



Humanist Society of New Mexico



May 2010

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

Quotes of the Month

When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion.

Abraham Lincoln

When we blindly adopt a religion, a political system, a literary dogma, we become automatons. We cease to grow.

Anais Nin

Upcoming HSNM Meetings

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

Saturday, May 8th

Informal Meeting

General Discussion

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

Refreshments: Mina Yamashita

Summit Apartments, 3901 Indian School NE

Saturday, May 15th

Topical Discussion

Science and the Brain

Special Collections Library, 423 Central Ave. NE

Saturday, May 22nd

Speaker Meeting

*Albuquerque's Stormwater Quality
Challenge and Our EPA Permit*

Kathleen M. Verhage

Humanist Minute: Laverne Rison

Refreshments: None

UNM Law School, Room 2406, 1117 Stanford NE

HSNM Family Co-op

Alternative Children's Sunday School

Call 505-292-4375 for meeting times

Santa Fe Humanists

Saturday, May 1st, 10:30am

Guest: Rev. James E. Grant

Unitarian Influence on Humanism

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

Secretary: Open

Ron Herman: Director of Classes

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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 \$15 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.

**SPIRIT VERSUS SPIRIT: MEDITATION
ON A POEM BY THOMAS HARDY**

By Donald Gutierrez

“The Man He Killed”
by Thomas Hardy

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry
And staring face to face
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead—because—
Because he was my foe
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That’s clear enough; although

He thought he’d list, perhaps
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

Yes! Quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You’d treat if met where any bar is
Or help to half a crown.

Thinking about this poem by Thomas Hardy might make us begin to ask where one’s most fundamental loyalties or values reside. We at first take it (and leave it) as facile anti-war verse: all men are brothers; given the proper chance enemy soldiers could be friends. Had they met near a tavern in time of peace they would have treated each other to a bottle of ale, perhaps even sung a song or two together. But at war, they would kill each other without hesitation.

Tim O'Brien's If I Die In a combat Zone, a book about the Vietnam War and his Army experiences, indicates why the will to kill would be automatic:

Drill Sergeant Blyton...gives us our lesson in the bayonet. Left elbow locked, left hand on wood just below weapon's sights...lunge with left leg, slice up with the steel. Again and again we thrust into mid-air imagined bellies, sometimes towards throats. 'Dinks are little shits,' Blyton yells out. 'If you want their guts, you gotta go low. Crouch and dig.' 'Soldiers! Tell me! What is the spirit of the bayonet?' He screams the question....

'Drill Sergeant—the spirit of the bayonet is to kill! To kill!' (51).

Aside from the gross racism in this passage, there is a suggestive unifying of two symbolic entities usually considered the very opposite: spirit and (versus) bayonet. A bayonet has a "spirit" by its capacity to kill the enemy (friend) by a savage, quick, eviscerating twist. This bayoneting (or shooting) of a man who could be a friend in peacetime suggests that in some crucial respects war is basically insane, at least from the stand point of an individualistic ethic. Hardy's soldier says this foe/friend contradiction is "quaint and curious," but the excessive mildness of these terms, considering the context of the poem, delivers an irony of understatement that is harsh. Although the collectivist-war values are deemed by society (but especially by its leaders) to be not only dominant but exclusive in time of war, Hardy's poem suggests a significant space for an individuated response possibly sharply opposed, rather than conforming, to a war.

The leaders who start and administer wars try to develop a moral, political or emotional rationale for starting, continuing or finishing the war ("Saving the World for Democracy," "Preventing the Spread of Communism," Halting Saddam's-- or Iran's-- Tyranny and Nuclear Potential") but often these rationales—or rationalizations—are meant more for the folks at home than for the troops. Before long the latter come to realize that the only meaningful goal of the war is to end it or at least to not get killed or mutilated. When the realization develops that some soldiers are intended by their commanding officers to be sacrificed to gain some distant strategic or even tactical objective—i. e., that they are regarded as cannon fodder—the war outlook of combat soldiers readily becomes cynical if not nihilistic. (The troops also come to realize something else—often unavoidably: "In the second World War the American military learned...that men will inevitably go mad in battle and that no appeal to patriotism, manliness or

loyalty to the group will ultimately matter"—Paul Fussell, Wartime, 282).(The high Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder rate—and often grim civil-life consequences--of American servicemen-veterans since the Vietnam War and up through the Iraq and now the Afghanistan War provides further evidence of Fussell's alarming claim).

One reason why the enemy/friend in Hardy's poem is part enemy is that the poem's speaker in real life often has another friend not alluded to in the poem—his combat buddy. One doesn't have to be an expert on combat motivation to know that intense camaraderie is the prime binding element in a basic fighting unit; the squad is a soldier's immediate "family." With its support and loyalty, or lack thereof, during combat, the soldier likely either lives or dies. When one's unit buddy is killed or horribly wounded, a part of one's self is maimed.

The consequent rage towards the enemy responsible (whether literally or symbolically) is massive. One remembers all too many scenes from the Vietnam War on TV coverage, movies like "Platoon" or books: Vietnamese villagers of all ages being dragged out of their huts by their hair or feet, their heads bashed in by weeping, rifle-butting American soldiers, their home/huts totally destroyed.

Hardy's poem effectively simplifies the situation by omitting the squad buddy, or by turning him into the "foe and then changing him back again into the buddy, with the crucial difference that this buddy is also the enemy (though of course men in the same squad sometimes become enemies too, not to mention officers considered incompetent and thus dangerous to survival). The violent wrenching of reality embodied in one's deadly war enemy also potentially being one's good friend should seriously diminish the grounds on which war is justified. That it does not evidences the authoritarian power possessed by a monarchy, a plutocracy, the patriarchy, a tyrannical regime or an oligarchy posing as a representative democracy (as in America) to wheedle or bully its populace into accepting a basically unnecessary or even thoroughly immoral war. Looking more closely at "The Man He Killed" reveals a sly sophistication in a poet some socially conservative American literary critics, such as the academic "New Critics". used to consider little better than a "rural" (i. e., simple-minded) poet.

The poem is narrated in the first person by the British (and Everyman) soldier himself. Hardy uses this dramatic point-of-view technique to allow us to see the soldier groping his way from darkness to light, the gray light produced by a grim realization surrounded by irony. The entire poem is a retrospection. The soldier

has already thought out the “curious” war situation in interpersonal terms and almost resolves it in the final stanza.

Right off the bat Hardy’s soldier says that he and his war foe in peaceful circumstances would have liked each other—meeting in a tavern they would have had “right many a nipperkin” (or half-pint of ale), but in the context of war, positioned in opposite trenches, they would—and did—shoot at each other. They also would have known what the Spirit of the bayonet is: each, come trench warfare, would have unhesitatingly tried to disembowel the other.

The poem’s speaker is quicker, and lives, and then lives to come to terms with his act of (of what? Defending his country? Defending British imperialism? Saving his own life? Murdering with the approval of the State?). “I killed him because,” (hesitation, looking for justification), because he was the Enemy. Then doubts arise. The foe, now becoming the “foe,” probably enlisted out of a whim (“Offhand like”) because, “just as I,” he was unemployed and at loose ends.

The society that both soldiers fight and risk their lives for did not provide them work (though neither England nor German were scarcity-economy societies at the time—this was not the United States 2010). Thus one is economically (if not legally) forced to possibly make the “ultimate sacrifice,” often, as writers like Ford Madox Ford, Robert Graves and George Orwell have bitterly pointed out, while some civilians were profiting off the war (Cheney, Wall Street, General Electric CEOs and others today?), reminding one of fantasies front-line soldiers had of turning their weapons on the civilians at home and particularly on those who had initiated and profited from the war and sent them into it. Put another way, war has been described as a revenge of old men against young men, so, turned around, son/soldiers could feel deadly revenge towards the symbolic fathers who, safe at home and likely prospering, concocted the war.

The fourth stanza of Hardy’s poem is electrifying when its deeper meaning surfaces—the “foe” probably enlisted because he was out of work (as perhaps is Hardy’s soldier), “No other reason why.” Enemy stereotyping—the savage Boers or Huns—doesn’t figure in the combat motivation at this stage. Hardy’s possibly unemployed soldier had no other reason to enlist. The state’s war slogans had apparently not impressed him. He joined the army because survival requires food and shelter. War breaks out, he’s caught in it, and thanks to the Sergeant Blytons of the world, his killing or survival instincts are better than his “foe’s” (now his foe, again), and he kills (murders?)

the man he would treat like a brother had they met under friendlier circumstances.

Actually, Hardy, or his soldier-narrator, ignores the physical horror of war in part because he is concerned with the psychological horror of its simple yet profound irony. Chances are good, especially during World War One, that the two foes could have ended up in hand-to-hand combat, each trying to kill the other in the most efficient (and probably brutal) way possible. Rather than a surgically stab or gun shot right through the heart, being bayoneted through the throat, belly or groin is perhaps even more likely. Fussell is disturbingly informative on the surreal, demonic nature of combat injury:

What annoyed the troops...about the public was its innocence about the bizarre damage suffered by the human body in modern war. The troops could not contemplate without anger the lack of public knowledge of the Graves Registration Corps with its space for indicating ‘Members Missing.’ You would expect front line soldiers to be struck and hurt by bullets and shell fragments, but such is the popular insulation from the facts that you would not expect them to be hurt, sometimes killed by being struck by parts of their friends’ bodies violently detached. If you asked a wounded soldier or marine what hit him, you’d hardly be ready for the answer. My buddy’s head, or his sergeant’s heel or his hand, or a Japanese leg, complete with shoe and puttees. (270)

It becomes apparent, how the usually suppressed reality in this quotation could lead to Fussell’s sinister generalization later in a chapter correctly entitled “The Real War Will Never Get Into the Books”:

In war it is not just the weak soldiers, or the sensitive one, or the highly imaginative or cowardly one who will break down. Inevitably all will break down if in combat long enough. ‘Long enough’ is now defined as between 200 and 240 days. As medical observers have reported, there is no such thing as getting used to combat...Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their experience. Thus—and this is unequivocal

—psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in war. (281)

I present this “reality-of-war” dimension first to underline the overt irony in Hardy’s poem—the man who he would buy drinks for, perhaps become good friends with in peacetime, would in war embody the foe he would do anything to destroy in the rage and terror of combat. Hardy’s soldier kills his foe-friend ultimately at the dictate of the State (Hardy’s poem doesn’t include societal coercion—the Draft—but it is part of the scenario implied by the poem). Although Hardy’s soldier enlisted, sooner or later he would have otherwise been drafted. Being a lower-class out-of-work person suggests that the narrator is a marginal figure economically forced into enlisting. Further, the foe/friend relationship of Hardy’s speaker and his enemy suggests a “friend”/“foe” relationship between a soldier and his own society, particularly the power centers of that society or what Anarchist social theorists from Peter Kropotkin to Kirkpatrick Sale have called the state. As the French-Jewish writer Simone Weil once pointed out, an enlisted man’s real enemy could well be his own officers and the authorities empowering both that military hierarchy (the Pentagon and the White House, say) and the war itself.

Thus the military is ideal for a society that has no place in civilian life for such people. That the rulers of Edwardian England (the era in which the poem was published) had their own geo-political and egotistic reasons for wanting to engage in war is suggestive about the possible fate of unemployed classes and races in our time and nation. The reader of “The Man He Killed” possibly knows, as Hardy did, that there was a British Empire out there, and that it had to be defended from those savage imperialist Dutch (or, twelve years later, Germans)—or, many generations later, Middle-East “insurgent” Muslims.

Hardy’s soldier might not realize why his society wants a war and wants him in it, but he does sense the vivid and profound irony of having to kill his foe/friend—it’s “quaint and curious.” Though the poem’s understatement is strong, is it strong or suggestive enough to lead this soldier to the “separate peace” of Frederic Henry in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*? Perhaps not. But certainly the irony offers a power of suggestion to the reader to wonder, should another war come and s/he (and “she” is now definitely all the way in it) enlists or is drafted, whether s/he will obey the spirit of the Bayonet. Or will s/he obey another spirit either directing one “North” or to jail as a Conscientious Objector or even to pulling down the criminal leaders—the high-placed political chiefs, the

military brass, the corporation war-profiteers—who start or want wars in the first place. For be sure of it: there will be more wars, and they will be justified by slick lies concocted by the state and sent out by the “embedded” and corporatized media, forcing us or our our children or theirs to choose between the two Spirits.

Osama Bin Laden's Epitaph

By Jerry Gilbert

Bin Laden’s recent criticisms of President Obama for what is wrong with this country, and for global warming, are just his latest efforts to foment hatred, distrust, and conflict. It is one more reason why history will thus write his epitaph:

Here lies a man who should be nameless
For he lived a life that was utterly shameless
He was a coward who ran and hid
From all the atrocious crimes he did
He refused to stand in public view
And face the critics that he knew
He followed his own twisted religion
While sending others to oblivion
He was an architect of immorality
Disguised as righteous sanity

He chose hate instead of love
He chose evil over good
He chose to destroy instead of build
He took responsibility for tragedies that pleased him
He took no responsibility for any wrongdoing
He pursued the audacity of hopelessness
Rather than the audacity of hope
He displayed no courage in his caves
Yet sent thousands to their graves

He deserves no shrine, no tributes, no prayers
No place on Earth should embrace his remains
While history may record his deeds
It will be to remind us once more: “Never again”
For all his innocent victims, let “death be not proud”
For the holocaust he wrought, let “life be not proud”

Those who choose to follow his ways
Should live a life with fewer days
For those who mimic such insanity
Lessen the value of our humanity

Book Review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

By Lois Kimbrell

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, by Stieg Larsson, translated from the Swedish by Reg Keeland, Vantage Books, Random House, NY, 2009, reviewed by Lois Kimbrell

We're inclined to forget about Scandinavia, none of those countries has been strongly in our talk in recent years. But now, the times are changing. Phil Zuckerman jolted us alert to Danes and Swedes in *Society with God*, in which Zuckerman holds that societies without God are better of because they are without God. Also, Stieg Larsson, editor-in-chief of the Swedish magazine, *Expo*, succeeded worldwide with mystery book located not in the lovely English countryside but in Sweden.

As a magazine editor, Larsson specialized in two subjects. He was interested in anti-democratic, right-wing extremist and Nazi organizations, and he wondered about the way computers were sure to change us. By placing the two interests together and by inventing a wonderful fictional character, he produced the highly successful *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. It's a who-done-it about the search for a serial killer. Of course, he had to write a sequel, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, and was writing a sequel to the sequel when he died in 2004.

It is fascinating to observe the way his "wonderful fictional character" takes over in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Young, dirty and disheveled, given to kinky sex and kinky drugs, but a wizard on the computer, Lisbeth is not meant to become more of a favorite with the public than Mikael, who is probably Stieg Larsson's version of himself. She is more of a favorite even so. She reminds you of the many kids you know who can research everything, including you, and she is the ideal researcher to work on a serial killer investigation that stretches back to old databases. You'd hire her.

Not that she needs money. She games the system to take a luxury vacation for free. This is the section of the book I must read more carefully. Would I be caught?

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is now out as a paperback New York Times Bestseller.

Let's Lighten Up

There was this guy at a bar, just looking at his drink. He stays like that for half of an hour.

Then, this big trouble-making truck driver steps next to him, takes the drink from the guy, and just drinks it all down. The poor man starts crying. The truck driver says, "Come on man, I was just joking. Here, I'll buy you another drink. I just can't stand to see a man cry."

"No, it's not that. This day is the worst of my life. First, I fall asleep, and I go late to my office. My boss, outrageous, fires me. When I leave the building, to my car, I found out it was stolen. The police said that they can do nothing. I get a cab to return home, and when I leave it, I remember I left my wallet and credit cards there. The cab driver just drives away."

"I go home, and when I get there, I find my wife in bed with the gardener. I leave home, and come to this bar. And just when I was thinking about putting an end to my life, you show up and drink my poison."

Friendly Philosophers

Monday, May 3rd

Open Forum

Bring a Your Own Topic for General Discussion

Monday, May 17th

Memetics: Would You Mind Repeating That?

Jerry Gilbert

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, May 2nd, 9am

Albuquerque Center for Peace and Justice, 202 Harvard SE

Tuesday, May 18th

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, May 19th, 7pm

The 9-11 'Truth' Movement

Dave Thomas

UNM Law Building

1117 Stanford NE, Room 2402

