membership or can be obtained by
nonmembers for \$12 annually. Send
subscription and membership request to:
Humanist Society of New Mexico, P.O. Box
13675, Albuquerque, NM 87192. Send
Newsletter submissions to: Editor, Randall
Wall at Email paragon2012@comcast.net

The deadline
for Newsletter submissions is the third
Saturday of each month.

Care

By Harry Willson

With Postscript by Zelda Gatuskin

The word "care" had been batted around a great deal lately. Let me take part in the action.

For two weeks now I have been in a rehabilitation facility, following serious surgery on my spine. The therapists who work here are not kidding around. They want me and all their patients to improve enough to get out of here. They work very hard. They are often out of breath and must stop for air. They make us work hard too, one therapist after another. It really is exhausting!

But I notice it is all care, i.e. caring. Never a harsh word, always an encouraging word. The old word that I come up with to describe what they do is "love."

Jay Evans was here yesterday. At one point I exclaimed, "It's amazing! You can make your living loving people!" Jay jumped up and made a placard which said that, which he then hung on the wall.

The theme in my mind is "care." Care is caring. I am watching so much of it, I am overwhelmed. Not "coverage." That's a different topic. We all talk of health care. Some talk of health coverage. But that's not what I'm looking at. Care is caring. Coverage is legalese, and look out!

I'm not sure this even is a rant. "Rant" implies a degree of indignation, and what I'm referring to now is a series of experiences which leaves me in a kind of melt-down. Absorb the love. Return it. Not much in the way of indignation.

This experience makes a body thoughtful. It "concentrates the mind." I think of my whole life, and it occurs to me that for a period I made my living loving people. The ten years that I taught school are what I'm thinking of. The students came first with me, and everybody knew it, and at times it caused trouble, what with institutional rules and traditions and reputations and all that. But the students knew.

I'm wondering what a country more concerned about care than coverage would look like.

A Postscript from Zelda

Amador Publishers' friends and fans and regular readers of Harry's Rant of the Month will note from the above that December was a hard month here on the home front. January's shaping up to be a tough one too. But the love will get us through.

I dial a number that changes from time to time and himself picks up and declares, "Harry Willson speaking." I'm the student who's still trying to graduate and he's still coaxing me along, with love. When he's out of answers, or out of gas, he tells me, "You'll have to figure that out, honey." And because he taught me well, I do.

We drop in at rehab. No Harry. He is at PT, Adela at his side. We chat amongst ourselves. The aide who escorts Harry back to us gives him a very big hug, and seems reluctant to leave. There are half a dozen of us in the room. A regular party.

A day later, I have been summoned; Harry has the next rant ready. What a relief to have him to myself. He's eating lunch while I sit in his wheelchair and read over the rant, handwritten from beginning to end with barely an edit. It will be a snap to type up, easier than my own writing, with all the strike-outs, inserts and arrows. I still have a lot to learn from Harry.

"Harry Willson speaking." Go ahead, insert your own name and try it. Say it with feeling. Be who you are, own who you are, in whatever shape you are in, right now. Get out a pen and start writing on the back of some scrap paper - two pages top to bottom and don't strike out anything. Let it be what it is. Let it be the thought for today, not an afterthought, or a regret, or an edit. Stet. Let it be. Then see what you can learn from it, from what came out uncensored.

Keep an eye on this space for updates and messages from Harry. If you would like to send Harry a message, please e-mail to zelda@amadorbooks.com with "for Harry" in the subject line, or snail mail to c/o Amador Publishers, LLC, 611 Delamar NW, Albuquerque, NM 87107. I will transmit your messages for Adela as well. And I will eagerly fill your book and gift certificate orders. Thank you for being part of our labor of love. The adventure in publishing continues...

For Harry Willson, Adela Amador and myself,
Best wishes for a happy and healthy 2010,

Reading Good Fiction

By Donald Guitierrez

I live in New Mexico, and have two granddaughters who live out in California. So I don't see them often and was wondering recently whether they are getting exposed to good fiction. That consideration led me to think about whether such exposure really made any difference, whether reading Cervantes or Bronte or Balzac or Dreiser or Scott or Conrad or Lawrence or Lady Murasaki really mattered, and, if it does, why or how it matters.

Why indeed read Melville, Fielding, Jane Austen, Mark Twain as a youth, let alone as an adult? Does it make one a better person? "Better" of course has a moral ring to it. Art has been viewed by literary theorists and idealists as making one better by organizing one's sensory, emotional and intellectual faculties, thus giving sensible, even at times exalted, shape to life experience. Thus, art could make one a more coherent person.

That might be true, but it sounds overly idealistic. In a world as discontinuous, sporadic, aggressive, violent as ours in 2010 is, can art, fiction, really make much difference? Despite the Kosovoes and Rwandas and Gazas, the huge crime and violence rates in the United States, Mexico and elsewhere, the widespread enervation caused by corporation crime, multiple pollution hazards and critical overpopulation globally, people, even without having read Proust or Faulkner or Ford Madox Ford or Doris Lessing, seem to order their senses and lives not only to survive but to secure some decent measure of stability, pleasure and even joy.

But reading good fiction might add to these positives. One quality much needed in modern life and society that it might add is patience (another is an enriching of leisure). As everyone knows, post-industrial societies today are, for a number of reasons, triggered by speed, pressure and stress. Geared to this intense, automated energy are sensationalism in entertainment (increased violence in sports and movies), excessive consumerism, more productivity emphases and high-profit demands, and ingenious progress in high-tech culture. All these developments have a profound impact on human sensibility, and it is not one for, by and large, the good, as it corrodes elements of human nature—such as tranquility—vital to human culture and even to sanity. Patience is necessary because it helps us to deal with stress but also because it is essential to learning, enjoyment and experience. It is also essential to reading good fiction. Put conversely, reading good fiction develops or can develop patience. One might want to know what happens to a character getting entrapped in a

perilous situation (job, marriage, foreign country), but the very nature of significant fiction virtually enforces our capacity to wait for an event or process in fiction to evolve.

Further, even when we know what will happen to a character (Dreiser's *Hurstwood*, Hardy's *Tess*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), we go back time and again to watch and experience the enchanting intercession of character and fate. This sort of reader tolerance or even engrossment ideally trains one to live life at a slower or more "human" pace. Haste makes waste is a profound adage for our hyped-up, time-devouring society, as is give time time. Reading *Don Quixote*, *The tale of Genji*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Good Soldier*, *Sons and Lovers* (let alone *Remembrance of Things Past* or *War and Peace*), forces us, better, persuades, entices us to accept a novelist's rendering of life rhythms, and though this is "art" and thus in a sense artificial, if it is great or even good art it is also truer than life.

The life rhythms found in good fiction could teach us something about the rhythms and patterns we might try to evolve around our own life and the social interaction surrounding it, whether we're talking about the pacing of a conversation with a friend, buying a home or car, or dealing with the work load on a job. Patience has lot to do with time and one's sense (and one's society's sense) of time, and though reading Thomas Mann or Balzac might not induce us to respect the eternal within the moment (those other Balzac novels to read, let alone the Joseph-and-his-Brothers tetralogy) it still might help—at least, while we're reading!

Interpreting life, the world and experience through fiction—surely this can be dangerously distorting. Life is not like that, we sometimes hear, usually from people with a naïve sense of the reality fiction exhibits, or of how it exhibits reality. Of course fiction is usually more ordered than life, more patterned and selective. Yet to say that life's raggedness and disorder disprove the availability, even ideal, of fiction as an example of what life is and can be is like saying that virtue is impractical because there's so much evil in the world. One pursues one's insight, boundaries of the possible, instances of the desirable and wonderful, the repulsive and horrible, where s/he can. If fiction offers such instances, and does so compellingly, evocatively, numinously, one does well to go with it.

Just as important, fiction familiarizes us with the World, the Flesh and the Devil. We learn not only what the world has been like, or could have been like, but what it is or could be in the present or the future. Granted, what we experience on the written page and in the "actual" situation aren't the same, but we also know by now that reality is sinuous, ambiguous, often enough

even "reality," so that our imagining of a place or situation or person can be more "real" (or even real) than being there in the flesh, and thus what is actual or authentic becomes problematic. Fiction can create or shape reality, rather than only entertainingly reflect it, affecting the kind of impact readers have on their surroundings. "Poetry makes nothing happen," said W. H. Auden in a famous poem, but the word "happen" is ambiguous. It might not affect overly a corporation's ethics or a nation's decision to go to war, yet who is to say whether it might not affect some individual's outlook or mental fiber who, someday, in a key position of power might cast a determinative vote or exert key influence for something humane, decent, sane on a crucial occasion? It is hardly arresting to say that great fiction is more real than ordinary life, but it might be worth observing that either fiction or life experience is as real as the person involved in them.

Another important aspect of reading good fiction is that it can subtilize our minds (I stress good because cheap fiction can do the opposite---degrade or coarsen it, one of the baleful aspects of sensational or violent movies like Scorsese's gross *Casino*). The great and good novelists do instruct us—if usually indirectly—how to perceive and evaluate life in the round. I don't mean by this that one learns only from novels dealing in depth with characters (that would, for example, leave out much of Dickens). I do mean that Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* or Mann's *Dr. Faustus* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* offer us Life, the World, Places, People, Society High and Low and the labyrinths of interior experience with such fullness or vigor or color or penetration or completedness or deliberate, haunting uncompletedness that we as a result assimilate, willy-nilly, substantial portions of life's options, variations, potentialities, dangers and blessings.

What, as the British man-of-letters Cyril Connolly once put it about literature generally, does literature do best and uniquely? I think it is this—more than any other art, it incites or encourages us to help make a world or segments of one in our own mind. The reader obviously doesn't write the fiction but his involvement in it is crucial to its imaginative potential being realized. All the arts stimulate the imagination one way or another, but none elaborates places, crowds, scenes, individuals, and the senses and the mind through the brick-by-brick use of language that fiction exhibits, erecting realms of thought, feeling, site and action through the great needle's eye of words, words, words. What could be less stimulating to the senses than words (compared to painting, sculpture, music), yet what medium in skilled hands can be more dynamic in making all-absorbing heterocosms, the little "second" worlds of literature that

can seem and be more real than the “first” world?

And if fiction can create other people, settings, patterns of events than those in our daily world, it can also exhibit more desirable or terrible worlds. The terrible ones are not quite so terrible because we can put them away anytime we feel like it, yet we can be second-remove witnesses of terror and horror that it would be unbearable to experience ourselves (although, at its worst, this becomes voyeuristic involvement in sensationalism). *1984* warned us before then of itself, and educated the world about the perils of totally socializing human communities. It did not prevent Rwanda or Bosnia or East Timor, but Orwell’s novel emerged from a pattern of political, institutional traditions and experience foreign to these more recent social catastrophes. *1984* couldn’t have terminated the USSR, Mao’s China or any other totalitarian society. Fiction seldom has that sort of direct force or effect, and shouldn’t be expected to (though Flaubert once said that if enough people had read his novel *Sentimental Education*, the Franco-Prussian War would not have occurred). Yet it does work on individuals in a way that could have political consequences, quietly, subtly, yet accumulatively, issuing in political act, movement, change.

The terrifying world of fiction, then, can also be a desirable one not only because we can escape from it, but because of our own surreptitious engrossment by it. We might be grieved by Pip’s illusions or torments in *Great Expectations*, but we also “enjoy” them, not out of sadistic response, but because the sophisticated attitudes one can bring to or develop from reading good fiction stimulates this crucial indirection in our reading.

Fiction of course is just that—it is something that is and isn’t happening. It isn’t really happening because it is fictional, made up, artificial. But it is happening, because of the craft, the inspirited imagination and the empowered sense of reality with which it is conceived. This “doubleness” of fiction comprises no little of its Utopist character. Ultimately fiction is a kind of Utopia (or, as in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a dystopia), offering attractive or horrible alternatives to ours, the latter itself even attractive exactly because it is not ours. Yet fiction offers the ideal and safe opportunity for appreciating what we have or trying to make it better, to make of life a “work” analogous to fictional art. One could do much worse than educate oneself on good fiction. It might not tell one how to work a computer or do a valve job on a car engine or make money (or it might), but one way or another it shows—more than tells-- us how to live (and not live), and that is enough.

Americans United Warns Louisiana Education Board Not To Adopt Review Policy That Favors Creationism

Press Release from Americans for Separation of Church and State, January 5, 2010

A new policy under consideration by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is slanted to favor creationism and should be revised, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Due to lobbying by the Religious Right, Louisiana legislators approved a law in 2008 that allows for “supplemental materials” to be used in public school science classes. The Board has developed a policy for reviewing these materials that is seriously flawed, says Americans United.

“It’s obvious what’s going on here,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “Louisiana elected officials are once again trying to undercut the teaching of evolution and slip creationism into science classes. This effort must fail.”

In a letter sent to the Board, Americans United warns that the proposed review policy is constitutionally suspect because it appears to open the door for creationist concepts to be taught in public schools.

The Board calls for allowing challenged materials to be reviewed by a panel that could easily be stacked with people sympathetic to creationism. It would bypass the expert opinion of the Louisiana Department of Education.

“The proposed procedure for reviewing challenged supplemental material is unnecessarily complicated and appears designed to provide a forum for promoting creationism,” asserts AU’s letter.

The letter notes that the Board’s proposal “would create the opportunity for a show trial with ‘experts’ presenting reports” that attempt to portray creationist supplemental materials as scientifically sound and supported by empirical evidence.

The Louisiana Family Forum, a state affiliate of Religious Right leader James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, pushed for adoption of the new law and will likely try to use it to smuggle creationist materials into public schools.

In fact, AU’s letter points out, the U.S. Supreme Court and several lower federal courts have struck down the teaching of creationism in public schools. The Board’s proposed policy, AU says, is “unfair and illogical” and “appears to have the unconstitutional

purpose of promoting religion.”

The letter was written by Dena S. Sher, Americans United’s state legislative counsel. It was sent to Jeanette Vosburg, executive director of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

Letter to the Editor

What's Wrong with Hierarchy?

Why is hierarchy bad? Surely, our prehuman ancestors lived in hierarchical social groups. Christopher Boehm in *Hierarchy in the Forest* suggests that egalitarian social structure and morality is a valuable human invention. How could language have developed without the assumption that all members of the groups are subjectively alike? I don't know if anyone has tested the hypothesis but steeply hierarchical societies would be expected to produce a degeneration of language as clusters of equals disintegrate and vanish. Stalin, that Grand Master of totalitarian rule, apparently understood that to get real science he had to crate a town full of scientists and let them communicate freely among themselves. Shakespeare's tragedies illustrate the self destructive dynamics of hierarchical societies. As a member of the Brahmin caste Mahatma Gandhi probably understood that an enlightened society would be unlikely in India without raising the status of “lower “ castes and “untouchables.” Choosing nonviolent mass actions avoided the hierarchical organization demanded by military rebellion. A religious door-knocker recently shrugged off similar comments with “but that's just human nature.” No, we can't become fully human until we resist a certain apish behavioral tendency. And that insight is there in the Bible if you look for it. Hierarchical organizations are very good at destroying others and, ultimately, themselves. But when the destruction is ended will there be any human life remaining? Political equality is the foundation of knowledge and wisdom. Hierarchies depend on secrecy, promote ignorance, pervert truth and subvert laws of democracy.

Dale L. Berry

Let's Lighten Up

Supposedly George Bernard Shaw once sent Winston Churchill some tickets for the first night of one of his plays.

Churchill then sent Shaw a telegram to the effect: "Cannot come first night. Will come second night if you have one."

Shaw promptly replied: "Here are two tickets for the second night. Bring a friend if you have one."

Friendly Philosophers

Monday, February 1st

Open Forum

Bring a Your Own Topic for General Discussion

Monday, February 15th

Change Your Mind, Change Your Life

Lee Delaney

Copper Canyon Restaurant, 5455 Gibson (opposite Lovelace Hospital) in conference dining room.

Dinner at 5:30; talk follows.

The Atheists and Freethinkers of New Mexico

<http://atheists.meetup.com/75>

Sunday, February 7th, 9am

Albuquerque Center for Peace and Justice, 202 Harvard SE

Tuesday, February 16th

Social Meeting at 6:30pm at Mimi's Cafe, 4316 The 25 Way, Near Jefferson and I-25

New Mexicans for Science and Reason

Wednesday, February 10th, 7pm

Patently Absurd? The Scientific Patent Process

Jim Middleton

UNM Law Building

1117 Stanford NE, Room 2402