



Book of Stuff

2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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Scott

PLACE 1: GORDON NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

In Conversation with Chantal Denis

July 5, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Tell us about your brief background – family, education, and work.

I was born and raised in Ottawa, and lived there until I left to attend Western University in London, Ontario. I started out in biomedical sciences but ended up graduating with a degree in psychology, with the goal of teaching primary French immersion. During the summer of 2012, I had a rather sudden change of heart and realized that I wanted to pursue food. Vegetarian at the time, I found a job at one of Ottawa's most well known vegetarian restaurants, a pay-by-weight buffet called The Green Door. That was where my cooking career began and where I was first introduced to the kind of large scale cooking I now do daily. I spent 3 years working there, including while I was taking a post-graduate certificate in Event Management. Last summer, I cooked for a tree-planting camp and after that I decided, on a whim, to move to Vancouver in pursuit of a better life as a commuter cyclist. Only a month after my arrival, I was lucky enough to land a job as Vega's Office Chef, where I prepare a daily vegan lunch for 100 employees at their headquarters in Burnaby. So far, my life on the West Coast has been pretty dreamy!

How did you find out about Gordon Neighbourhood House?

The weekend after I officially moved to Vancouver, I met a friend of a friend on a trip to Salt Spring Island. She lives in the West End and had been involved with GNH. She told me about the Nourish photo series and suggested that I be photographed. That photoshoot led to an in-depth conversation with Matt (the photographer and chair of GNH's Community Advisory Board) about food philosophy. He introduced me to Paul and the rest is history!

What interested you about us?

I think the first thing that really drew me to GNH is the incredible energy of the space. It's a hard thing to describe, but I suppose the best way to put it is that Gordon has very, very *good vibes*. After such a good first impression, what sealed the deal was the fact that Gordon's food philosophy so closely mirrors my own. Their radical stance on food security really resonated with me and I absolutely love how community-minded all of their food programming is.

Now, you're the Cooking With Chantal and Veggie Soup-a-Stars Coordinator for Gordon Neighbourhood House. What tasks and responsibilities come with these positions?

Cooking With is a plant-based cooking class that I have the absolute pleasure of teaching once a month. For this class, I am responsible for choosing a theme and then developing/selecting recipes that we will be making. Once all that preparation is done and the ingredients have been acquired, I am responsible for facilitating the 2-hour class with my goal always being to empower people to cook by providing as many new skills and laughs as I can.

Veggie Soup-a-Stars is a weekly community kitchen that is much more low key than the cooking classes. I am responsible for leading a group of amazing volunteers as we prepare a large meal Sunday evenings that will be served for "Meatless Monday" – a pay-what-you-can lunch program that usually attracts around 25 people. I don't prepare recipes for this group but I do have to plan the menus and gather the ingredients. I am also responsible for weekly reminders to

the group and coordinating things if I happen to be away for a weekend. During the community kitchen, I assign tasks and provide tips when applicable. We've developed into a really strong team and I am so impressed by how efficient we are and by what a lovely community we've created!

How did you come upon, and earn, these positions?

I feel very grateful that these positions were more or less created for me by Paul and Chantille. I expressed interest in getting involved with GNH and wanted to put to use my large-scale cooking experience as well as my passion for making plant-based cooking affordable and accessible. After a few chats with Chantille, they created these programs that were a great fit for me to facilitate as well as very complementary additions to the existing programming at GNH.

Where do you hope Gordon Neighbourhood House moves forward into the future?

I hope that GNH never let's go of its radical food philosophy and keeps pushing the boundaries of the current food system in Vancouver. I believe that food programs are such an integral part of the work done by Gordon and I hope that they continue to evolve in a meaningful and community-minded way. I think that Gordon being involved in the creation of a Community Food Centre would be a huge step towards a better, more just food system in Vancouver.

In Conversation with Matt Schroeter (Board Chair)

July 11, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Tell us about your brief background – family, education, and work.

I'm from Washington State in the USA, and I've been living in Vancouver for a little over 8 years now. When I was growing up, I always wanted to be some kind of artist—I just wasn't sure what kind!

I ended up getting interested in graphic design and got an Associate's Degree from Centralia College in that. I then got really interested in film, and earned a Bachelor of Art's Degree at the University of Washington in Seattle. I eventually found my skills more aligned with digital design, so I pursued a Master's Degree up here in Vancouver—at the Centre for Digital Media.

Throughout high school and university, I was working as a photojournalist and doing freelance design work when it came up. Now I'm working at a small agency making apps and websites, mostly for healthcare and technology companies based in the USA. Outside of that, I'm constantly taking photos around the city, working on personal art/design projects, doing freelance design work, and volunteering with GNH.

How did you find out about Gordon Neighbourhood House?

I was brought into GNH by a mutual friend of Paul Taylor's about 4 years ago. I was so interested in what was going on there, that I asked Paul how I could lend my skills in the best way. They really needed a new website at the time, and that was something I loved doing. I thought it was a great chance to help out the community and start getting involved.

What interested you about us?

So many things! I liked the sheer diversity of the programs and the people they served—from youth to seniors, and every age group in between. The friendliness of the staff and the willingness to open their doors to the people in the community was especially nice to feel.

Now, you're the Board Chair for the Young Ideas Steering Committee, Young Ideas Communications Committee & Neighbourhood Small Grants Advisory. What tasks and responsibilities come with these positions?

Currently I'm the board chair for the GNH Community Advisory Board. I'm also member of the Young Ideas Communications Committee and GNH Fundraising Committee. Previously, I served on the Neighbourhood Small Grants Committee for 2 years, but this year I decided to give it a break.

Outside of reading and organizing materials for those meetings, I try to make it to as many events related to those groups as I can. For all of those positions, it's really important to have a sense of what's going on in the neighborhood. Making a habit of getting involved in the wide range of GNH events has been the perfect way to get that sense. Often I'll go to the events as a photographer, and while I'm there I meet people from the community.

How did you come upon, and earn, these positions?

For the Community Advisory Board, I served on the board first—and was elected once the previous chair stepped down. For the other committees, I just expressed my interest to Paul once I heard about them. I'm always looking for new ways to help out GNH, and it's been so fascinating seeing the changes from those different perspectives since I got involved.

Where do you hope Gordon Neighbourhood House moves forward into the future?

First, I hope GNH can continue doing all these things it's been doing. I think we're incredibly fortunate to have a space, staff, and volunteers that make all of the current programs possible. Looking further, I hope that GNH can grow the connections it has in the community and in the city. Thinking about all the work GNH has done, especially around food—the potential to implement similar models in other neighborhoods is very encouraging.

In Conversation with Stephanie Shulhan

July 19, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Tell us about your brief background – family, education, and work.

I'm from Calgary, Alberta. My family's small but close. Growing up, I always loved having little family card game nights, dinners, going for walks in Fish Creek Park, and I still love simple dinners and going for walks with my family.

I studied Anthropology and Development Studies (in Calgary), and Integrated Studies in Land and Food Systems (UBC). I love studying and consider myself a life-long learner. Education isn't just about school, and I learned a lot from the jobs I had while I was in school: I worked at a Drop-In Centre in Calgary and learned about how many of us don't manage to earn a living even when working as many hours as possible, and then at Immigrant Services, which was eye-opening as I met new Canadian residents, refugees, and Temporary Workers with a huge range of life experience. In Vancouver, I loved learning about bees and pollinators during an Internship at UBC Farm, while I was studying issues of (popular) food culture and how we form our definitions of 'good' food.

How did you find out about Gordon Neighbourhood House?

I got connected a bit to other N.H.s during my work with the Think&EatGreen@School Project during my studies at UBC.

What interested you about us?

When I saw Gordon Neighbourhood House was hiring, I thought it looked like a fabulous opportunity. I liked its Food Philosophy, range and scope of projects, and the fact that it was so well connected with so many other organizations and initiatives.

Now, you're the Community Programmer for Gordon Neighbourhood House. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

I see it as being mostly about making connections between people, programs, and resources, to respond to real needs/dreams of our neighbours. I help to connect a lot of great volunteers with opportunities to work on projects they're interested in, share their skills and talents, and to connect with each other and with other members of the community. I like when volunteers and program participants can learn new things or make connections that help them in their personal and career goals.

Where do you hope Gordon Neighbourhood House moves forward into the future?

I think we'll keep building on our partnerships to reach more people. I'm excited to see more spaces downtown for Good Food initiatives, and to be involved in animating those spaces and helping to bring awesome people into those spaces so they can do amazing things.

In Conversation with Agata Feetham

July 8, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Tell us about your brief background – family, education, and work.

I am originally from Poland. I moved to Canada when I was 8 years old with my parents and younger brother. We were very fortunate to have a smooth immigration experience and have been living in Vancouver since 1989. I went to UBC and got my Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and then a Diploma in Guidance Studies (through the Faculty of Education). I have been working for Gordon Neighbourhood House for a total of 15 years and currently I am the Program Director.

How did you find out about Gordon Neighbourhood House?

During my first year in University, I started volunteering at my local neighbourhood House (South Van NH) and there I came across a job posting for a child care worker at GNH.

What interested you about us?

As a psychology student, I was very excited to gain experience working with children in a community setting.

Now, you're the Program Director for Gordon Neighbourhood House. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

As the Program Director, I oversee the majority of programs that are not food initiatives (we have a Director of Community Food Initiatives). This includes program coordination, program evaluation, and overseeing a number of community program staff that run and supervise a wide variety of programs.

How did you come upon, and earn, this position?

I took part-time classes throughout university so that I could work part-time and gain experience. I started working in different positions with children and youth (e.g. Out of School Care, Summer and Spring Break Day Camps, etc.) at Gordon Neighbourhood House in 2001 and 3 months after I graduated from the Diploma program in 2005, I was offered the position of Child, Family, and Youth Program Coordinator. Since then, my position and title have changed a couple of times and I now work with GNH as the Program Director.

Where do you hope Gordon Neighbourhood House moves forward into the future?

My hope for GNH is that it continues to grow and expand the wonderful work that it already offers. I am extremely proud and honoured to be part of an organization and staff team that truly makes a difference in the lives of our neighbours. GNH is very dear to my heart. I have witnessed hundreds of examples over the last 15 years of how essential GNH is to making the West End a vibrant, healthy, and active community.

Linda's 36th Anniversary!

October 1, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Linda has been an integral part of the Gordon Neighbourhood House and West End community for over three decades. On behalf of our community, we want to express our deepest, heartfelt gratitude to someone not only indispensable to the community at large and to the individual lives influenced by her presence and interactions, but for playing a significant role in the growth of Gordon Neighbourhood House.

When Gordon Neighbourhood House opened in its current location at 1019 Broughton in 1986, HRH Prince Charles toured the house. Linda was there the day that he came to the house, in fact he shook her hand and commented on her important role at Gordon Neighbourhood House.

Paul Taylor said, "Linda's laugh brightens Gordon Neighbourhood House several times thorough the day. You couldn't miss it! It's as much a part of this place as the walls are. Her commitment and dedication to her community is an inspiration to us all."

Jim Balakshin said, "Linda is involved in so many aspects of Gordon Neighbourhood House. When we host events, Linda is often the first to arrive and will stay until everything is finished."

Agata Feetham said, "Linda is a compassionate, kind, and loving person who truly cares about people. She is a hard worker and always willing to help anytime anyone needs it. Linda is a dedicated team player that everyone appreciates and she truly cares about Gordon House and the West End community. I am proud to call her my colleague and friend."

Debra Bryant said, "Linda, you must have welcomed hundreds of newcomers into Gordon House and ANHBC. Maybe that's why you're so good at it. Thank you for warmly welcoming me when I joined a couple of years ago and for being part of the life of ANHBC for more than a third of our history."

Thank you, Linda, and happy GNH 36th!

In Conversation with Susanna Millar

October 5, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

What's your brief background – family, education, and work? How did you find out about Gordon Neighbourhood House? What was your original interest in us?

My background and how I came to know GNH are closely linked. I studied social work and have always had an interest in agriculture. I had travelled and worked on several farms abroad as a WWOOFer (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) and always knew I wanted to incorporate this passion into my work somehow. Trying to connect my love of agriculture with social work seemed tricky at first, until I became familiar with the work GNH was doing around food and community. The GNH food philosophy was inspiring to me, and I felt this was a place where food could be grown locally with the community, cooked together, and shared over laughs. I am now grateful to be part of it.

Any suggestions for others to become involved with us? Any suggestions in 'spreading the word' via social media, word of mouth, newspapers, blog posts, articles, and so on?

We are always looking for folks to get more involved at the house. As cheesy as it sounds I truly believe there is something for everyone here. My suggestion is to check out our programs online or at the front desk, and if there's something that interests you, sign up! We are also always hosting special events, so it is important to sign up for our newsletter and check out our Facebook page so you don't miss those. If you see an event, post, or article that you like, chances are your friends might like it too- so be sure to share! GNH is a great place to meet new people, and I often hear stories of long lasting friendships that began at an event, in a program, or through volunteering. Don't be shy...once you attend something you'll be part of the GNH family.

You are a farmer and community programmer for Gordon Neighbourhood House. What are your tasks and responsibilities in that role?

As the farmer/community programmer I look after the GNH urban farms and community herb gardens around the West End. With 4 farms and 10 herb gardens to date, it's safe to say I can't keep up without an enormous amount of help from volunteers. The urban farm team is incredibly keen, and we go out each week to look after whatever needs to be done (weeding, watering, harvesting, and way more). Together we have learned how to maximize our space with salad greens, companion plant, troubleshoot with pests, and attract pollinators. Once the produce is ready it gets harvested and brought back to Chef Peter, or one of our many other food related programs at the house.

Gordon Neighbourhood House wants to make the West End a better place to "live and grow" whilst remaining "sensitive to the ever changing needs of the diverse groups of people" in the neighbourhood. What do you see as the importance of this message and work by Gordon Neighbourhood House?

Being a better place to live and grow means all people feel welcome in this space. When I say there is something for everyone here, it means we strive to ensure that each person who walks in

the door finds something important to them: English conversation class, a new friend, a tasty meal with neighbours, or a treasure at the attic. It also means that this person has something to offer which makes this place grow alongside them: maybe they raise issues that affect seniors at the seniors' lounge, or are looking to get their hands dirty at the farms, or find themselves starting a dance party at a Young Ideas event. With the West End being a fairly diverse community with a wide set of skills, interests and challenges, we see GNH mirroring such diversity in our programming and activities. This must also come with a commitment to critical conversations around how to make this community better in the future, and advocating to see that change happen.

Where do you hope Gordon Neighbourhood House moves forward into the future?

It is my hope that Gordon House continues to grow in the direction it is headed. I dream of a place with farms on all sides, food in all rooms, and conversation amongst all people. As I say this however, I am sitting at the front desk on a regular Thursday night at GNH and it feels pretty good. The Rainbow Soup Social is cooking up a meal for the Community Food Hub tomorrow and it smells amazing, "Mexican Fiesta soup" they say. In room 1 there's a free documentary film screening about the Site C dam, with a Coast Salish welcome song and drum. A couple regulars are chatting in the lobby over some coffee, and curious people come and go from the thrift store. I just commented to someone that I hoped to pop in to see the film because "it's pretty quiet right now". If this is quiet, I think it's fair to say we've hit a pretty high point. I trust it will continue to grow from here.

Thank you for your time, Susanna.

Gordon Neighbourhood House: What is a Neighbourhood House, and What Does It Do?

November 12, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Short intro to GNH

Found tucked away in pockets of lively communities, neighbourhood houses are hidden gems enchanted with an ambience of hospitality and zest. Most might not know about neighbourhood houses. Indeed, they might not know their content and purpose. There's a few in the Lower Mainland including South Vancouver, located on Victoria Drive; Mount Pleasant located on East Broadway; Kitsilano, on West 7th Avenue, and finally, Gordon Neighbourhood House (GNH), which can be found on Broughton Street. Many are associated with the Association of Neighbourhood Houses in British Columbia (ANHBC). We want to explore some of the aspects of a neighbourhood house through a case study in GNH. But what is a neighbourhood house? What is its purpose, and how can one get involved?

The ANHBC helps over 100,000 British Columbians with over 300 programs. These include child care and other family resources, support for seniors and youth, and even food programs. For examples, these can mean camping and community dinners. The ANHBC remains an overarching association for seven neighbourhood houses. Some of these have been around for a long time. For example, and to the case study, GNH has been around since 1942 in Vancouver's West End.

The organization aims to facilitate community engagement and interaction. This is done through various programs for the development *of the community by the community*. Now, the key phrase "neighbourhood house" has more clarity. A neighbourhood house is part of the community and a collective effort for public engagement. This will include work with sister associations through bottom-up, or grassroots, organizing for diverse engagement to reflect the West End community.

Throughout the Lower Mainland, neighbourhood houses have become grassroots organizations that are constructed and developed, by, and for, the people of the local community. As with most bottom-up organizing, GNH is one of them.

Victoria's and Scott's Experiences

We have been to Gordon Neighbourhood House before, in different events. Scott attended in October for a Young Ideas meeting, which is, as per the title, an event for the organization's youth wing. Victoria could make it for part of a community dinner, which was connected to the Vancouver Food Conversations event; part of GNH's annual West End Food Festival. We found the experiences pleasant and informative, and the membership enthusiastic, warm, and professional. Our hope is that individuals will consider these hidden community resources right in their proverbial Lower Mainland backyard. In fact, they have numerous ongoing, upcoming, and annual events.

How to Get Involved/Upcoming Events

The GNH hosts a multitude of events and programs at its venue located on 1019 Broughton Street. Programs are available for citizens of all ages and backgrounds. Families and youth are supported through experiential learning that inspires not only intellectual, but emotional discovery as well. A Seniors' Advisory Committee consisting of GNH members advises the GNH on improving the issues faced by seniors in the community and city. The GNH also hosts a Seniors' Lounge every week from Monday to Wednesday, which is open for all West End elders to meet with old and new faces. Additionally, Seniors' Out-Trips are organized to provide West End's seniors with the opportunity to take part in the outdoors and diverse cultures in the Greater Vancouver Region, while socializing with other elders.

In GNH's Young Ideas (YI) initiative, GNH acknowledges that a community is largely affected when its members experience loneliness or social isolation. With 48% of West End's demographic being between the ages of 20 and 39, 41% of which finding it difficult to make friends, the YI organizes events, activities, and workshops to create opportunities for those between 20 and 39 to engage and forge relationships between West End's community members. In addition to these programs, GNH also has a "Neighbourhood Small Grants" program and organizes "The Clean Team" in partnership with the West End Business Improvement Association to audit litter and work towards a cleaner neighbourhood.

There are two annual events at GNH: The West End Food Festival and the Vancouver Food Summit. The West End Food Festival is a multi-day event focusing on bringing public attention to various topics of concern in our food system, and using food to bring together community members to celebrate the diversity of food and cultures in the West End community.

The Vancouver Food Summit was an incredible and rare opportunity for individuals, community food practitioners, farmers, community leaders, academics, funders and activists and stakeholders to spend a day sharing experience and expertise, challenging assumptions, having difficult conversations and exploring how to deepen our collective impact. The interest in food in our city has gained significant momentum, in fact this year Vancouver celebrates the third anniversary of the Vancouver Food Strategy.

A key aspect of this work must be focused on a critical analysis of who is typically left out of conversation around our food system and why? The Vancouver Food Summit allowed us to collectively push ourselves to think about what an inclusive food movement looks like. Attendees chose between eight different panels throughout the day, involving discussions on eight topics central to Vancouver's food movement. Topics included: the advancement of indigenous food sovereignty, a critical look at food banks, the efficacy of food policy at challenging poverty, the question of whether local food is inherently more just, accessibility as more than a ramp, and whether food waste was an opportunity or a curse. Using food to animate important conversations, GNH is a central hub for these activities.

Volunteer postings for GNH can be found on GNH's website, and include a variety of postings; from yoga instructors to herb garden volunteers, to outreach and awareness volunteers. Becoming a volunteer for the GNH can be a very enriching and fulfilling experience, as well as an effective way to engage with West End's community.

You can become involved and donate to Gordon Neighbourhood House at their website. Note: there are restrictions on the kinds of material donations. <http://gordonhouse.org/>

In Conversation with Joy Gyamfi, Young Ideas Program Assistant

November 16, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Tell us briefly about your background – family, education, and work.

I was born in Ghana but have grown up and lived in Canada for the majority of my life. (16 years to be exact.) I am now a student at UBC, and I've mainly worked in the food service and retail industry before this position.

How did you find out about Gordon Neighbourhood House?

I'm a Co-op student, so I found out about GNH through the Summer Day Camp Leader position that they advertised with Co-op.

What interested you about us?

When I first found out about GNH I was mainly interested in finding a job but now that I've worked here for 5 months, I'm really interested in and proud of the fact that we are able to run so many programs that are low-cost and affordable.

Now, you're working with Gordon Neighbourhood House. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Now that my position has changed, I am a Program Assistant for Young Ideas. I essentially help plan events for people living in the West End area.

Where do you hope Gordon Neighbourhood House moves forward into the future?

Although GNH is well-known in the West End area, I hope that it can become a more recognized name outside of this community.

Welcome to the New GNH Community Advisory Board Chair, James Kim!

December 10, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

(GNH Community Journalist/Blogger)

Gordon Neighbourhood House (GNH) is thrilled to welcome the new Chair of GNH Community Advisory Board, James Kim! As part of the annual election for positions on the board of GNH, James will fill the position. The previous chair, Matt Schroeter, stepped down from the role to contribute to GNH in different ways. We appreciate the service of Matt and James.

James has been profiled in a previous GNH Blog post about the branding of the GNH, *What's in a Brand? Community Journalist Gavin Reid Explores the Gordon Neighbourhood House Rebranding Process*. At the time, James said, "It is important to create a good first impression. A brand reflects personality and helps make it recognizable in different environments."

James notes that the huge increase in visitors to GNH since 2012. James is curious about the world and the local, and wider, Vancouver culture as well, especially related to food. He likes to eat. He likes to cook. He likes to share meals. A perfect fit for the GNH community!

He has been associated with GNH for some time as the Communications Consultant (since November, 2012). Even before GNH, he knew Paul Taylor. He heard about the GNH when Paul became the executive director. "Gordon Neighbourhood House was also a good place for me insofar as the catchment area, which is the Downtown Peninsula," James said, "I've been living here for the last 12 years. That worked out for me."

For the role as the chair, James will be involved in meetings, fundraising efforts, meeting with the city, signing various documents for grants, and so on. "With certain types of grants, for example, there is a request that along with the executive director or staff at Gordon Neighbourhood House there is an indication of endorsement from the advisory board," James said, "Usually, that would be the chair signing."

James wants the board to be as inclusive and representative of the community members that GNH is integrated into as much as possible. He wants the conversation of poverty reduction and food security between the community, the city, and the province to continue. James stated that GNH is an important part of that movement to "try and make the world a better place."

"It has to do with trying to keep the conversation going with a poverty reduction strategy, food security...for everyone from elders to students," James said, "As part of that strategic goal I think GNH is doing a great job of speaking to the right people and hopefully making a bit of an impact."

He described the community, and the energy that "informs and influences the GNH," as his favourite part of the neighbourhood house community. That is, GNH is a community hub or a "home away from home." James has been touched most by attending some of the volunteer events.

When his parents came to Canada in the late 1960s, they did not have jobs. They weren't quite food insecure but options were limited. There was less of a Korean-Canadian community

compared to today. And there was no such as a neighbourhood house such as GNH and its outreach programs. GNH is good because it can bring people in.

“When I sit down with people, in some cases, I feel like it is revisiting an opportunity when we were young, or my parents were young,” James said, “I feel it is an amazing thing that we are able to do this, to be frank, with the limited resources that we have at neighbourhood houses.”

Welcome to the New GNH Vice Chair, Jill Porter!

March 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A big welcome to a new member of the executive team, Jill Porter! She is a community development advisor at the University of British Columbia's (UBC) Centre for Community Engaged Learning who also lives in the community served by GNH. Jill is the new vice chair for the advisory board. She has a background of over 20 years in non-profit, community and partnership development work.

Jill has worked in inner city communities through various non-profit organizations and government roles but for the past 5 years with UBC. "It was a new role when I began", Jill said, "It was geared towards our Centre connecting with community organizations in different ways." Through it, she found Gordon Neighbourhood House (GNH).

Over time, the relationship between GNH and Jill grew, especially since she lives in Vancouver's West End. Her inclusion in the community was an additional pull for the position as well. Jill said, "I live there. I knew about GNH over the years through interacting with neighbourhood houses. It was a matter of reaching out."

Jill had conversations with Paul and the team to look for ways in which the Centre at UBC, where she works, could collaborate with the GNH community. "I got excited," Jill gushed, "I was inspired by Paul and the work that he is doing at GNH."

Another attraction to becoming a member of the board for GNH was that she had "never been on a board of a community organization that was in my own neighbourhood."

The role of vice chair of the advisory board for GNH is new. Board positions are traditionally 3-year terms. She is beginning her second term with this new role. "The first year I was on the advisory board, I was a member. The next two years, I was in a recording role." Jill said, "I saw this as an opportunity to step up and take on more of a leadership role in the advisory board and help Paul and the CAB chair James Kim, with a lot of that work."

When asked about the core value of GNH, she said, "What appeals to me, and what I believe the core values are, are inclusion, accessibility, reciprocity, just those opportunities around just being responsive and inclusive of the needs of community." The values that support an organization to stay connected and in touch with its community.

PLACE 2: SKEPTIC MEDITATIONS

Leaving Psychologically a Cult-like Meditation Group

October 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Leaving, physically, an abusive group is not the hardest part. It's leaving the relationship psychologically, recovering your psyche.

The core of this interview originally appeared in Medium: Humanist Voices. Republished here with permission for the interviewer and edited here by SkepticMeditations. Our interviewer is Scott Douglas Jacobsen of Conatus News and Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing.

Interview by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott, the Founder of Skeptic Meditations, speaks from experience in entering and leaving an ashram. Here we talk about existential risks for an individual leaving a cult, views of the world only knowing the cult, leaving psychologically and physically from the cult, places for transition, and some who never get over their trauma.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What big existential risks are there immediately for the individual who leaves a cult-like group?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Based on my experiences of leaving the cult-like ashram of Self-Realization Fellowship, I would say the big existential risks immediately upon leaving:

1) Feelings of despair and meaninglessness upon leaving the group.

A huge attraction for joining is the promise of ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Gurus and authoritarian leaders short-circuit or bypass our natural process of individually grappling, struggling, and resolving for ourselves the meaning or meaninglessness of existence. After I left and later read Nietzsche, Camus, and Kierkegaard I understood the value of seeing life and the universe as ultimately meaningless. Each of us ought to grapple individually with the meaninglessness of our existence, and create what meaning is in our lives. Otherwise, we either sink into emptiness and despair or mindlessly follow some external authority who tells us what our purpose in life is.

2) Leaving a cult-like group *only* physically.

There is leaving physically, which is perhaps easiest to see, to grasp. You split from the ashram and move out. Although the longer you are in the group the harder it is. In the ashram I lived members were given \$40 a month total and were dependent completely on the group for food, shelter, clothing, and relationships or community.

Leaving the group psychologically is much more complicated. For reasons cited in my response in #1 above about our human desire to find ultimate meaning, purpose, answers.

The existential challenge of leaving a cult-like group includes:

Loss of psychological identity: Years inside a cult-like group makes followers ideologically consciously and unconsciously fit into the group's doctrines or worldview. Leaving psychologically will likely take as many years as it did to stay in it to unbind the language, worldview, and subtle manipulations of the group.

Leaving the group physically is no guarantee of leaving the group psychologically. Close proximity to the group's "headquarters" or "center" puts follower-disciples at greater existential peril psychologically.

Fear of not being "good enough" from being kicked out or leaving the group, not living up to the group's ideals of spiritual or ideological perfection, obedience, and loyalty.

There's an excellent collection of essays titled: *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad which I recommend and have written about in my articles, including: Manipulation Techniques of Meditation Peddlers, Escaping the psychological trap of meditation techniques, and Double Bind of Eastern Enlightenment.

3) I prefer to use the term "cult-like" instead of only cult. For cult-like encompasses the attributes of common behaviors, such as:

Unquestioning obedience to authority,

Promising ultimate purpose and meaning in life,

Dismissing or berating anyone who questions or challenges the group, leader, ideology.

Cult-like behaviors are on a spectrum. They are common in our society and manifest in degrees, like a bullfrog that is first comfortable in a cooking pot of lukewarm water. Gradually as the flame burns underneath and boils the water the frog is cooked. We are all born into cult-like influences. But each of us is influenced in various degrees by these external authorities.

Jacobsen: How can they—those for who the entrenchment and indoctrination are arguably the most thorough—leave mentally and then physically?

Scott: The way I left mentally or psychologically the SRF systems of undue influence was through a gradual, years-long process. I lived in the SRF ashrams as a monk for 14 years. I believe it took me the same amount of time, 13-14 years, before I was able to psychologically come to grips with what had happened to me. During those 13-14 years I was engulfed mostly in catching back up with decades of my life lost while living in a closed-cloister. I was reintegrating back into the world: getting professional training and experiences, going back to school to complete college education, building a home, paying the bills, and learning about being in the world outside the ashram.

The harder part, in hindsight, was unpacking the layers of psychological manipulations that go way beyond just one cult-like group experience, like SRF. I'm talking about layers of cultural and societal indoctrination since birth. The education of youth in being obedient to authority and so on. Of being raised Catholic and being asked to have faith in the Church, Pope, and God, Jesus. The whole thing about unquestioning authority feeds into an entire worldview, an existence, psychologically. Like a fish in a bowl of water. The indoctrination is the bowl but more critically the unconscious water all around the fish.

In some strange twist of chance, it actually was the fellow members of the ashram where I'd lived that allowed me to openly begin questioning ashram authority and the teachings of SRF.

The monks at that time started these encounter-like groups. We had begun to confront our existence, it's meaning, individually within the community.

For instance, we would sit in a circle of maybe 10–50 monks and discuss questions such as:

If SRF ashram was an instrument to our feeling the bliss, joy, and love that our guru, Yogananda (1893–1952) promised followers-disciples then why were we mostly feeling fear, despair, and hopelessness?

Why were the leaders of SRF seemingly indifferent to our despair?

Could it be that the leaders and the organizational systems gained its very power over the fear-based systems of psychological controls?

These and many other questions were hashed out over a year or two by many of the SRF monks in the ashram. Until the SRF President and her lieutenants shut down the conversations and banned the open “encounter” groups. Also, the leaders of the encounter groups, the Spiritual Life Committee, were all replaced by compliant lieutenants of the President. And the President fired the two outside professional psychologists who had facilitated any encounter sessions.

Jacobsen: Do halfway houses or safe transition houses exist for ex-cult members as with women domestic abuse victims?

Scott: I’m not aware of any halfway or transition houses for members who leave cult-like groups. There are some members or former members from outside some cult-like groups like Scientology, SRF, or Mormons, who may temporarily take people into their homes, provide occupational training, or donate household items to members who leave the group to establish a home or place to live outside the group.

On Netflix sometimes you find some interesting documentaries. I remember one called *Amish: Shunned* that reminded me of my experiences in and outside the SRF ashram. Also, *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* also helped me process my experiences and see how disturbing are these cult-like behaviors.

Jacobsen: Do some never ‘get over’ their experiences, the trauma for example?

Scott: Correct. Some, perhaps most, if not all, who spent many years within high-control groups, may never get over the abuse or controls.

Why would we want them to get completely “over” it?

For me, the lessons I learned getting out of the ashram cult-like situation, both physically and psychologically, was perhaps one of the most defining experiences of my life, of my psyche. I learned so much that is nearly unspeakable. And, that continues to unfold. That’s not to say that I don’t regret living in the SRF ashram for 14 years. I do regret staying so long.

I have scars and trauma lurking underneath my psyche. On the outside I live a fairly ordinary life, with fairly unremarkable job, car, family, friends and accomplishments. Most of the people I know do not know I lived for a decade and a half in an ashram, cult-like group. Or, if they do know we seldom if ever talk about it. Perhaps it’s also my introverted nature that keeps me from speaking much about my experiences.

That’s why for me to talk or write about it is so healing. It allows me to process my thoughts and feelings. In some strange, macabre way I get fascinated as to what drives people to join, stay, and leave cult-like groups.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Scott.

Existential Risks and Trauma of Leaving an Ashram

May 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The closer members got to the supreme leader in the ashram the more it would break them. Even after leaving the group physically, many never psychologically escaped. It could take years, even decades, to recover from the trauma.

This is the fourth in a series of interviews that originally appeared in Canadian Atheist. The interviewer and article author has granted permission. SkepticMeditations.com has republished the interview with edits from the original.

Interview by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott, the Founder of Skeptic Meditations, speaks from experience in entering and leaving an ashram. Here we talk about existential risks for an individual leaving a cult, views of the world only knowing the cult, leaving psychologically and physically from the cult, places for transition, and some who never get over their trauma.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What bigger existential risks exist for the individual who leaves the cult, immediately?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: The more the group members lived in the ashrams the more broken was their self-identity. Their self-identity was dismantled and remolded to fit the image of the leader and group. Group members attached their existence to ashram identity, name, and position within the spiritual-organizational hierarchy.

Cloistered spiritual groups tend to rule over followers in an undemocratic and unequal way. Those deemed superior are those closest to the supreme leader [1]. Group members learn quickly how to compete for the leader's attention and to climb the ladder of the spiritual-corporation. The ashram members sought power, position, and competition for the attention of the leader.

It is difficult to describe what a member feels and thinks after leaving their relationships within a group that for years or decades destroyed, then reformed and maintained their spiritual-ego or self-world identity. Members who leave the group psychologically first, before they leave physically, probably have lower risk of failing to reintegrate into society outside.

When you think about cults, the aim of the leaders and the members who join them, is to break down the former self-world identity. It's presumed the egoic self is bad, wrong, or evil. In the name of spiritual training ashram residents allowed the leader and his henchmen to abuse, to break the self, the ego of followers.

In cults with an Eastern enlightenment-bent, the spiritual path is purportedly divinely designed to bring follower-practitioners to perfection, to realize self as Self, soul, or God or Nirvana. It doesn't really matter what the ideal. For the external authority dictates the goal, the path, and everything in between. The ultimate devotee-disciple then is the one who is selfless, egoless, and thoughtless. There were many disciples of meditation gurus who I saw who had the thousand-yard stare. Shining eyes and toothy smiles but behind them was not themselves as individual personality but robots, parrots of the teacher-masters words and thoughts.

The aim of selflessness in the Eastern enlightenment sense is by degrees to offer one's self in total service and obedience to the spiritual teacher. In the SRF ashram we called this attunement. The more we became like the leader or his ideology the more in-tune, spiritual we became. Gradually over years and decades of spiritual training our identity broken. Fashioned in the old self's place is some new self made to fit the image of the guru and group.

To members inside the outside world is dangerous, evil, or deluded. To be close to the master-teacher is spiritual safety and illumination. The way to get close physically or psychologically (spiritually) was to kill the self and attune to the master. Psychologically cult groups break the member's sense of self and then reframe follower's self-world identity. Meditating, chanting, visualizing, affirming one's Oneness or Unity with some Higher Power, these are cult-like practices. For when coupled with an ideology of seeking perfection or enlightenment the practices break down self-identity, corrupt the senses, and one's ability to analyze and act independently.

Jacobsen: How does someone view the world if the cult or cult-like group is all they have ever known in life?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Long-time cult-group members fear more than anything to leave the group. It was drilled into the monks in the SRF ashrams that we were special, chosen by God and Guru, just one more meditation away from ultimate self-realization. Divine carrots dangled with a spiritual stick.

The darker side of the story was that if we ever left the master-teacher or left the ashram we not only risked losing everything spiritually but were likely to wander in darkness, suffering, lost in delusion (Maya) for seven future lifetimes (future human incarnations).

The annihilation of self occurs when entering, staying, and leaving the cult. That is perhaps why many former members who leave cults hold onto the underlying beliefs that led them and kept them in the group in the first place. Psychologically it's all one has known, the cult of an external authority. That's why many who left the ashram joined other cult ideologies, such as Landmark Forum, Buddhism, spiritual but not religious, or energy healing.

We humans have a deep need to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. Our cultures (cults: familial, social, economic, political, philosophical or theological) breed meaning.

I think this is why existential philosophers, like Nietzsche, declared God is dead and acknowledged that the natural world was a nightmare of horror tinged with moments of art and beauty. Men seek to escape from nature's horror into an imaginary perfection.

When a member of the cult group, that pretends to offer the ultimate purpose of existence, when that member psychologically or physically leaves the group or ideology, that creates for him or her a crisis of existence.

Jacobsen: How can members who are thoroughly entrenched in the doctrine of the cult's worldview leave mentally and then physically?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Ashram members who left or who were asked to leave often were not able to leave psychologically. Meaning they did not leave behind the SRF ashram ideology. Which meant then that leaving the ashram physically didn't make much difference to their underlying self-identity. The held psychologically onto their identity with the ideology of the group.

Several former monks who I talked with after I left, though they physically left the ashram, they clung psychologically to it. Their worldview continued to revolve around Eastern mysticism, spirituality, and meditation practices. They'd tell me their experiences in meditation prove the existence of kundalini (astral energies) awakened in their spine (a Yogic doctrine espoused by SRF and many Eastern-styled meditation groups), as if tickling sensations are deeply meaningful and proof beyond doubt.

How would they know those sensations are what they believe they are? Did they actually come to mystical experience by themselves? Or, did some external authority tell them about it?

Gradually, decades after leaving physically I finally psychologically left the ashram cult; I saw that what I'd believed in was a false doctrine. That the whole thing was a fraud, and that we'd simply been abused. It really hurts to admit that. But to admit I was a victim of abuse has helped me to process, learn, and get through the trauma.

Jacobsen: Do halfway houses or safe transition houses exist for ex-cult members as with women who were victims of domestic abuse?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: I'm not aware of organized, physical safe houses for victims of cult abuse in the United States. Though there are some online support groups. In U.S. society, I think, pretends there are no victims of abuses.

Self-reliance is sometimes insufficient. Pick yourself up by the bootstraps, is the attitude in the U.S. society. Members who leave controlling groups or cults seldom get public assistance.

Perhaps the heartlessness of self-reliance is one reason why in the U.S. we have so many religious factions, fundamentalists, and cults vying for mindshare. And, why there is an endless supply of incoming and outgoing members to religions and cults.

So, for the most part, cult members in the U.S. when they leave the group, they pretty much are on their own. Some are fortunate to have supportive family and friends. But, as I noted above, many cult members abandoned or destroyed their former relationships upon entering and obeying the rules of the cult.

However, I do know of a few informal halfway houses for former religious clergy or cult-members to transition back into society.

The Clergy Project, a nonprofit for clergy who no longer believe in the supernatural, provide online resources and sometimes training and funding for former clergy to reintegrate back into society.

There's Recovering From Religion that provides a toll-free hotline, but it is not focused on cults per se, but on people struggling to come out of religion (which as I mentioned above physically leaving a cult group is not the same as psychologically leaving the religion or underlying doctrine of the cult).

I've heard that Leah Remini, producer, and host of the TV documentary series Scientology and the Aftermath, is trying to organize a nonprofit to support Scientology Sea Org (e.g. clergy) who want to leave and to reintegrate into society.

When I left the Self-Realization Fellowship Order, never to return physically, I was fortunate to find the informal support of several members and former monastics of SRF.

Without their material (donations of household items to stock my new apartment) and psychological support (listening and understanding), I may have had a much more challenging reintegration back into society.

Or, if I had left without their support would have felt perhaps totally isolated and alone. (Self-reliance is mostly a myth. We rely on support from others, especially during our crises.)

I sometimes feel alone in my experiences but then I occasionally meet former cult members who I can identify with. More public conversation seems to be happening in the mainstream, but mostly alternative media about cult-groups and members who exit cults.

That kind of vulnerability, feeling isolated and alone, is often what cults and their leaders prey on and target in recruits. So whatever we as society can do to support our member I believe is extremely important for our societal, human, and natural survival.

Jacobsen: Do some never ‘get over’ their experiences, the trauma for example?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Yes. It breaks you to be a committed member of a cult or psychologically controlling group. Members sign-up for the promise of spiritual training, which begins by breaking down the ego, self-identity. Those who take it deadly serious place their entire trust in God, Guru-teacher, and spiritual path. Those who don’t take the group so serious probably will not be broken.

The break-down of self at first can often feel exhilarating, ecstatic, liberating. But this breakdown and reshaping of self-identity through external authority is at best a waste of time, at worst dangerous. For me, I experienced the harms. And, the waste: the many years I spent meditating and in the group was precious time lost. Time that I can never regain. Time that I would’ve instead spent learning skills, building relationships, family, career, intellect, and so on. The ashram cult didn’t just take away my time or money; they robbed me of my right to experience my self-world as it is.

Many former members never really seem to get over their trauma. Many turn inward on themselves: to guilt, shame, or depression, sometimes suicide. The guilt and self-world breakdown is by design. It is part of the conditioning, or spiritual training, underlying membership in psychologically controlling groups.

A huge motivation for my doing this interview with you is to speak out about the harms of such groups, to process my experiences, and hopefully help by telling my story and perspectives.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Scott.

Needs Fulfilled from Cults, and Benefits for Leaders and Followers

April 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What are some of the benefits for ashram residents and their leaders? What keeps followers stuck inside an abusive relationship or cult?

This article is third in a series and originally appeared in Canadian Atheist. It is republished here with the author's permission. Skeptic Meditations has edited the original for the article below.

By Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott, Founder of Skeptic Meditations, speaks from experience in entering and leaving Self-Realization Monastic Order, a Hindu-inspired ashram headquartered in Los Angeles and founded by famous Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. Here we talk about some of the benefits of ashram residents and their guru-leaders. Also, we discuss the drivers that keep people stuck inside an abusive relationship or cult.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to take a 25-degree slant on the conversation around cults. What small benefits came from the extensive training found in the ashram?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Yeah, you'd hope there were some benefits from spending a decade and a half of my life in an ashram. A few benefits were: I got exposed to people from all over the U.S., Canada, India, Australia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, England, Scotland, and Ireland. Interestingly, other than India, there were no monks from other parts of Asia. Of course, the SRF monks in the ashrams were similar in their spiritual beliefs and renunciate worldview. But I got to enjoy traditional recipes from around the world.

Some other benefits while in the ashram: I learned to prepare and cook food, to cut hair, to grow herbs and vegetables. The ashram routine taught me how to be orderly and tidy, to clean toilets, clean dishes, and community areas of the ashram. The monks lived the cliché "cleanliness was next to godliness". Mostly though the ashram rules and duties to clean and be orderly reflected the unlivable renunciate ideals of living a life of perfection, sanctity, and purity.

Jacobsen: Did any big benefits come to you? It seems odd to ask because the focus is on the negative, but, with a hint of humor, only a small percent of all things are ever *all bad*.

Scott: The monks, individually and in groups practiced meditation for four hours everyday. The monastic routine [1] forced me to introspect, to go within, to meditate and police my thoughts. There was nothing like a meditation chapel full of stilly sitting monks to force you to sit still, though often times my mind could be racing. Sometimes I quieted my thoughts. There were times when I had so-called mystical experiences. Many altered-states of consciousness I understand now have alternative explanations [2] that are more natural than supernatural.

Perhaps there's no other human experience quite like living as an ascetic, like a hermit or a monk. Professional monkhood demands total self involvement. Taken to extremes monkhood becomes about being self-absorbed. Despite much rhetoric about how spiritual aspirants must be

selfless and surrender ego to a higher authority, frankly my experience was most ashram residents were pathologically self-absorbed. We just relabelled self-absorption as spiritual, blissed out, or communion with God. Later I learned that meditation can sometimes have negative side effects [3], like depersonalization and psychosis.

When the honeymoon wears off, after the first two or three years, the routine in the ashram became mindlessly deadening. The ashram is a place where people go to let individuality, creativity, and intellect die.

Any benefits become traps. The ashram routine of meditation and renunciation stifled psychological growth. In the SRF ashram, developing intellect and self-expression is considered egoic. There might be a few exceptions but ashram residents had to seek their own secret outlets for creative self-expression. I remember one monk telling me he'd listen over and over to Jimi Hendrix 'All Along the Watchtower' to relieve his frustrations. Another monk got emotional outlet by listening to Opera. (Only SRF approved music was considered spiritual, and opera was not). Most long-time monks had to live a secret inward double life to cope in a stodgy ashram.

Jacobsen: What is the need fulfilled by the joining of a cult for those that do join them? What need does this serve?

Scott: Well for me, joining the SRF ashram and becoming a monk was a way to escape the world on the pretext of spiritual searching. It's not that I was insincere in my search. It's just that looking back I realized what I searched for was answers. The kinds of answers where I no longer had to search. No longer had to think or grapple with difficult questions. It was, in a warped way, an exhilarating freedom to hand over my authority and responsibility to a divine master and his spiritual predecessors who presumably had all the answers. All I had to do was follow, to obey, and everything would be bliss and roses. A culture of non-thought is rewarded with its own benefits. Ignorance is bliss: until disillusionment sets in.

Outwardly the ashramites presented themselves as pious disciples. As ascetics, hermits, monks they were special or different from most people in Western culture. Inwardly though the monks were no different really, or perhaps different in the worst ways, loaded with desires, neuroses, and insecurities. Renunciates are forced to pretend outwardly that everything is wonderful. Else their ashram existence is a sham. Outwardly monks had to present themselves as holy, pious, and pure. Inwardly though many monks felt empty or worse, doomed to suffer for the master, and unworthy of happiness in the present life. At first the double life of an ashram resident starts with little violations of ashram rules: They install a coffee maker in their bedroom (consuming caffeine is against the rules, even though chai tea was served on special occasions). They'd secretly install a TV in their room or sneak out to the movie theatre. Or, in some cases the vows of outward celibacy (no sex or romance with mortals) occasionally erupted into sex scandals. There were several incidents when renegade monks ran off with nuns and others who sexually exploited SRF lay members. (In this context, lay member is pregnant with double meaning).

I digress. Back to your question. The needs change for members who join these groups. Followers of cult-like groups join for idealized, starry-eyed, spiritual purposes: to transform the world, to bring techniques for self-realization to the planet, to spiritualize self and humanity. On the outside these motives for joining appear to be peaceful, harmonious, and noble. Inside though there is a psychological battle with many contradictions. Spiritual advancement is often equated with position, power, and authority over others in the ashram. Self-importance is tied to outward markers in how often one is recognized, promoted, or praised by the leaders or members. So the

ashrams become a nasty breeding ground for bringing out the best and more often the worst, passive-aggressive behaviors, in residents. It's a psychological trap that once followers invest in psychologically becomes difficult to get out [4]. It's a very confused existence really because of the contradictions inherent in the unlivable ideals.

Jacobsen: Obviously, the main benefits of cults come to the leaders, whether finances, followers, or, apparently, people to have sex with for an extended period of time. These seem like casual observations of consistent phenomena. What seems like the main driver for the highest leadership in a cult?

Scott: In a recent blog post I wrote how the supreme leader-guru gains his superpower from his devotees. The guru needs disciples for his identity. The disciples need guru for theirs. The guru-disciple relationship is based and maintained in this power exchange.

Allegations of sexual impropriety are common among Hindu gurus in the U.S. The guru-disciple relationship is built and maintained on a power exchange and often by sexual attraction. Here's some examples I will quote.

"Yogananda was also formally accused of impropriety by Swami Dhirananda in 1935 and Sri Nerode in 1940; these two men worked originally with Yogananda to spread Kriya Yoga" wrote Lola Williamson, a religious studies professor at Millsaps College in Jackson, MS and researcher of Hindu-based groups in the US, in *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*.

Yogananda was apparently never found guilty of abuses by a court of law. However, there's been numerous out of court settlements and testimonies of disgruntled former followers.

One disillusioned female student of Yogananda wrote in a letter dated 1938:

"...After we started living at Mt. Washington [ashram], Swamiji [respectful for Swami Yogananda], whether at Encinitas or here, had me come to see him every night....On these nightly visits to his rooms he always had me lock the door or he did it; then all he'd do was either to sit and look at me or talk about his experiences with beautiful women on his tours and of sex....Before this time he had me take an oath of unconditional friendship to him promising never to reveal what he tells me to another person. He says there should be no conditions, no barriers between us now that I took the oath...He said I was creating a barrier between us by not letting him kiss me, or at least not wanting him to. He kissed me every time I went to his rooms after the first time although it was against my liking. Sometimes he tried to stick his tongue in my mouth but I wouldn't stand for that! He says that nothing he would ever do to me could possibly hurt me but bless me since it was God manifesting through him.

"He has told me that any place his hand touches that person is blessed. At times he has placed his hands on different parts of my body and made suggestive movements to put his hand inside my dress and would have if I had not pushed it away. If he would do such things as this on just a few months friendship, what does he do with the girls who are with him constantly and wait on him like slaves?

One afternoon up in his office here at Mt. Washington we were sitting on the couch and he pulled me back on his big lotus pillow and kissed and held me so tight I had to fight to get my breath. This was not an unusual occurrence however. We had been discussing the barrier which he said I had erected by resisting him (he always brought this subject up

until finally I got so sick of discussing it I refused to say any more on it) when he told me this about Jesus Christ. He said that a spiritual man can touch a woman and it won't be in the physical plane. He said Jesus "had" Mary Magdalene in a certain way."

These allegations are not surprising. I would expect disgruntled students to come forward to testify of abuses. No matter how sincere the leader-guru, students get used for the master's own self-interest. The followers make the master. And the master needs the students. Whatever abuses occur within that dynamic of self-interest exchange between master and disciple [5].

Jacobsen: When it comes to followers somewhere in the privileged circle of the leader, what benefits accrue to them? Why do they keep following when they must see the hypocrisy and faults of the leader more closely than others at the bottom of the cult pyramid?

Scott: The inner circle of followers, those closest to the powerful leader, have much control of the followers further outside the circle. They often act as the conduits of the master. They have the information power over disciples who have lesser access to the master. I don't believe followers can remain long in the inner circle of the leader *if* they focus on the leader's hypocrisy and faults. There would be too much cognitive dissonance (inner psychological conflict) for the follower who disbelieves in the infallibility of the leader. Or, in some rare cases some monks or follower disciples might be able to go through the outer motions, pay lip service, while inwardly not believing in the teachings, doctrines, or edicts of the church and its leaders. The guru-disciple relationship demands total obedience to the master. Otherwise, it won't work.

What keeps "followers" following the master or cult is complicated. The longer followers follow—especially an ascetic, renunciate, monastic life that is dependent on the church or spiritual organization—the harder it is to break free of the group. It's extremely difficult for to abandon one's entire psychological identity and the community that props it up. In the SRF ashram monks were given food, clothing, and shelter from the horrors of the "outside world". Remember these groups, like SRF, paint the outside world and the people in it as dangerous or "evil".

The Clergy Project [6] is a community of current and former religious clergy who no longer believe in god or the supernatural. As a member, I have heard many, many stories of clergy who can't leave or who finally left but couldn't without support from groups like Clergy Project, other former cult-members, family and friends. Having left a high-control group, the SRF ashram, I understand how difficult it is for followers inside these groups and the longer they stay inside the group the more difficult it is to leave. Is it really surprising that people stay in abusive relationships? Relationships are powerful and difficult to break from the longer we are in them and the more our identity (i.e. psychological survival) is tied to them. It is often an existential fight for survival to question or to break away from an abusive, long-term relationship.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Scott.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen is the Founder of [In-Sight Publishing](#) and [In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal](#).

Notes

1 For more on the inside of SRF Order, read my post [A Monks' Ashram Weekly Routine](#).

2 There's many natural explanations for mystical experiences. Read my post [Re-Interpreting Mystical Experience](#).

3 My index of posts [Adverse \(Side\) Effects of Meditation](#) contains numerous examples and research studies.

4 My post [Double Bind of Eastern Enlightenment](#) goes into details about the psychological traps inherent in renunciate worldviews.

5 For more details, read my post [Sexuality in Guru-Disciple Relationship](#).

6 [The Clergy Project](#) website: For current and former religious professionals without supernatural beliefs.

Trapped in Post-Christian Spirituality and Meditation Beliefs

April 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Post-Christian spirituality and secularization of meditation beliefs in the West has transformed thinking God's thoughts to thinking "right" thoughts, stilled thoughts, or no thoughts.

This article originally appeared in Canadian Atheist and is republished with the author's permission. I've made some minor edits to the original.

By Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He speaks from experience in entering and leaving Self-Realization Monastic Order, a Hindu-inspired ashram headquartered in Los Angeles and founded by famous Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. Here we talk about meditation beliefs, and Westerners who are Post-Christian and consider themselves atheist or spiritual but not religious.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You were in a cult-like group devoted to meditative practice and a monastic living. What was it? How did you become wrapped up in it?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: I was an ordained monk for 14 years in Self-Realization Fellowship Order, founded in 1920 by famous Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. It is essentially a Hindu-inspired religion with a heavy blend of Christianity. I discovered SRF and Yogananda while I was in college. As musician, at that time, I was looking for ways to be more creative, more intuitive. To tap into the hidden, unknown creative powers within myself. At a party, when the band took a break I spoke to my buddy's Uncle who was a Yogi meditator. He recommended I read *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda.

Long story short: I read the *Autobiography* and had a "come to Yogananda" experience. At the time I felt that everything I wanted was promised to followers of Yogananda's teachings, which were articulated by his organization Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF). Within 12 to 18 months I ran away leaving college, job, friends, and family without notice to go live at SRF Hidden Valley Ashram. My aim was to see if I could be an SRF monk for the rest of my life.

After two years as a resident-lay disciple at HV Ashram I was excepted into the Encinitas (San Diego County CA) Ashram for postulant (bootcamp) training for new monks. I was transferred 18 months later to the SRF Mother Center, the International Headquarters, on top of Mt. Washington, in Northeast Los Angeles.

I took Novitiate vows within two years and three years later took Brahmachari vows. Each vow required of the monk greater commitment to the SRF monastic vows of loyalty, obedience, celibacy, and simplicity to God, guru, and the SRF. My dream to become a monk eventually turned out a nightmare. Fortunately, I was able to leave.

Jacobsen: How did you get out of it, following from the previous question?

Scott: As life gets, it was complicated. After a decade and a half of struggling to make the monk life work, I realized the monastery wasn't the right place for me. What I needed was to grow, to

try new things. During the last couple years, I'd secretly obtain and read books on escaping religious cults. Also, I hired a couple life coaches and talked over my challenges with a certified psychologist—all outside the ashram.

During my last few years in the ashram, I gradually worked up the courage and the resources to be able leave the Order, the ashram. Prior to leaving I cashed out my savings so I could rent an apartment in nearby Glendale. With the help of an ex-monk I bought a new car. I lined up some part-time work helping a friend in her business. What I discovered was the longer followers lived in the ashram the harder it was to leave. What held us from leaving were many fears: "Where will I go? What kind of work will do to support myself? Would the SRF's threat of wandering lost in darkness for seven lifetimes for leaving the guru and his ashram come true?" Fears, at first, often shot through my heart whenever I thought of leaving the ashram.

Fortunately, my family and friends also gave me the psychological support I needed to leave. I've never regretted leaving.

Jacobsen: Now, with this foundation, the "I have been there" framework for this series. I want to delve into a variety of topics. For a first one, which was your idea in correspondence, the idea of post-Christian spirituality. What is it? Why is it a relevant, timely, and intriguing topic to you?

Scott: What I mean by post-Christian spirituality I'm referring to Western puritan ideals that transfer easily to Eastern spiritual worldviews, with aims of self-sacrifice, stilling thought, and emptying the mind. In the process of secularization, meditation turns from focus on god to mind cure. Post-Christian spirituality or secularization changes thinking God's thoughts to thinking "right" thoughts, stilled thoughts, or no thoughts. As if having no thoughts is something attainable. (Most of our thoughts are preconscious and always will be. I wrote about reasons why our unconscious is inaccessible in my post Meditation techniques offer illusion of control). Secularized meditation practices are often based on authoritarian frameworks of enlightenment. This is why I called it post-Christian or Western secular spirituality.

Jacobsen: These explorations post-Western Christianity can lead to many areas including meditation, yoga, Buddhism/Hinduism, the New Age philosophy, and Eastern cosmology. What are some cognitive-behavioural traps from the post-Western Christianity explorer's side?

Scott: Lots of booby traps. We will never escape them all. But we can perhaps avoid falling into them endlessly. Everyone must untangle their own cognitive traps themselves. Looking to authoritarian leaders quickly becomes a trap. Underlying our cultural indoctrination, our schools and family upbringing, is a framework of Protestant puritan ideals, or of enlightened authorities or scientists who have all the answers. We are products of the culture of the West. Having atheist or secular beliefs does not automatically free us from our own preconscious reliance on authorities within the Christian-Western religious lens. The modern moral or ethic "work hard and you will succeed" or "control your thoughts and you control your destiny" are beliefs which must be taken on faith (in other words, are scientifically verifiable and rooted in myth or secular-religious authority).

Jacobsen: What are some of the traps from those who wish to bring those post-Western Christianity explorers into their particular fold?

Scott: The scientific research into the benefits of meditation are inconclusive. There is not even consensus among researchers on how to define mindfulness. Mindfulness is one another one of those benefits we have to take on faith. For meditation is a creed based on a value system which cannot be measured objectively. Faith is required, even if it is a secular-religious faith in the scientific authority. Yet, many people scan and read only the headline that says meditation is beneficial for everybody. It takes time and effort to dive deep into a topic like religion, meditation, or spirituality or morality. Whatever. Those are just labels. I think we should not take headlines and labels too seriously without first doing our homework and diving deep into the authority and faith underlying our premises and assumptions.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Scott: Well, I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today. I enjoyed your questions and grappling with how to respond. I really like your conversational and interview style. I think back and forth dialogue is one of the best ways to try to understand ourselves and others. Thanks.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Scott.

Reliance on External Authority

March 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

An interview with a former monastic about entering and leaving Self-Realization ashrams. Here we talk about the traps of reliance on external authority.

Below is an interview with Scott of Skeptic Meditations. It was originally published in *Canadian Atheist* and is republished below [with my additional edits] with permission by the author.

By Scott Douglas Jacobsen of Conatus News and Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With regards to the tactics to keep members in a cult-like organization, what seem like the more prominent examples?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: There's many tactics that cult-like groups, like Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) Monastic Order, use to trap followers. First, is the ideal of renunciation, which is unrealistic and unlivable. The ideal of renunciation of self is a trap because its irreconcilable. No human can ever be totally selfless. Nor can they ever be perfect. Despite the claims by SRF members who idealize their supposed selfless yogi-guru and SRF founder Paramahansa Yogananda.

"I killed Yogananda long ago. No one dwells in this body now but God." proclaimed Paramahansa Yogananda.

Another tactic used by cult-like groups is the practice of meditation techniques. Meditation is often prescribed as a means to enlightenment. Or, the path to some kind of exalted state of spiritual awareness. Why? Meditation is supposed to still thought, to quiet the mind, which is a way to kill the ego, to become selfless. Ultimately, disciples of SRF are indoctrinated that they ought to become like Yogananda or God-conscious. It's another tricky psychological trap for followers.

Jacobsen: What runs through the mind of a believer to keep them bound to the cult or cult-like organization?

Scott: People in cult-like organizations are trapped in a double bind. They get trapped inside the prison of beliefs built with no-win communications designed to keep followers obeying the authority figure. (Remember the examples above of unlivable ideals of renunciation and irreconcilable beliefs in selflessness?)

Cult-like organizations, like SRF, implicitly or explicitly communicate to their followers:

"You are asleep or ignorant. Meditation is the path to awakening or knowledge of God. You are asleep or ignorant, so keep meditating.

You are ego/self-centered. Meditation is the path to ego destruction/self-transcendence. If you are not yet egoless or selfless, keep meditating.

You are racked with desires. Meditation is the path to fulfillment of all desires. If you are not yet desireless, keep meditating."

The double bind is the inability to see the traps, for instance, that desiring to be desireless *is* desire.

In each of the above examples, the cult-like group keeps you psychologically trapped in the double bind. You keep meditating. You keep trying to follow the given techniques for enlightenment but do not still your thoughts or become enlightened (beyond a momentary and temporary experience). The teachers, teachings, and techniques are never to be blamed for fault, say the group. Your ego got in the way and that you just need to keep trying more. Essentially, followers in these groups are tricked into thinking they can attain some unlivable ideal and they keep going in circles inside the double bind. Filled with self-doubt and mistrust in self, what do you expect followers to do? They tend to surrender and follow even more the external authority—the guru and his cult-like group.

Jacobsen: How is the inculcation of self-doubt and reliance on an external authority part and parcel of the maintenance of the follower mentality in a cult?

Scott: Mental or psychological control is easy when people doubt themselves.

Cult-like groups and gurus use many methods to instill self-mistrust in followers. They patronize followers (treat them with kindness while betraying superiority). Or, they assume superiority (claim to know what's best for followers). Or, they use methods that instill fear, guilt, or shame in followers which fill them with more self-doubt and self-mistrust.

Cult-like groups label independent thinking as “ego” and also devalue reason, analytical thinking, and personal feelings. Whereas, it is supposedly superior for followers to give blind obedience and selfless service to guru or external authority versus taking care of one's self-interests, such as family.

In cult-like groups, if followers question any abuse they are told that it is spiritual “training” and it is beyond understanding in a rational way. “God works in mysterious ways”. And of course, they assume the leader of the group is attuned or at-one with God. So no one can question the guru's or the group's abuses without being ostracized or even excommunicated from the spiritual community.

The SRF monastic ashram environment is very closed. Everything the monks did had to be approved by the monk's spiritual counselor or by the ashram superiors. Everything offered inside the ashrams the monks were expected to accept as if it was coming from Guru, from God. If you question or resist anything (even moldy cheese served in the dining room), then you'd be labeled as disloyal, egotistic, or self-centered. In this setup the SRF leaders and monastic superiors could do no “evil”, abuses went unchecked. Victims of physical and psychological abuses, like myself, endured for decades in the name of “training” wondering what the hell was wrong “with me”.

For years allowed the abuses because I too believed they were “training” for my own good. Eventually I saw through the control and manipulation and left the ashram. Though I'd left physically the abusive monastery, psychologically I'd retained many of the manipulative double bind beliefs in spiritual external authority.

Jacobsen: Even if there aren't formal methodologies on some levels for the individual follower, how does the follower make excuses for the abuse and bad behavior of some of the leaders of some cults and cult-like organizations?

Scott: There are formal rules and vows of the SRF Order. I've shared these on my website. In addition, the SRF Lessons—which are available to the public for a nominal subscription fee—contain 100s of “official” SRF rules and procedures regarding “how to live”, such as following a strict vegetarian diet, abstaining from sex, and practicing esoteric meditation rituals.

There's something called the “sunk-cost” fallacy. When we invest so much of our time, energy, and possibly money into something that is failing and we tell ourselves we can't give up or we can't cut our losses now. We try to convince ourselves if we persist in our efforts and beliefs (despite the evidence) that we will make a successful comeback and be a hero or a saint. Psychological investments, including attachments to the people inside the community, also plays a huge role in why followers have a difficult time escaping the traps of abuse in cult-like organizations.

Jacobsen: What is the general marketing that cults or cult-like organizations present to the outside world, i.e. the warning signs and signifiers of a potentially harmful organization?

Scott: Eastern, Hindu- and Buddhist-inspired, groups often use meditation techniques as a way to entice and keep followers. Meditation is scientized. That is, it is promoted as a practical and scientific method. Meditation practice is supposed to bring the faithful practitioner peace, material success and happiness, and ultimate enlightenment.

Cult-like ideologies also promote their unlivable, utopian ideals. Which are appealing to people who may be suffering or looking for something to fill the existential vacuum in their lives. People who are most vulnerable are those who are going through a challenging life transition. That's why you often find young, college-age disciples who join cults. During college is when I first was attracted to SRF. By escaping into an idealized model of the world as “spiritual training” gives meaning to people who are confused or suffering.

Also, cult-like leaders and groups often claim to have special dispensations from God. Of course, each particular cult-group claims to have the “right” answers. Groups like Scientology often charge exorbitant fees to clear themselves of evil thetans through a method Scientologists call auditing. I recommend watching the documentary *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*. Many of the psychologically controlling and cult-like behaviors and tactics used by Scientology are also used by other cult-like groups, like SRF. The groups don't differ in kind but only in degree of attempted control over followers.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Scott.

Scott: Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences about what I believe is an important topic.

**PLACE 3: THE NATIONAL YOUTH INTERNET
SAFETY AND CYBERBULLYING TASK FORCE,
INC.**

Overcoming peer pressure

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Peer pressure is both a good and a bad thing. The question as to the good of peer pressure inexorably comes with its bad side. To avoid the bad side of pressure is to, in essence, take part in the good of it, what is it, though?

It is, to me, simply the degree to which the social group influences your own perception of what you should and should not do, and then also how this leads to what you do. The good is what is good for you and the bad is what is bad for you. Then it is only a matter of how good and how bad on net based on the peer influence.

Let's say you're at a party, and you're having a good time, but one peer or friend is known to be involved in illicit substances, drugs, and uses them before a safe age or more than a safe, responsible amount even if at a safe age, they offer the drug to you.

Do you take it? Or do you pause, reflect on the possible harms, and say, "No, thank you"? What do you do?

These are tough decisions at a young age. For those who are subject to the peer pressure of drugs, the possible harms are increases in fatalities or addictions, especially with the recent rise in the deaths associated with opioids connected with fentanyl.

Even those increase risks aside, the pressure of the friend is bad pressure because there are more harms than benefits associated with the peer pressure. Bad peer pressure is your friends or peer wanting you to do something that is not for your best interest in the long-term.

Okay, now, let's switch up the script and have some good friends who come with you to the party and then the other drug-using peer is already at the party and offering the drug to you – bad peer pressure, but then your other friends who do not use substances or use them safely and responsibly come to your aid.

They decline on your hesitant behalf in order to help you. They give you boost, bolster you, to take the high road and support you in it, so you do not feel rejected while doing the short-term fun thing in favour of the long-term beneficial thing.

Peer pressure can be good or bad. But the point is to avoid the bad pressure, have good friends who have your back when the bad peer pressure can come forward, and so you can have a better time in the long-term.

The power of knowing your worth

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The immediate empowerment of yourself may come from the knowledge of your worth. This does not mean an excuse for undue self concern or absorption. Nor does this imply the unwarranted self assessment of being better than other people.

It may be true. However, what is the probability? The real power in knowing your worth comes from realistic assessment of yourself. You need to know your strengths. You need to know your weaknesses. You should understand the basis upon which you were able to perform well in the world.

You should also know the ways in which you do not perform as well. On the ways to perform well, you should make a steady effort in maintaining excellence there. On the ways to perform not well, you should work to ameliorate the problem areas as you can. It is never easy.

Nonetheless, the focus on strengths will be the greatest asset in your life because your strengths are where fewer people perform well.

This can lead to questions about personal worth. Your worth should be grounded in something. If you have an idea about yourself, and if the idea is simply theoretical, it detaches you from the real world. You can lead an unhealthy life because you lead a false one with it.

Worth should be grounded in something. In particular, your worth should be grounded in things of lasting value, which do not necessarily equate to the more temporary things such as beauty and popularity. As you leave high school, and college, the looks and popularity will become less and less important as intelligence, conscientiousness, and morals become more important. In general, the best thing to inculcate in yourself and others, and if you have children then those, is character for a long and good life.

Your worth should be grounded in character. My main advice about the power of your worth comes from knowing that you have worth and something that will last throughout your lifetime, which is your own character. You may not be the smartest. You may not be the prettiest or most handsome. You may not be the richest. You may not have the most status. However, if you have character, you can earn the love and respect of others, which will outlast, often, many of the more transient things of a person, of yourself. In that, you can find power and longevity of that power.

How to overcome adversity in live

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Hard times are an inevitability of life. You will encounter difficulties. You will be broken down. Somethings will go well while other things are going wrong. Life is an admixture.

The main questions or issues to consider are how are you going to react to those difficulties when they arise. How are you going to also celebrate when the times are really good?

Life will come in waves and sometimes waves will crash together and make a very difficult situation, those are flashpoints in a personal life. This makes it crucial to understand the nature of yourself in the relationships of the world.

The best means by which to overcome the difficulties or hardships in life are through assiduous personal development. The hard work in developing resilience.

Resilience will stand you in good stead in times of difficulty. It's a skill set, an emotional and social skill set, to allow you to persist in spite of the difficulties.

Another way is to have a good and healthy social network. That network provides a solid foundation for people to fall back on who love you and who you trust and respect.

In addition to that, you can look into professional help from counselors or psychologists or psychiatrists depending on the severity of the need at a time in life.

The benefit of the first one is that it is free and it comes with the benefit of personal development. The benefit of the second option with friends and family comes from external sources when internal resources are not enough.

The last one is helpful for severe cases, but does come at a higher cost, especially financially.

You never be able to avoid the hard parts of life. You will never have the opportunity for that one extended period of time, probably. In the country that we live in, you will have an easier time than most people. Nonetheless, you will have relative difficulties within the North American context at some point.

It is extremely important to bear in mind the basics of health too. You need to be healthy. You need to focus on proper sleep for your age.

You need to focus on quality and full sleep; that also means at a good time in a quiet place. There needs to be proper exercise with aerobics, strength training, and stretching.

Also, there needs to be proper diet. If you are physically healthy, and if you're mentally healthy, then you can withstand the difficulties in life that come your way better.

So, here you go: personal development, friends and family, and professional help, and sleep, exercise, and diet.

Building your self-esteem in a changing world

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Everyone needs a pep talk once in a while or reason to get out of the bed.

If you want to build self-esteem, you will need to work within yourself. You should try to also work in community. The better ways to build self-esteem or to behave in ways that are deserving of them and are self-respectful.

Self-esteem comes from doing things and thinking in ways, and so feeling in ways, that are most representative of your better self. Do you want to work to limit yourself, or expand yourself? Fundamental presuppositions around self-esteem are helpful. Because the development of the self comes from behaviours and thoughts.

With thoughts and behaviour as the foundation for a proper self-esteem, the basis comes from within you. It starts with taking responsibility for your own actions and thinking. It has to do with what is sometimes termed the internal locus of control.

If someone can develop in themselves a sense of control over what they can and cannot do, and if they can develop this within a framework of self-knowledge, they can begin on the process of self-discovery, and so greater self-esteem.

Proper self-esteem comes from accomplishment not simply from thinking abstract thoughts. You have to be bold in enacting things in your own life. This is especially true for you younger men out there. If you're driving a car, and if someone else has the steering wheel, you are living a life on the coast mode of the car.

You are not driving your life. You are being driven. No one wants that but so few of us realize that. To simply have positive thoughts about yourself and to not take into account real successes and honest failures, you are, and to be blunt here, living in outer space.

You need to get down to the dirt and live your life and have a plan for it. That basis of a plan and working towards especially a long-term plan provide a basis for a better life. As you begin to accomplish that, you will naturally develop a certain self-efficacy and self-esteem.

It is an important part of keeping in touch with the real world while achieving things and so feeling a real sense of accomplishment and not simply an unwarranted sense of achievement. This is all part and parcel of proper and healthy self-esteem.

You earn things. You feel better. One really effective way to feel better and achieve things is to do it in community. It could be a little church. If you go to a mosque, synagogue, or a Sikh or Buddhist temple, it could be any of those things. It could be a soccer club.

It could be a yoga studio. All of these provide basis for community. Everything based on a common activity, at a minimum. When you work within that community and achieve something, whether being more flexible in a yoga position or donating time and finances to the food bank through the place of worship external community, you accomplish something for others and yourself with others.

It is really that simple to feel self-efficacy and to develop that healthy sense of contribution to the community and self-esteem about being worth something.

How to identify and overcome anxiety

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Anxiety is a modern problem. It can be a particular issue in youth. If you are a teenager, and if you suffer from the consequences of excess anxiety not channeled well, it can make the already uncertain, at times hellish, and the finding-yourself phase of life known as being a teenager even worse.

Your thoughts race. Your blood pressure rises. Your heart rate increases. You feel the sense that the world is caving in on you due to all of the internally produced pressure. Often times, this is apart from real pressure.

It does not amount to real pressure. It's simply a subjective perception of the world that triggers anxiety and general discombobulation, physically and mentally. It can be very disconcerting. Some people, they can suffer over the long term from a generalized form of anxiety. It's not a fun life. It is not a healthy life.

The question becomes, "How do you deal with anxiety, especially in early life as a teenager?" in order to be healthier and have a better youth, you need to be able to stop and take one step back. Need to hold the escalation at the moment, need to take a step back, then you can begin by respectfully removing yourself from the situation of particular anxiousness.

If you need to ask someone for the time, you can do so. If it just happens to be a triggering situation, you can simply remove yourself from it. You hold that right. Some basic techniques of dealing with the anxiety in the moment, if temporary, are to count from 10 to 1.

Another is to take it deep breathes, breathing from the belly and the diaphragm, and slowly relaxing. It is crucially important to not have the additional stress involved from anxiety in daily life. Anxiety can impair school performance.

Anxiety can impair professional performance. A generalized anxiety can harm general performance throughout life. Because it detracts emotional and therefore mental resources needed to be able to handle things that life throws at you.

Another important thing is to have a good support network, with her family or friends. If you have a good set of family members, you can confide in them to help quell some of the anxiety-producing things. It helps to talk out your problems, especially for the young guys out there where this is frowned upon - by themselves or others.

Talking it out, it is an effective methodology. If you have friends, and if you trust them sufficiently enough, you can talk to them as well. These are known as social and emotional skills. They are necessary for a higher quality of life.

We all know the feelings of anxiety, but dealing with them takes practice. Those are some ways to know how to help with the temporary and the long-term versions of it.

Physical and digital bullying

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bullying, physical and digital, is taken as if a simple fact of life. It does not have to be a part of life.

Even if one experiences it, you do not have to be a victim to the circumstance. You can overcome the associated difficulties involved in the kinds of the bullying received in everyday life and in professional life too.

Say you are working at a fast food joint or restaurant, you begin to feel as though the boss is picking on you or a co-worker is being mean and vicious with you. The first thing to do is try to stay from the people who are the bullies. Or you can double-check and identify if this is really the case or if this is simply perceived.

They probably want some attention, and negative attention. They may feel insecure and need to take people down and so you become an unfortunate semi-random target needing taking down. If you are stuck with those individuals due to work constraints or to the particular context, then take a proactive and constructive attitude, this is a way in which to assert yourself in life.

It can be a testing ground for developing those skills. You will encounter and experience difficult people in this culture. It is important to be able to deal with them and neutralize the situation in a proactive way to defuse the tension and continue on with your day, be of service to others who may encounter that person later in their day, and have that person feel respected while you defuse the situation as much as is reasonable in the context.

This can be for digital or physical bullying. Physical bullying may be the pushing and shoving of you at work, or in public, or other areas of life. It becomes more direct. It becomes more physical in other words.

However, you can report these people to the proper authorities in the school, in public life, or gain support from those around you at the moment to be able to defuse the situation. It is not a good idea to escalate an already obnoxious or unpleasant person who is being physically bullying.

For the digital bullying, it amounts to the same the psychological state for a victim and victimiser here. However, the main issue comes from the asynchronous nature of it. That is to say the bully or you may leave a message at one point in time.

Then you can receive it at a far distant or an immediate time after sending of the message. That is the nature of the digital media. It is asynchronous.

It does not care about the particular time. If someone is continually bullying you, it is good to have a record of the bullying and to be able to then substantiate any claims made to the school authorities such as the vice principal or principal as well as police authorities if it is particularly inappropriate.

Otherwise, as a general rule in life, you want to surround yourself with those who support you, love you, and vice versa.

The power of positive thinking

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Life can suck. Life can also be pretty darn awesome. In fact, the clouds are more often spread out with lots of sunshine and sometimes life gives you nothing but sunshine.

The people who tend to get nothing done are those who sit around and complain, moan, blame others, engage in self-pity, and feel at odds with the world.

Those who tend to get things done are those who have an optimistic outlook on the world because you have to think that the world can be better.

So, the fundamental difference between the power of positive thinking and the weakness of negative thinking comes from the practical reality.

Those who can get things done think that the world can be better than it was the day before. If someone keeps that up day after day after day, they are more likely to produce a world worth living in, because the world they produce is more positive than the prior one.

It is a fact that the negative thinkers can sometimes think of themselves as hard-nosed realists. However, they are more often cynics, which is not to be confused with a realism.

A realist will look at the situation and analyze it relatively objectively within the information that they have on hand at the moment. A cynic will give up any sign of problems.

A realist will give up half the time because half of the time the situations do seem bleak. However, they maybe have limited information.

Whereas, the optimist will continue forward in any case. So, in any of those cases of bleak and not bleak, the optimist will persevere and continue on to make that better world. The world needs optimists. That's the power of positive thinking.

PLACE 4: RATIONAL DOUBT

Conversation with Atheist Minister Gretta Vosper – Current Context

February 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Editor's Note:** I think you'll enjoy this update in the ongoing saga of Clergy Project member and United Church of Canada minister, Gretta Vosper. In a recent interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, she tells us about her thoughts on preserving and propagating the values (not the supernatural beliefs) that progressive religious communities have provided up until now. I think she has an important point. This interview is lightly edited and reposted with permission from Canadian Atheist. We thank Scott, who has posted here before, for sharing his interviews with the Rational Doubt Blog.*

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By Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have been a controversial in Christian culture in Canada, willingly or not. For those that do not know your background and activities, please fill us in.

Gretta Vosper: I am currently a minister in the United Church of Canada. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of my ordination and I've been serving a congregation in West Hill – the very east end of Toronto – since 1997.

A few years into our work together, I realized that the church language I had grown up with was problematic. I had been taught to use such language to describe concepts and ideas that could be better described using plain English.

It misled my congregants to think I believed in a supernatural, theistic being called God, which I did not. It also prevented people without such beliefs from experiencing what I call the “off-label” benefits of the church community – belonging, recognition, affirmation, and an increased sense of well being that comes with those things.

After engaging my church community in a conversation about that dissonance, we began the work of creating a theologically barrier-free space. West Hill is now a haven for those who do not believe any religious concepts as well as continuing to serve those who believe, but do not need theological language.

Unfortunately, rather than my denomination recognizing that it had, over the past many decades, trained leaders to serve this constituency, my denomination chose, instead, to retreat to a more conservative theology.

In doing so, our work at West Hill became controversial among those who did not know what we were doing or why. Their complaints led to a heresy trial, which is currently being conducted under the guise of a “Disciplinary Review.” The end result may be that I am stripped of my credentials and no longer able to serve my community in leadership.

Jacobsen: You are involved in an organization called The Oasis Network. There is a brief statement of values on the website:

People are more important than beliefs.

Reality is known through reason.

Meaning comes from making a difference.

Human hands solve human problems.

Be accepting and be accepted.

What does the organization do in the community of the formally irreligious or the formerly religious?

Vosper: The Oasis Network has grown thanks to people experienced the “off-label benefits” of church. They do not hold religious beliefs, but they want to create meaningful community. Also, there are others who have no experience of church who are also looking for a place where meaningful dialogue happens and deep friendships can be nurtured.

Each Oasis community operates autonomously but collaborates with all the others. Research indicates that in order to provide the kind of experiences that allow people to flourish, communities need to meet weekly; so Oasis communities do that. They can pick whenever they want to meet but most of them have found that Sunday morning is the best time – it’s not a school or work night and most people have it free.

Oasis gatherings replicate the church gatherings without the doctrine and, for the most part, without the religious trappings you’d expect to find in church. For instance, there is a speaker each week, but most Oasis communities don’t sing. They welcome a variety of local musicians who are happy for a gig with a really attentive audience.

West Hill still sings, because it grew out of a tradition that the congregation adapted beyond doctrine. So we sing songs and hymns that have no mention of God or Jesus but reflect the humanitarian values we espouse. And people don’t, of course, pray to an interventionist God but some of them – not all – like West Hill, allow for a time for participants to share stuff happening in their lives – good or bad.

And there is a coffee time when some of the most important stuff happens: people get to know one another, become involved in one another’s lives. It’s magical, if I can use that word!

Jacobsen: What is the relevance of such as organization now? How did you become involved with it?

Vosper: I think Oasis communities are filling a very important need in a world that is emerging from social experiments for which we cannot predict the outcomes. As I’ve noted, there are serious off-label benefits to religion related to personal well being. This may sound self-centered, but personal well being is related to our ability to engage in our communities and the world beyond our front doors. We have built our social democracies with the input of people who felt good enough about themselves and confident enough about what they had to offer that they engaged beyond their own “tribe” in the wider community.

Liberal Christianity transfers positive social values in a way that conservative iterations do not. As a result, the great liberal Christian institutions of the twentieth century helped embed those social values we cherish in our communities.

We are now watching the demise of those Christian institutions. And it is easy for those who do not hold religious beliefs to dismiss the death of these institutions as a good thing. But it isn't. Liberal Christians helped negotiate the social fabric of our nation, mitigating the effects of the fundamentalist versions of its own story and the individualistic relativism of an unchecked libertarianism.

What the loss of institutions like United and Anglican Churches of Canada might mean for the future of Canada's social democracy is unknown but I'd be willing to bet it will be a meaner, and less comfortable country than what I was privileged to grow up in. Also, it will be subject to the influences of those two powers – religious fundamentalism and individualistic libertarianism. That isn't a pretty picture. So I think the loss of these institutions might be tragic.

Jacobsen: With a very rapidly growing, and often young, irreligious population in the country, what can or should be done to accommodate them? (e.g., developing secular or atheist churches, or Sunday Assemblies, or organizations such as The Oasis Network, etc.

Vosper: Building on my concerns for Canada's social democracy, I think it is very important that we find ways to engage individuals in communities that present humanitarian values as central to each person and every neighborhood.

Liberal Christian institutions that are closing churches every week need to assess the cost of those closures which, as I've said, go far beyond their statistical and revenue losses. Perhaps their legacy could be using money from the sale of those buildings as an investment in the future. They could lay the foundations for secular communities like Oasis, by taking the ethos that those institutions have nurtured that define this nation, and craft it in ways that speak to and engage new generations and their emergent needs.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Gretta.

Bio: Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Founder of In-Sight Publishing and In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal.

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Interview with Producer of Atheist Clergy Documentary

February 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Editor's Note:** Here's another Jacobsen interview reposted* with great pleasure. It's with Leslea Mair, of Zoot Pictures, the only person besides me who has done extensive in-person interviews non-believing clergy. Many of her subjects also participated in the Dennett-LaScola study. A major difference is that Leslea did her work on camera and made a documentary out of it! She was also able to do something I couldn't — capture a wife's reaction to a de-converting pastor husband. Fascinating. /Linda LaScola, Editor*

**[This is a portion of the original post and is edited for clarity and brevity.]*

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By Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Tell me about your family background.

Leslea Mair: I grew up in Regina, Saskatchewan, out on the prairies. My family belonged to the very progressive United Church of Canada.

Nobody believed much of anything. You stand up and say the nice creeds, but you don't put much into it. It's all about how you interact with the world. The way you treat people. It's basically,

“Try to be nice and try not to hurt anybody.”

I did have a relationship with a fundamentalist family in my early adult life, which was the first time I saw the more extreme religious end of the scale. I've always been interested in religious people because they believe in a way I don't seem wired for.

Jacobsen: Can you expand on that?

Mair: I think some people are more wired to belief and other people aren't. If it doesn't make logical sense to me, it's not something I can put a lot of store by. As a young child, I thought ghost stories were pretty thrilling, but ultimately, I have say the evidence doesn't stack up.

Some people are more inclined to be more evidentiary in their beliefs and others are more inclined to magical thinking.

Jacobsen: Can you recall any people or events that influenced you away from belief or away from the United Church of Canada?

Mair: I don't think so. We never believed any of the supernatural stuff, so I guess you could say I'm a deeply agnostic or functionally atheist person and have been my entire life. I never shifted to or from religion at all, but I do find religious people interesting.

Jacobsen: Tell me about *Losing our Religion*, which is a new documentary film about people who have lost their faith.

Mair: The film is essentially about preachers who are not believers and what atheists do without a church community. The inspiration for it was general curiosity — a handy trait for a documentary filmmaker.

I read Dennett and Linda LaScola's initial research paper when it came out, and I thought, "Well, that's interesting."

I'd read lots of deconversion stories on atheist blogs, but hadn't ever read a preacher's deconversion story. A few years later they did a follow-up study and The Clergy Project was formed, making me realize that non-belief is affecting a lot of clergy, not just Christians. I contacted The Clergy Project, told them I was documentary filmmaker interested in pursuing this subject and they agreed to tell members about it.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the more difficult recollections of people transitioning out of pastoral life?

Mair: The hardest thing is you've got the panic of having to find a job and trying to redefine yourself. Because being clergy is not just a job; it's an identity. Hiding your beliefs is very stressful. It's tied to your economic, family and social wellbeing. It becomes overwhelming.

We followed a married couple, Brandon and Jen Murphy, through their life in the ministry and all the way to getting their lives back on track after leaving. It was a tough time for them. It was incredibly generous of them to let us in on a difficult part of their lives.

Jacobsen: How do people's social relationships change?

Mair: When you stop believing, you're still the same person you were when you were a believer. Just one of the details about you has changed. But people see the lack of belief, especially if you're a minister, as a tremendous betrayal. They react badly a lot of the time. There's a special cruelty saved for de-converts that's ten times worse for ministers. But while a minister may have stopped believing in the supernatural, the way they speak, especially Evangelicals, may not change.

Jen in our documentary describes it as "Christianese." It's as if being part of a religious community seeps into us at almost a cellular level. We don't even realize how invested we are with it or how it shapes us, even after we no longer believe in the supernatural.

Jacobsen: Gretta Vosper made the difficult transition in real time, in the national news.

Mair: Yes. Gretta is in our film! She is a member of The Clergy Project and has served on its board of directors. Gretta is interesting because she is still in the pulpit. She is not willing to walk away from it. Her United Church of Canada congregation is fine with it, but the larger church organization is not. This surprised me. Having grown up within the institution, it never seemed like we were heavily invested in belief anyway. I think a lot of progressive churches stand to gain if they could find a way to accept secular people into their congregation.

Churches are dying out. The numbers don't lie. And the progressive churches are dying out faster than other churches. So they need to start embracing people who embrace science. Many churches do a good job of accepting science, but they're still hanging on to those threads of the supernatural that don't make sense anymore to a lot of people.

People seem fearful of taking the leap into the next thing, which Gretta is pushing them to do. Our film was reviewed in the *United Church Observer*. The review didn't say anything about us

being wrong, but it did mention that I lacked “nuance” in my view of religion. I found that incredibly funny because it’s like,

“I’m not going to attack you on the substance of what you said. I’m going to say you don’t get it.”

It’s similar to how a lot of church organizations reacted to Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola’s study on preachers who weren’t believers. They said,

“We knew that. It’s not a big surprise to us.”

But then they don’t want to talk about it.

Jacobsen: It seems like a situation where someone knows that a person they don’t like hasn’t broken the law, but they can say, “Well, they went against the spirit of the law.”

Mair: Yes, something like that. It’s a bit of a vague thing, like –

“I don’t like where you’ve gone with this.”

Jacobsen: What have some of the early reactions to the film been outside of the *United Church Observer*?

Mair: We’ve had actually quite positive reviews from lots of people. Surprisingly, I haven’t heard much from people who are religious, or from churches or people who are believers. What I get from people in the atheist community is they quite like the film. We’ve had lots of positive feedback. A few people who are pastors or former pastors have sent me messages, saying things like:

“Thank you for making this film, this is great. It was so nice to see a story that is partly like my story out there.”

People want talk about other ways we can organize ourselves into communities. What happens when you do stop believing? Where do you go from there?

We tried to have that conversation. We didn’t want to say that all religion is bad and religious people are stupid. It’s been done to death quite frankly. It’s not a positive message. It’s not something I was interested in exploring. But the idea of “What now?” appealed to me.

The more I talked to ministers who didn’t believe anymore, the more I realized they’re still ministers. Some of them, like Mike Aus, who started Houston Oasis, are continuing to be ministers in a secular way. I found utterly that fascinating. Bart Campolo is a humanist chaplain. There are people doing positive things outside of belief to provide what people have gotten from religion. It was so cool.

Interview with “Scott” of Skeptic Meditations

April 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Editor’s Note:** Rational Doubt is grateful to have another Clergy Project member interview done by Scott Jacobsen of Conatus News. This one is a little different in that the member being interviewed is not what you immediately think of when the word “clergy person” comes to mind. Read on.*

By Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing

Scott Jacobsen: You published the story of your personal transition from being part of a monastic order called the Self-Realization Fellowship Monastic Order to not being a part of it. The story is on The Clergy Project website, dated May 27, 2015. You were known as Brahmachari Scott. Now, you’re just Scott (me, too). For those leaving monastic orders, what are important things to keep in mind?

“Scott”: It was a big deal to leave the Self-Realization Monastic Order (the Order or SRF) after 14 years. It was a pivotal decision in life. I joined the Order when I was 24, expecting to be a monk for the rest of my life. I took vows of loyalty, obedience and chastity. All, purportedly, for finding God and self-realization. My justification for being a monk was that purpose. But it was complex.

For reasons as complicated as life can become, I felt out of place. I realized the monastery was not for me. This wasn’t the end, though. In the most important ways, my journey unfolded when I chose to come back to the world.

Before leaving the Order, I spent months acclimating myself to the outside world. It was like dipping toes into cold water before the plunge.

Instead of attending the regularly scheduled monastic classes, I joined a local Toastmasters club. I practiced public speaking. Rather than turn my doubts and fears inward—as I did for decades, I visited an outside psychotherapist, and confided my hopes and fears to her. Before seeing that psychotherapist, I spent years weighing the pros and cons of staying in or leaving the Order. I built an underground support community of trusted current and former monastics, church members and biological family.

At the time, I had a motto:

“I’m not moving *away* from anything. I’m moving *towards* something.”

Something great, I hoped. I did not know, but I felt I was moving towards something great based on a vision. I was developing a plan for a new life. That energized me. The pain of feeling “stuck” was greater than my fear of leaving the Order. I was one of the lucky few. I escaped. When I say “escaped,” I mean physically *and* psychologically.

Many monks from the Order I lived with still live in the monastery. Many others left. However, some of those who left still psychologically stuck within the Order. The monastery is still with them. It is more important where one resides psychologically rather than physically, in my opinion, speaking now from over a decade of experience. Some people have the privilege to

move. Several monks stayed in the Order who were instrumental in helping me become who I am today. For me, leaving the Order was about moving towards, rather than away, from something.

What are some expected difficulties—personal, familial, and professional—in transitioning out of a monastic order?

The difficulties included learning how to reintegrate into society. We had extremely limited access to the outside world. The monks were allowed to watch one movie a month, and even that was censored. The Monks' Library contained only censored materials: books of saints and yogis, the *LA Times* newspaper and magazines like *National Geographic* and *Sports Illustrated*. Access to the internet, during my tenure, was blocked or filtered and our phone calls were monitored for 'billing' purposes. We were charged for long-distance calls, which discouraged outside contact. Censoring of our exposure to the world, we were told, was for our own spiritual development.

Life inside was like a cult.

Upon re-entry into the world, I felt woefully inadequate in practical matters of daily life.

To transition, I learned how to be an adult, and to be assertive, to negotiate and pay my bills. I had to reintegrate into society, rebuild my life, relationships, and start a career. When I left, I had no job, no home and no family to live with. I had to prove to myself that I could make my way in the world. Within two years of leaving, I enrolled in university and graduated with a bachelor's and a master's degree while working for a corporation.

Have there been substantial changes in the last 1-2 years?

Yes, after nearly 10 years at the corporate job, my department was eliminated. Since then, I started a successful business consulting practice. Also, I'm teaching at a local college, while looking for my next corporate job.

I was intrigued by your description of monastic life on the Clergy Project Website:

...monks didn't just sit all-day chanting, praying, and navel-gazing.

Monastery routine consisted of meditation, classes, recreation, 9-to-5 jobs: ministering to a worldwide religious congregation at the Self-Realization Fellowship churches, temples, meditation centers and groups, and spiritual retreats. Each monk received \$40 per month cash allowance, room and board, paid medical care, and all-you-could-eat lacto-ovo-vegetarian buffet.

You were working in rather extreme conditions. What was running through your mind? What is the insight gained since you left about monastic life, e.g. working conditions?

I was convinced by church doctrine and the spiritual mythologies. They stated that renunciation and self-sacrifice was an exalted path to God, self-realization and spiritual freedom. However, a few years after leaving, I was able to step back and take a stern look at the conditions of the Order.

In the monastery, I lived inside a closed, cult-like system. SRF is a Hindu-inspired meditation group.

The followers—consciously or unconsciously—buy into false premises taught by the church. Once one believes the false premises, it becomes easy to surrender to the work and spiritual

routine for hours, days, weeks, months and years. You hand over control to teacher, guru, church or religion.

SRF puts a premium on meditation techniques as the highest way to spiritual development or self-realization. Examples of some of the premises we believed:

“You are unaware. Meditation is the way to unbroken awareness. If you are not fully aware, keep meditating. Or, you are a god, but don’t know it. Meditation is the path to know you are a god. If you don’t know you are a god, keep meditating. Or, you are asleep (ignorant of your delusion) and don’t know it. Meditation is the way to wake up from delusion. If you are in delusion, keep meditating.”

Now, I look back and regret having spent precious years in the pursuit of the Order’s false premises. But, better late than never, I outgrew them.

The *Scientific American* article was the linchpin to becoming an atheist within your social circle, friends and family. What seems to be the main reason for transitioning out of monastic life?

There’s so many reasons why I left.

Mostly, I needed to change and grow. The Order wasn’t about change or growth. Lord knows, I tried. Ultimately, the church and its leader were about perpetuating the revealed teachings of the teachers. I was lucky; I saw through the false premises of the church. I never regretted leaving it.

There are local agnostic, atheist, humanist, and freethinker organizations to provide support for people. How can friends and family give support?

Family and friends play a vital role in supporting people like me who leave extreme religions or cult-like groups. My family accepted me. I can not think of anything special that family and friends can do that is different that what true friends and family do: laugh, care, and do things together. Naturally, different friends and family serve different needs for us. It was most helpful for me to connect with a variety of people from different cultures or worldviews. Having a good therapist helped, I did not become a burden for friends and loved ones with my issues.

You created *Skeptic Meditations* as well. It is a general resource on skepticism with a blog. How can people become involved with *Skeptic Meditations*?

I created *Skeptic Meditations* to critically examine the supernatural claims of yogis, mystics, and meditators, and to muse and critique my experiences inside the SRF/the Order.

Christians have many resources to question and doubt, if they choose. After coming out of the Order, which is a Hindu-inspired meditation group, I found precious few resources for people like me who had left Christianity and questioned Eastern religion, especially yoga meditation. *Skeptic Meditations* explores the hidden, sometimes darker, side of yoga, mindfulness, and meditation.

Thank you for your time, Scott.

I’ve enjoyed your questions and chatting with you. Thank you.

Interview with John Harkey Gibbs

April 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Editor's Note: Here is another profile of a Clergy Project member by Conatus News reporter Scott Douglas Jacobsen. Note that he cleverly noted and investigated an odd word that the former minister used in his Twitter profile.

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By Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing

Jacobsen: You published the story of your personal transition on The Clergy Project website on October 25, 2014. You described how you were in seminary, but became more involved in the Joseph Campbell orientation towards theology and mythological narratives and themes. You said you had been in ministry for 14 ½ years when you left it. What have been some notable activities in the last 2-3 years for you?

Gibbs: In the last few years, I've become more involved with The Clergy Project. I serve on its board and am the chair of the communications committee. I also am a screener. Screeners interview applicants who desire to become participants. Also, I'm working on a book whose working title is *Recovering Humanity: Finding our hearts without losing our heads*.

Those leaving a main source of communal and social activities tend to need a replacement. What have been some important initiatives for re-creating a social world for people transitioning out of pastoral duties, where you directly participate or indirectly advocate?

I agree that community involvement is often one of the main things that those who have left the church miss, and I (at least theoretically) support the idea of building secular communities. I have participated some with a local group of atheists, agnostics and freethinkers, but didn't really click with it so much. I participate in several virtual communities, most notably The Clergy Project, where I have found much connection. I'm an introvert, so I tend to prefer intimate settings over more public venues. I have lived in the same city for over twenty years now and have friends, many of whom are atheists, who more than meet most of my social needs.

You use the term "Humanuality" in your Twitter profile, which you describe as "spirituality sans anything ghostly." Before that reference, I never heard or read the word. What is it? Who invented it? Why is the neologism important for others, and for eventual common use?

"Humanuality" is a word I made up. It removes the root of the word spirituality, spirit-, and replaces it with human-. The word is intended to fill the void left when use of the word spirituality is abandoned. Not everything associated with spirituality is supernaturally spooky, but there are enough problems with the word to move away from it. However, humanuality is more of a shift in focus than a rejection of spirituality. It is more of an affirmation than a negation. The insertion of human- into the word is more significant than the removal of spirit-.

Any new insights into the post-ministerial life?

Yes, it is less about filling a void than it is about establishing a new equilibrium and finding a new identity. That can take a long time.

What is the single greatest professional difficulty you experienced in serving the church and then leaving the church?

Being a pastor is a role that roots itself deeply in the psyche and is thoroughly embedded in a fairly insular community. Leaving such a role can be very disorienting. And not being able to really use most of the social network I had built up made the career transition difficult. In addition, a lot of people are suspicious of former ministers. They either don't like religion or they think something must be wrong with me for leaving.

What was your single greatest personal, emotional difficulty in this process?

I was left with a sense of failure for getting into ministry the first place (which felt like a mistake in retrospect), for how impaired I was as a minister due to a lot of inner turmoil, and for the years I spent pursuing a dead end rather than more promising avenue.

Are the sacrifices different for men pastors than for women pastors?

Women in ministry are more marginalized than men. I'm not sure what that means in terms of the sacrifices they make. I think men tend to have their identities more linked to how successful they are in their careers, so a loss of a career can be harder for men.

Thank you for your time.

Interview with Terry Plank, Past President of The Clergy Project

March 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Editor's Note:** As promised, here is another interview by the journalist who interviewed me for Conatus News. This time he talked to TCP's most recent past president. I've known Terry for a few years now, but must say, I learned a lot I didn't know by reading this interview. Maybe you will too.*

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By Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing

You published the story of the personal transition “from agnostic to believer to atheist” on *The Clergy Project* public website on October 25, 2014. In a prior time, you were a “Christian in the Church of Christ,” and earned an M.Div. at Fuller Theological Seminary and were a pastor in 5 churches. Since that time, other activities, initiatives, insights, and relationships could have developed for you. Let's explore some of the updates. Those leaving a main source of communal and social activities tend to need a replacement. What have been some important developments in initiatives for the recreation of a social world for those transitioning out of pastoral duties, where you directly participate or indirectly advocate?

Terry Plank

I had no communal or organized social activities before joining the church after meeting and marrying a Christian. So, basically, I returned to my pre-Christian state. There have been stints in organizations like Rotary, our local semi-professional theatre, social activism, Humanist Society Board, but those were not a replacement for feeling a loss or seeking community, but commitments to the goals and objectives of a particular organization of meeting a need in our area. Except for the early years when our children were young, even my work in the church was not really based in any way on a desire or need for communal life, it was commitment to God's work in the world.

Let me situate this, I grew up as an only child in a home where we had no social life outside of the three of us. I was very involved in theatre, music and such, but not out of a desire for relationships or being with people. I had few close friends in HS or College. Now, I've recaptured that triad with my wife and our dog! Actually, we have great relationships with our grown daughters and grandchildren, but they don't live locally so it's not a regular involvement in person. My wife and I are of like-mind in nearly everything and have a very meaningful relationship. That said, we are both introverts and value alone time greatly. She is a different kind of introvert, having many close women friends she spends time with. I, on the other hand, am kind of a gregarious loner, a personable and friendly recluse.

I have been very involved in leadership at TCP, most recently President of the Board. I have some terrific relationships with other TCP leaders and workers, but those are online, distance relationships centered around accomplishing the Mission of TCP.

As time has passed since the last report, any new insights into the post-pastoral life?

Basically, I just stepped back into a pre-pastoral life. Eventually, I began to study and read more about science, philosophy, history, Skepticism, Freethought, & Humanism. That didn't strengthen my rejection of religion, just validated what I had discovered for myself trying to make sense of the Bible, myself, and reality.

What is the single greatest professional difficulty in serving the church as an atheist and leaving the church?

For me, there was no difficulty. I had a degree in Theatre Arts and a previous for another advanced degree and career in retail management before becoming a pastor and returned to that. Within a couple of years, I returned to Graduate School and became a psychotherapist, eventually moving on to consulting as a Search Marketing Professional and operating a wedding business. I retired from Search Marketing & still operate the wedding business.

What is the single greatest personal, emotional difficulty?

Dealing with aging and physical limitations due to having Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis & Arthritis. I don't have the same mobility and stamina that I've had over the years. So, hiking is more limited, backpacking and snowshoeing are out. Experiencing my stiffness and limited mobility, walking/hiking looking down at the pavement, dealing with fatigue, it's taking a lot of introspection on what it means to be human in the world. Fortunately, my mind is unaffected and as long as I slow down the pace, I can still do meaningful work at the computer and out in the world performing marriages. We still camp and I take road trips. I don't fear death, but am aware each day that at 75 my life will end any day now, definitely within the next 20 years. That's not something I dwell on, but it influences making decisions on how I want to live my remaining years.

Are the sacrifices different for men pastors than for women pastors?

I don't know if you mean during ministry or after, but either way I've never had a relationship with a woman pastor so I don't have any experience to draw upon.

Thank you for your time, Terry.

How I Got Mixed up in This Atheist Clergy Business

February 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Editor' Note:** This is an excerpt from a recent interview that Scott Jacobsen of Conatus News did with me. He has generously offered to conduct interviews with Clergy project members for the Rational Doubt blog, so I offer this excerpt as an example of his work. Please note that I have kept the original Canadian spelling.*

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By Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Founder of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal and In-Sight Publishing

In brief, what is your familial background and personal story?

I think of my own story as being very boring, compared to the stories of the people I interviewed in the non-believing study I conducted with Dan Dennett. I was raised, the youngest of three children, as Roman Catholic in an Italian-American family in a small town in Western Pennsylvania.

I had a happy and very stable childhood. Although we went to church every Sunday, we weren't very religious. My mother refused to send us to Catholic schools. She didn't go to church much herself, claiming "claustrophobia," and my father guiltlessly skipped holy days.

I attended church less in college and just stopped going as an adult. Though I still believed in God, there was too much silliness in Catholicism for me to take the religion seriously. After about 20 years of marriage and without children, my husband, an agnostic, and I started attending an Episcopal Church, to fill his need for community.

We both enjoyed it – especially singing in the choir. There was no pressure to believe anything – the pastor himself was openly agnostic – and the music was beautiful. About ten years ago, I realised I didn't know much about religion from an academic point of view, so I decided to fill that gap.

After about a year of reading and taking adult education classes at church, I realised there was nothing to believe and we left. My husband, who, like me, now identifies as an atheist, has since joined an Ethical Society and a Unitarian Church. I stay home and read the paper.

What was the original interest in clinical social work and psychotherapy for you?

I once had a job as an American Red Cross caseworker that I really liked, so when I was thinking about graduate school, I decided on Social Work. Also, I had taken what was meant to be a short-term job as a tour guide at the US Capitol.

After two years, the repetition started driving me crazy. In my boredom, I couldn't help but notice how people reacted in groups and I wanted to understand more about that. ...

Most of my work as a social worker was in alcoholism counseling, which involved a lot of group work, and employee assistance programs – workplace counseling and referral....

What about in qualitative research and analysis for you?

Qualitative research, which is conducted in the form of focus groups and in-depth individual interviews, seemed like a natural outgrowth of my work as a group and individual psychotherapist. It offered more variety, flexibility, and higher pay. What's not to like?

Would you consider yourself socially progressive? If so, why? If not, why not?

Yes – it's just something that I eventually realised about myself as an adult. My family of origin did not guide me in any particular direction. I found myself supporting liberal rather than conservative causes. Of course, this would apply to most people who choose to go into social work. We think of ourselves as being empathic and interested in improving society for people less fortunate than ourselves.

Social progressivism tends to involve women's rights and secularism. If advancement of women's rights and secularism seem like the right values and movements to you, what is their importance in the early 21st century in America to you?

I've seen huge advances in women's rights in my lifetime and know that many more are needed, e.g., equal pay for equal work, protecting abortion rights, and continuing the fight for LGBTQ rights. As for secularism, of course, I support that as well, and also see it as something that is happening on its own. People are naturally leaving religion, in many cases thanks to the free-flow of information and emotional support they can receive anonymously on the Internet.

Secularism "happened" in Europe and is happening here in the US, albeit more slowly and with resistance from the strong Christian Evangelical movement. The clergy I interviewed are examples of people who left religion even though the initial decision had a negative impact on their careers and relationships.

What was the original research question and methodology conducted by Professor Dennett and yourself?

Excerpted from the proposal for our original research: *"It's understandable that atheist clergy would exist, considering that academically-trained clergy routinely learn about the mythical foundation of the Bible as part of their seminary education. What would allow clergy to present these myths as truth to their congregations and what causes some of them to reject this position? What other factors are involved when clergy "lose their faith"? What price do they pay for this change of heart and what price does society pay? The effects of the cognitive dissonance needed to preach faith in concepts that clergy themselves no longer accept is unknown and requires study."*

What was the conclusion of the original research?

There was no formal conclusion because it was a pilot study to gauge the difficulty in finding non-believing clergy to interview and to try to figure out how best to engage them in conversation about their experiences as their beliefs changed. The larger study, chronicled in Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind, also does not have a conclusion, but rather describes the experiences of non-believing clergy.

In Preachers who are not believers (2010) published in Evolutionary Psychology, you describe the spectrum of God's definition, as follows:

...frank anthropomorphism at one extreme – a God existing in time and space with eyes and hands and love and anger – through deism, a somehow still personal God who cares but is nevertheless outside time and space and does not intervene, and the still more

abstract Ground of all Being, from which (almost?) all anthropomorphic features have been removed, all the way to frank atheism...

Actually, Dan Dennett wrote that part! But I agree with it. This is his formulation of the various ways all kinds of people define God. It's not a specific finding of our research with clergy.

Does the elasticity of the definition of God support the unanimity and cohesion amongst the preachers and the congregation in church life? That is, everyone believes everyone else believes the same thing without believing the same thing.

I won't opine on what people (members of religious congregations) I've never talked to in depth are thinking about but not saying. I can guess that among religious fundamentalists there is an assumption that clergy and congregants hold the same beliefs – the ones written as the inerrant word of God in their Holy Book.

More progressive congregations focus more on community and in acting in ways that reflect the goodness of their religion. Speaking from my personal experiences in two progressive Episcopal churches, exactly what people believe is not so important.

Can the research findings expand to local temples, mosques, synagogues, and cathedrals as well?

Again, I can't say. In our larger study of 35, we did interview two rabbis, but we could not find any imams to participate. Anecdotally, in conversation with Jewish lay people, they don't seem to think believing in "God" is important to being an observant Jew and were not surprised or concerned to learn that some Rabbis do not believe. Christians, in contrast, were often shocked and disturbed by the very concept of a preacher who did not believe.

The Clergy Project is intended to "provide support, community, and hope to current and former religious professionals who no longer hold supernatural beliefs." What have been the notable impacts of The Clergy Project?

... I have heard from members that the forum discussions often involve members who left the clergy years ago who are now helping new people navigate their feelings, their relationships, and their plans for the future.

Another popular feature of TCP is the outplacement program, provided by [RiseSmart](#), which helps clergy write resumes and find secular jobs. Carter Warden, a founder, was the first member to use the service, which helped him find a good administrative position in a state university near his home.

You edit the blog called Rational Doubt. It is a place where the "public and non-believing and doubting clergy can interact." What are some emotionally touching aspects common to many of the stories from those told in either Rational Doubt or The Clergy Project or via your clergy research?

People go into the clergy to "do good", but because of their changing beliefs, they feel they have to leave a profession which they otherwise enjoy and are good at. They may love the music, the counseling, doing "good works" in the community, and comforting the ill or the grieving. These are activities that don't require belief in a deity, but that belief is expected of clergy. They are so sad to have to leave the good parts of the job behind, that many try to believe, or to act as if they believe.

Many suffer greatly in the process of realising they don't believe. Many try mightily to hold on to their beliefs, going through periods of doubt that don't return to belief (as is supposed to happen). They may consult many people or books in the process. Changing from belief to non-belief is not something that they ever imagined and when it starts to happen, it's not something they actively want....

On the positive side, when I asked research participants what they felt they had gained and lost as a result of their beliefs changing, they all felt they had gained much more than they lost, often citing being at peace with themselves and seeing and appreciating the world as it really is. I remember seeing their faces light up when they told me what they had gained, despite losses they experienced in relationships and income. It was very gratifying to know that they felt they had come to the right conclusion and that their struggles ultimately had great value.

Any recommended thinkers or authors on the subject of non-believing clergy other than Professor Dennett and yourself?

Many members of The Clergy Project have written their own books – Jerry DeWitt, David Madison, Fernando Alcantar, Drew Bekius (coming in 2017), Dan Barker, Bart Ehrman, etc. Also, Catherine Dunphy wrote a book in 2015 about The Clergy Project, called From Apostle to Apostate.

PLACE 5: THE BLACK DETOUR

Has Fake News Made it Hard to Believe the Media?

January 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Fake News is a bane of modern media. I do not like it; others despise it. Those in power looking for conspiracy theories and obscurantism love it, surely. But how does this affect the general public's perception and trust in the mainstream media, or even media generally?

Fake News is a unique oxymoron. It's like false narrative instead of fantasy. It really is like saying, "True Fable." It just sounds awful and off, but it's the theme of 2017. In the era of social media, we have periods, and one is the fake news period. Whether spread by Russian bots or disgruntled members of society, it's really a calamity for truth in democracies relying on them. Truth isn't simply a value amongst a bunch of others. It could arguably be one from which many others derive meaning. What use is validity and reliability in scientific data if it's falsely reported?

The news is a precious commodity in what I would probably lean into calling the commons. The commons, or the public good in the way the forests and most things in them were considered several centuries ago. I feel as though the news in an era of mass communication could and should be at least partially placed in that category. Democracies need informed educated – formal or otherwise – citizens capable of critical thinking. Those able to see through the nonsense spread by hundreds of Russian bots about Brexit or any other issue. If they are able but don't, or are unable because they can't, then we're in for a real mess into the future.

We're into a future where whatever dictates a leader gives on a whim goes completely unquestioned, not simply by a few but by everybody. Then that's a recipe for a democracy deteriorating into an oligarchic plutocracy such as Russia, or an autocratic-leaning state such as the Philippines with Duterte, or even theocratic and a mixture of the aforementioned – as we find in Saudi Arabia.

So, has this made believing in the news more difficult? For me, it has made believing in the mainstream media narrative more difficult because it is not the same now. Reality is in competition with unreality, constructing viewpoints unlike ever before. Mostly, it is the speed with which misinformation and disinformation can spread. I fear this can bring out the worst parts of us.

What Happened to the Racists from the Civil Rights Era?

January 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Racists in the civil rights era can transform, for better or worse, in another one. I suspect that several things have happened to them, but that the general trend, as with the long arc of American history, is one of progress for the better, where the good continues to win despite setbacks.

Racists will be Racists

The racists in the Civil Rights era were prominent opponents of the movement, obviously. But they seem to have disappeared from the public consciousness. And I don't know *why* exactly. So, I'm taking the space here, if you'll indulge, to explore the idea of this. To research this topic in full, I'd need to write a book: "In Search of the Deplorables."

Nonetheless, there is the notion about the Civil Rights Movement. That idea is some good people were fighting for equality. Some bad people were fighting for inequality. The good people triumphed to some degree. Others lost and slithered away. But what happened to them? Where did the individuals going for superiority based on the hypothetical concept of race go?

It is an interesting question. It raises the spectre of racists moving to other areas of the country and using different methodologies. Or were they immediately defeated, so they were dispersed as they disbanded? I don't see racists simply giving up their ideologies, prejudices, and pseudo-sciences. Some, sure, as 'the light' of modernity and critical thinking came to them, even basic equal, one-to-one interaction with people of different ethnic backgrounds. But all of them? I highly doubt it.

But Really, Where Did They Go?

So, I'm back to the original thought. What happened to the racists? One thought is that they went into the ether, or the underground. Some argue that a few crept into the White House. Another is they found other means by which to express their distasteful views. They could also have formed underground groups to band together again and to re-brand, "The culture won't accept this. But they may accept this."

Then again, there are those who took the ideology, moved forward with it, and who we see mocked and ridiculed – sometimes punched – in broad daylight. In the social media era, this is something that gets spread, as we all know, far and wide to make 'memes', video clips, and material for YouTube commentators and even mainstream media personalities.

There is research into unconscious biases from Professors Anthony Greenwood and Mahzarin Banaji with the Implicit Association Test or IAT. But this answers another question, somewhat, about the ways we all inhabit a social context rather than looking at individuals with reprehensible views about ethnic supremacy often tied to a religious ideology. Someone with the intent to deny another human being fundamental human rights based on those views.

My suspicion overall is that those who are on the losing side of history and eventually are defeated; at the time of the defeat, they do disband. Many lose hope. Some go underground.

Others rebrand, still others have a change of heart. They get fewer in percent of the population and less firm in their faith. But some simply never change, even indoctrinating their children. So, I suspect, though cannot prove definitively, that they're extant, still around in other words but with less power and fervour as those who used to partake of lynchings and Jim Crow. But the fact that the majority perspective in culture has shifted so much – the tide of history – points to their disempowerment in culture even if around.

PLACE 6: SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & PHILOSOPHY

Climate change is a necessary discussion

May 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) says, “97 percent or more of actively publishing climate scientists agree: Climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities” ([NASA, 2016b](#)).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report says, “Human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems.” ([Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015](#)).

The British Royal Society says, “Scientists know that recent climate change is largely caused by human activities from an understanding of basic physics, comparing observations with models, and fingerprinting the detailed patterns of climate change caused by different human and natural influences.” ([The Royal Society, 2016b](#)).

And the Government of Canada says, “The science behind man-made climate change is unequivocal. Climate change is a global challenge whose impacts will be felt by all countries, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable. Indeed, impacts are already occurring across the globe. Strong action is required now and Canada intends to be a climate leader.” ([The Government of Canada, 2015b](#)). What do these mean, plainly?

In short, the vast majority of those that spend expertise, money, and time to research the climate affirm that global warming is a reality, and a looming threat to the biosphere ([Upton, 2015](#); [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015](#)). So that means, in general, if you know what you’re talking about regarding the climate, you understand it’s changing. You know it’s warming globally—not necessarily locally, wherever any particular local is, which would be weather. What does this imply?

Well if it is inevitable and ongoing, then its solution or set of solutions is a necessity, which should be the center of the discussion. Not if, but when, and therefore, how do we work together to prevent and lessen its impacts? There can be legitimate disagreement about the timeline and the severity within a margin of error based on data sets, or meta-analyses, but legitimate conversation starts with an affirmative. So why is it significant?

Because most of the biosphere exists in that “extremely thin sheet of air” ([Hall, 2015](#)) with a thickness of only “60 miles” or ~96.56 kilometers called the atmosphere. It is happening to the minute sheet of the Earth, and in turn affects the biosphere. So small, globally speaking, contributions to the atmosphere can have large impacts throughout the biosphere and climate, as is extrapolated from current and historical data. What is the timeline, and why the urgency?

Because, in general, it will cause numerous changes in decades, not centuries ([Gillis, 2016](#)). That translates into our parents, our own, our (if any) children, and our (if any) current or future grandchildren. In other words, all of us, present and future. What kind of things would, or should, we expect—or even are witnessing?

For starters, we'll experience average increases in global temperatures, impacts to ecosystems and economies, flooding and drought, and affected water sources and forests such as Canada's ([David Suzuki Foundation, 2014b](#); [David Suzuki Foundation, 2014d](#); [David Suzuki Foundation, 2014e](#)).

It affects the health of children and grandchildren, and grandparents, through heat-related deaths, tropical disease increases, and heat-aggravated health problems ([David Suzuki Foundation, 2014c](#)). It is adversely affecting biodiversity ([Harvard University School of Public Health, 2016](#)) and threatening human survival ([Jordan-Stanford, 2015](#)).

Recently it was reported that the Arctic winter sea ice is at a record low ([Weber, 2016](#)). There'll be sea-level rise and superstorms ([Urry, 2016](#)). And it affects all, not just our own, primate species, according to primatologists ([Platt, 2016](#)). So even our closest evolutionary cousins, via proximate ancestry, will be affected too. This is a global crisis. What are major factors?

Population and industrial activity are the big ones. Too many people doing lots of highly pollution-producing stuff. It's greatly connected to the last three centuries' human population explosion and industrialization, which was an increase from about 1 billion to over 7 billion people ([Brooke, 2012](#)). So life on Earth is changing, in part, because of human industrial activity with increasing severity as there are more, and more, human beings on the planet ([Scientific American, 2009](#)). What's being done to prepare for it?

Nations throughout the world are preparing for the relatively predictable general, and severe, impacts of it ([Union of Concern Scientists, n.d.](#)). The international community is aware, and that explains the Paris climate conference (COP21) during late 2015 ([European Commission, 2016](#)), which Prime Minister Trudeau attended for our national representation at this important global meeting ([Fitz-Morris, 2015](#)).

Alberta is making its own preparation too ([Leach, 2015](#)). And, apparently, small municipalities in Canada are not prepared for its impacts ([The Canadian Press, 2015](#); [The University of British Columbia, 2014](#)). But there are those in Alberta such as Power Shift Alberta, hoping to derive solutions to climate change from our youth ([Bourgeois, 2016](#)).

So there's thoughtful consideration, and work, from the international and national to the provincial and territorial, and even municipal levels, for the incoming changing crisis. Whether something can be done about it at one magnitude or another, it is being talked about more with concomitant changes to policy and actions following from them.

All of this preparation, or at least consciousness-raising, is relevant and needing further integration. Climate change will only get more severe unless we do something about it. So, again, that means it's all a question of when, not 'if'.

If we want a long-term, robust solution to assist in the reduction of CO2 emissions, a carbon tax fits the bill for a start. Then there's future energy resources including Hydro, bioenergy, wind, solar, geothermal, and ocean ([Natural Resources Canada, 2016](#)). And the flip side of the coin for an energy source is a place to put that energy via future storage technologies also ([Dodge, 2015](#)).

But there's something needed prior to and alongside all of that, which leads back into the original point. Talk about it. Discussion and conversation is the glue that will bind all of these together. The energy sources and storage-devices of the future, the preparation for the effects of climate change that is happening and will continue to happen, and so on, need chit-chat throughout democratic societies for even more awareness of it.

So let's do something about it, by talking about it more through a national discourse.
Here and now.

Singularities, What is Inside a Black Hole and Behind the Big Bang?

May 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sunday Express reported on the possibility for research in standard Big Bang cosmology into areas before not empirically researched. That point being before the singularity at the moment of creation or the Big Bang as it is sometimes called.

It has been notoriously thought as something outside of the realm of empirical physics and only left to theoretical physicists to speculate and compare with moments of the universe after $T=0$, when time began—literally came into existence.

One international team of researchers is proposing a different picture of a before of creation, of a time before the Big Bang. Apparently, the singularity of black holes is akin to the Big Bang because the laws of physics appear to break down.

With some complex math and quantum strangeness, the international team of researchers claim the origins of the universe and the center of a black hole can be explained, comprehended, and not seen as a sort of known unknown.

Professor Mir Faizal at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada and the University of British Columbia, Okanagan in British Columbia, Canada explained, “It is known that general relativity predicts that the universe started with a big bang singularity and the laws of physics cannot be meaningfully applied to a singularity.”

Faizal co-authored the paper with Salwa Alsaleh, Lina Alasfar, and Ahmed Farag Ali. Faizal said that the current theories show the singularities, in black holes and at the Big Bang, are built into the interpretations of the math to make the theories. They follow from the math.

However, if they include quantum effects to remove the singularities, then the standard theories based on work by Roger Penrose, Emeritus Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics in the University of Oxford and Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford, and Stephen Hawking, Director of Research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology within the University of Cambridge, can be modified.

Those changes to remove the singularities imply new models. Those old models without the quantum effects to remove the singularities relied on specific models with problems. One model includes string theory, which, as noted, has its own problems.

Only “very general considerations” rather than a specific model is needed to ‘prove’ the proposal in the paper by Faizal and others. The paper concludes that the centers of black holes do not amount to singularities, but, rather, to empirically testable areas of future research.

“The absence of singularity means the absence of inconsistency in the laws of nature describing our universe, that shows a particular importance in studying black holes and cosmology,” the paper said.

Allegation and demonstration, and #MeToo: short commentary from Noam Chomsky

April 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scroll.in interviewed Noam Chomsky. He made an intriguing remark on the #MeToo movement, or the broader phenomena. Some points often made. Other points never made, except with condemnation and epithets.

His language remained different on the issue, though. The interviewer asked:

One of the most positive social and impactful movements of 2017 was the #MeToo movement. It has begun a sudden revival in the 21st Century Feminist movement and it has had profound effects on societies worldwide. What do you think of it?

Chomsky points to the critical issues talked about in the public domain. One with the “real and serious and deep problem” indicative of a “social pathology.” He sees this movement growing out of calling out this social pathology.

Another is the clear danger for many women in professional domains with powerful men, but this, especially, comes out, with almost no comparison for the United States than, in Hollywood.

But Chomsky continued, he went on to talk about the dangers of the #MeToo movement, but he, it seems, talked about the wider phenomenon of calling out bad behaviour or, more properly, making claims about bad behaviour in the public domain.

Chomsky sees the danger in “confusing allegation with demonstrated action.” That is, there needs to be care with making sure the allegations are demonstrated, which has more often been a conservative point, interestingly enough.

A point elaborated about the uncovering of “improper, inappropriate and sometimes criminal activities.” Where, “there always has to be a background of recognition that there’s a difference between allegation and demonstration.”

The full statement below in response to the interviewer’s question plus preface:

I think it grows out of a real and serious and deep problem of social pathology. It has exposed it and brought it to attention, brought to public attention many explicit and particular cases and so on. But I think there is a danger. The danger is confusing allegation with demonstrated action. We have to be careful to ensure that allegations have to be verified before they are used to undermine individuals and their actions and their status. So as in any such effort at uncovering improper, inappropriate and sometimes criminal activities, there always has to be a background of recognition that there’s a difference between allegation and demonstration.

T+A=S: The end game for intersectionality is individualism

April 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Intersectionality as a theory may result in the practical realization of individualism. It's seen as a means by which to view oppressive structures of society.

Oppressive structures including ableism, classism, homophobia, racism, sexism, and transphobia. These focus on groups. Groups bound by loose definitions.

This reduction of society into sections and their intersections summarizes the method.

Intersectionality, as a method, cuts society into parts. Then those parts become examined based on their intersections.

A poor, disabled Canadian First Nations trans man sits at cross-sections. These cross-sections of society bring analysis on oppression.

Oppression against the person as a low socioeconomic status person and disabled person. And so on, these provide the framework and the method.

Within the farther Left social and political spectrum, intersectionality reigns. Left-Liberal types love it. Many Right-Conservative types hate it, or feel indifference, even ambivalence.

But since this method garners wide praise, it deserves attention. But let's pause there, another idea comes from individualism. Or the individualist perspective, the emphasis on the person.

The person as sovereign, as unassailable. Individualism amounts to a focus on the independent individual. All gradations, nuances, and subtleties respected and honored.

Intersectionality, if taken to the limit, would imply individualism of a kind. Each person as a potential infinite set of intersections. But only a functional set of cross-sections, often.

Too many then the intersectional lens becomes cumbersome for the Left-Liberal types. It also becomes self-parodying for the Right-Conservative types. Both views valid.

Same with the intersectional view associated with the Left-Liberal spectrum. Identical with the individualism of the Right-Conservative range.

The main differences remain the focus on oppression and the level of analysis. The level of the analysis in popular discourse. Oppression as the focus for the intersectionalist view, not for the individualist.

The plane for scrutinizing the oppression are groups. Hence, the decrying of "neo-Nazi," "racist," on campuses. Campuses dominated by Left-Liberal administrators, faculty and staff, professors, and students.

Other terms include "sexist," "Marxist," "feminist," "Men's Rights Activist," "Capitalist," and so on. These are terms to defame to dismiss an opponent. They do not engage the empirical evidence or arguments.

On campuses, the Intersectional Central, the oppressors, by default, become Right-Conservative types. Insofar as I can tell, many claims against Right-Conservatives seem illegitimate.

Those Right-Conservative types tend to not like illegitimate claims of being oppressors. Of being unwitting sexists, racists, and so on, how would others feel? You become defensive. Imagine rampant declarations of Left-Liberal types as oppressors of various types.

It is not a fear of becoming called out as such. It amounts to indignation over often false claims about character: character assassination and attacks. If you want to critique someone, then look at the ideas and arguments.

Left-Liberal discourse continues to forget this. Sometimes, unquestionable assertions plus violent tactics replace conversation.

Right-Conservative types continue to dismiss legitimate philosophy of the Left-Liberal types. And that leads back to the intersectional views seen on the Left-Liberal spectrum. It brings back individualism of the Right-Conservative suasion too.

In the final claims of intersectionality, the individual will reign. The group broken down into constituents, into elements. That becomes an individual, a person. It remains in between groups and individuals at this time, in the academic and popular discourse, but this is progressing.

Each person brings different facets of a self, as individual human beings. Sometimes the oppressor; sometimes the oppressed. Group politics will dissolve into individual politics.

Individual politics means personal votes, translates into more democratic institutions. Those democratic institutions form the basis for proper democracy.

All votes count, not by group or cross-sectioned identity but, by individual. The relationship between fundamentals of Right-Conservative individualism and Left-Liberal intersectional philosophy sits idle.

This may be the future of the debate. A bridge between worlds opposed now, and more opposed soon. Besides, at the end of the day, most people want empowerment.

They want recognition as individuals. They want merit for their individual accomplishments, characters, efforts, and talents. Those will come hand-in-hand with recognition of their evil and good sides. The failures and accomplishments of theirs.

The vices and virtues of character of theirs. The efforts and lack thereof of theirs. The talents or failings of theirs. Every individual as a set of intersections. But acknowledged, they do not need excessive definitions.

Their names and regular language and talk can bridge that gap too. Many people do not like the disconnected and pompous rhetoric of the intersectionals. But they do not like the elitism of some of the individualists.

Simplify the language as much as need be, you can bridge the gap. The end game of intersectionality may be individualism. With this, the emphasis may be oppression.

At times, this new individualism will not be focused on oppressor-oppressed. It will be the empowerment of people with a non-victim (non-oppression focused) perspective.

That synthesis of these opposed ideologies and views. It will bring Left-Liberal and Right-Conservative types to the same table. We will be better for it; so with it, our public and academic discourses on persons and groups.

PLACE 7: MENDY MARCUS

What's in a good business?

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Online companies seem to have become the norm. In fact, there appears to be a reduction in the number of retail companies in favour of online replacements.

Does this seem to be the trend? If so, what can entrepreneurs keep in mind when building newer businesses and business models?

Mendy Marcus: It's true retail is dying, but that's a good thing and not a bad thing. Retail is being replaced by something far greater. Retail takes physical space software doesn't; retail costs an enormous amount of money while digital doesn't (sometimes).

Over the years, the opening of a business has become much more expensive, tedious, and difficult. For example, what you would be able to do out of your home, you now need licenses; what you'd be able to do by hand, it is now done by machines; what you used to do with your brain, it is now done by software.

This is great for those who started by hand and have graduated. It allows them to do more with less; however, this is terrible for newcomers because the options to start are no longer there.

In order to start that same business, you now need to buy expensive machinery or build software etc. The move to the digital market can, sometimes, help lessen the new versions of opening a business.

But if your business is completely new, you may have to build a lot of software. It may be even harder to start up. There is still a lot of work to do, just like opening an ecommerce or starting a website.

It needs to be affordable and easy with platforms like Squarespace and Shopify. We now need to have similar platforms for building app and more complex software so that we can do back to the days of doing it yourself and being able to start a business with only \$1000.

Although, I wouldn't write off retail so fast it is here to stay, however, in a very different form. I see retail as the physical side to a digital world, a showroom of sorts, a grocery store.

A grocery store you only go into to see the food, but why shlep at home when you can have it dropped off before you even make it home yourself or a place you can sit and play the video game before you download it to your TV at home.

I also see startups, lawyers, and accounts and order types of officers occupying the "retail" spaces. Of course, we won't be calling these retail; however, these will be what we will walk down the street to, and these will make our cities modern, hip, and lively.

The boring old stores will move into warehouses and sell strictly through apps and showrooms.

Jacobsen: When approaching the conceptual, early stages of business development, such as an app, what are some of the critical thinking, reflective steps to keep in mind?

Marcus: I don't have a billion dollars in my account. So, I'm not going to pretend I have all the steps figured out on how to create a successful startup. Instead, I will focus on something I find very few entrepreneurs and businesses do, and is also a personal annoyance when not done right.

That is, the creation of a great user experience, whether it's digital or not; UX is the most important thing. People tend to structure the UX according to how they want to do business or how they think they would do business, instead of doing business according to their user experience.

I'll use a tech business as an example, but this can apply to a restaurant as well. Whether you are building the walls of an app, or the walls of the restaurant, it doesn't make a difference.

The first thing you want to do once you have decided to open a business or have an idea is figure out the user experience: how does the customer want to experience what you are selling or offering?

Don't go right to researching how the market works, that tends to make you want to do what the market is doing or "follow the rules of the industry in order to succeed."

You should close your eyes, imagine yourself as your first customer that walks into the restaurant/uses your app, what experience do you want, and not what you are expecting.

Because you are expecting what you are used to, and you are used to what all the other restaurants and apps are doing, but that doesn't set you apart; neither does it satisfy them.

They don't need you, so take yourself through the experience you want as a user/customer and not what you are expecting. Now, do the same as the 1000th user here for the first time, a user who's used the app many times.

Once you have figured out what the user experience should be, talk to a lot of people, annoy some strangers with some really bad UI designs or describe what your restaurant looks like and get honest feedback, you shouldn't ask your friends or polite people who don't want to hurt your feelings.

Now, you can research the market and figure out how you can create a business model and strategy according to the user experience. Many places sell pizza. There will be a lot of apps like yours even if you have a new idea, many will copy it; people choose you because of the experience.

If this wasn't the case, Tesla would be all about the technology. The electric vehicle itself is pretty cool, but Elon knew it's a matter of time before there's another few electric car companies, so he had to make the driving experience amazing. The car has to look sexy.

The website experience had to be just perfect, picking up your car had to be a thrilling experience, even the test drive had to feel like a big deal. Every detail was carefully thought out.

Even though, the customer is having the time of their lives and living in the moment and it's all so natural to him/her. It is all created moments by Elon and his team, even the marketing has a user experience. When I have an idea, I don't turn it into a business and figure out how to make money from it right away.

First, I think about the user experience, then I play around with the UI. This tends to point out the flaws in my UX. Once I have that down, I try to figure out whether I can make some money from it as well.

I suggest always starting out a project as a hobby. This way you're not in a rush. You are not chasing the money. You're just having a good time perfecting something that may or may not be

monetisable later on, but for now it's all about having a great idea: an excellent user experience and eventually a good shot at a business idea.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Mendy.

Ask Mendy 1 – Startups

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Who are you?

I was given three very Jewish names but only go by one because it rings well with my last name. I was born in London England and have been living in Canada since I was 8. Currently I am a young entrepreneur who is trying to create exciting technology and earn a living that will allow me to break out of the societal Norm of living paycheck-to-paycheck while at the same time bettering the world through innovation.

What are your main areas of entrepreneurial interest?

I'm mostly interested by projects that can help people, better their lives, by projects that are Innovative and futuristic.

What are your upcoming projects for 2018/19?

Currently I am working on an app that is an Uber like service for your laundry dry clean and other related services.

Ask Mendy 2 - Going Solo

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Why are we doing this series?

I want to share my entrepreneurial experiences, I want to share my ideas the ones I'm working on and the ones that I'm not working on, I'm hoping to build a community of loyal readers, listeners and watchers who will give me support when I need it and constructive criticism when it's due, overall the result will be better products and better ideas, and hopefully I can also inspire other people to become entrepreneurs.

What is the point of it?

Part of it is just to have fun, find common minded people, I wanna put myself and my ideas out there for the world so I'm not frustrated with all of it in my mind, in a way I'm also trying to open source myself because there's only so much I can do in one lifetime.

How will your experience and upcoming projects be informing the work in this Q&A series?

I'm hoping that my mistakes and creative solutions will be transparent for others to notice and improve their own projects and hopefully point out and improve flaws in my projects.

It's kind of hard to explain but I guess the work I'm looking for is bond, I would like to establish a bond between me my ideas and the community we will create

Ask Mendy 3 - Online Companies

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Online companies seem to have become the norm. In fact, there appears to be a reduction in the number of retail companies in favour of online replacements. Does this seem to be the trend? If so, what can entrepreneurs keep in mind when building newer businesses and business models?

When approaching the conceptual, early stages of business development, such as an app, what are some of the critical thinking, reflective steps to keep in mind?

Where can the early stages of the development of an online company go wrong?

It's true retail is dying but that's a good thing not a bad, because we are replacing it with something much better. I wouldn't say it's a trend thought, that implies that is popular at the moment and has the option of fading. This started with someone or many people who were tech enthusiast who probably told things online just to show it can be done, then you had the internet boom where everyone wanted to sell something online because it was so new but they didn't know how, even Google has blamed the boom on people who wanted to sell food online, at the time they just didn't know how. Then you had Amazon, Google Book and other forms of industry being completely digitalized or at least the sales aspect became digital, now we are finding more and more business models and technologies that allow

I don't have a billion dollars in my account so I'm not going to pretend I have all the steps figured out on how to create a successful startup, instead i will focus on something I find very few entrepreneurs and businesses do and is also a personal annoyance when not done right and that is create a great user experience, whether it's digital or not UX is the most important thing.

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Don't go right to researching how the market work, that tends to make you want to do what the market is doing or "follow the rules of the industry in order to succeed", what you should do is close your eyes, imagine yourself as your first customer that walks into the restaurant/uses your app, what experience do you want, not what you are expecting because you are expecting what you are used to and you are used to what all the other restaurants and apps are doing but that doesn't set you apart neither does it satisfy them or they wouldn't need you, so take yourself through the experience you want as a user/customer not what you are expecting, now do the same as the 1000th user here for the first time and a user who's used the app many times.

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like yours even if you have a new idea, many will copy, people choose you because of the experience.

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When I have an idea I don't turn it into a business and figure out how to make money from it right away, first I think about the user experience, then I play around with the UI, this tends to point out the flaws in my UX, once I have that down I try to figure out whether I can make some money from it as well. I suggest always starting out a project as a hobby, this way you're not in a rush, you are not chasing the money you're just having a good time perfecting something that may or may not be monetisable later on, but for now it's all about having a great idea, an excellent user experience and eventually a good shot at a business idea.

Ask Mendy 4 – Sales

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What are the business models of the biggest companies including Apple, Google, Tesla, and others?

What makes each truly exceptional in their approach to R&D, marketing and sales, and the delivery of their products/services?

I don't work for these companies so it's impossible to know what is going on internally, however from observation alone I think it's apparent that Google's main source of revenue is from Google ads, here the business model is to offer as many free service like Google search Gmail etc in order to display ads, however I think Google is actively trying to change that, even though for has many products they primarily have one source of income and that can be a dangerous think, especially now that Facebook and pretty much everyone else is trying to invade Google's space.

Google now has many revenue models and they will be working to grow each one of them to take a larger percentage of their overall revenue as well as keep adding new revenue streams. With YouTube they now offer a monthly subscription to make that product less dependent on ad revenue, android is also no longer funded by ad revenue with the into hardware, however the made by Google hardware revenue streams is probably the most exciting one and most promising for Google.

Ask Mendy 5 - Small Businesses

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

When you're thinking about an app, what areas do you tend to focus on?

It always starts with an idea, I think of a better way to do something that is already on the market or I think of something completely new and solves a problem not solved yet. Side note, the worst way to start a business or project is to think about the money, many people would think, “Wow look at these guys they make so much money, that must be a good business.”

That's wrong. It's a good business for them because they are doing something right, if you want in just for the money you'll be board of it. You won't have anything new and innovative to bring to the market.

This is precisely why I try to hold off on thinking anything about the business strategy until I have completed my ideas, the way I go about that is I think about how do I solve the problem and how dose the user want to interact with my app.

I get to my laptop ASAP. I start designing the UI. I tent to think about more things that can go wrong in my idea when I have something visual in front of me. Also, I don't have any design skills like Photoshop or illustrator. I use Google presentations. They have all the features of Google drawings, which I used in the past.

But I made the switch, so I can have all the variations of the same page in one file. I'm getting ready technical here, but the point is you don't need much to get your idea down. The important part is to focus on what dose the user want.

Yes, it's your solution. The user wants that, but the user wants just that; the user knows how they want to interact with your solution/app. You have to put yourself in their shoes to design and build a good UI and UX. Plus, this points out for me all the things and scenarios I didn't about when coming up with my idea. Sometimes, it is a few hours later.

Sometimes, it can be days later when I have a 90% complete app I get developers involved. I also try to write down as much details as possible and paint the best picture possible for the developers working on the app.

Ask Mendy 6 - User Interface

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In terms of the terminology used in some of the prior interviews, one of them is the initialism UI standing for User Interface. What is UI? How does this play an important role in the creation of an app?

I'm not a developer, so I will probably do a bar job explaining this but here I go.

The user interface (UI) is the visual aspect that you interact with, that then communicates with what's known as the backend, I like to call this functions because I use Firebase Cloud Functions.

Although, all the user sees is the UI, the functions, or backend is the brain that know what needs to happen when the user interacts with a specific part of the UI, then there is the database.

This is where information is kept, so even though you are seeking a nice looking button, what it says in the button can be in the UI code itself or it can check in the database for some text to display in the button.

Mostly, an app deals with these three parts, but sometimes there can also be APIs used like if you want a map in your app; you're not going to build mapping technology just so you can have one small map. You use Google Maps API. That lets your app communicate with Google Maps.

PLACE 8: CANADIAN SCIENCE

Evidence for Democracy (E4D) Launches Budget Toolkit

June 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Evidence for Democracy or E4D has been a recent bulwark of scientific education and support of the work for evidence-based policy making and decision-making.

Many researchers, science-enthusiasts, and scientists came out in 2017. They came out to represent science, or ask for it to be represented, in Budget 2018. They talked to their MPs. They went to the social media land.

They submitted briefs.

With Budget 2019 close by as well. It is now time to begin the advocacy process once more, from the ground up. There has been the launch of the Budget Toolkit now.

E4D is putting this out as its latest training document. It is to help people find out how the pre-budget process works, especially in regards to advocating for funding.

The Budget Toolkit is crucial for the process of advocating to the government. The government uses information from the public to make decisions about the priorities for the entire year.

So, it is, as the kids say, kind of, sort of, maybe, like, like, you know, a super-big deal. It is in this substantive process that makes letting the government know that the public considers science important integral to the investment in science and evidence-based decision-making.

Another item launched was the recent issue of the volunteer newsletter:

the Catalyst

Bees Know Zero

June 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Science Magazine reported on one of the important and foundational concepts in the human mathematical arsenal comes in the form “0” or zero; based on the newest research, some experiments indicate bees understand the concept or idea of zero.

The idea of zero relates to the concept of nothing, nada, and zilch. However, what about the intuitive idea of nothing or zero?

Something at the base of the mathematical conceptual universe for human beings. Zero exists for other organisms, not in symbolic representation but in internal processing

Others in previous research have been monkeys and parrots. Now, bees joined the pack, or the hive as it were.

Honey bees know 1, 2, 3, and 4. These bees can count. This may help in territorial marking. An adaptive evolutionary function for better survival. Imagine not marking anything then functioning in daily life. No mental map, yikes!

The recent research extended the previous scientific initiatives into the world of zilch, littler than little nothing.

The research team trained 10 bees to identify the smaller amount of two numbers. In a series of trials, insects were shown two pictures. One with some black shapes and a white background. When bees flew to those with the smaller number of the shapes, they were given a “delicious sugar water.”

If they went to the one with the larger number, they were punished with the worst of the worst, quinine. “Once the bees had learned to consistently make the correct choice, the researchers gave them a new option: a white background containing no shapes at all,” the article explained.

Even with never seeing an empty picture, they chose this option 64% of the time rather than those pictures with 2 or 3 shapes on them (with a white background).

The article concluded, “This suggests that the insects understood that “zero” is less than two or three. And they weren’t just going for the empty picture because it was new and interesting: Another group of bees trained to always choose the *larger* number tended to pick the nonzero image in this test.”

Research on Sex-Change Mice

June 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Guardian reported on the change of the sex of some mice.

The removal of some DNA strands cause some previously normal males to grow ovaries and female genitalia. This, some think, may provide some insight into the development of human sexual disorders.

With those DNA strands gone, the mice then became males with female genitalia. They may explain why the XY chromosomes can miss some of the similar strands of DNA for the female mice's sexual organs or physiology. Men get XY and women get XX.

“Researchers at the Francis Crick Institute in London showed that they could reverse the sex of male mice by deleting a chunk of DNA called enhancer 13, or Enh13 for short,” the reportage explained, “Like 98% of the genome, this section of DNA does not carry any genes that are used to make proteins, the crucial building blocks of living organisms.”

Robin Lovell-Badge, who is a geneticist at the Francis Crick Institute, stated, “For the first time we’ve demonstrated sex reversal after changing a non-coding region of DNA... We think Enh13 is probably relevant to human disorders of sex development and could potentially be used to help diagnose some of these cases.”

The problem with the research into the sexual development disorders comes from the unexplained set of causal pathways from the genes or sets of genes acting in coordinated fashions for various sexual development disorders to emerge.

Lovell-Badge stated, “The analysis of such patients has mostly focused on the parts of genes that encode proteins, ignoring the parts that control the activity of the gene.”

In examination of the mammalian embryos, there are ones destined to grow ovaries and other with testes. The former point to females. The latter to males, on a biological and not sociological analysis—though these do not separate from one another.

“In the earliest stages of development, levels of SOX9 are driven by a gene on the Y chromosome, explaining why males typically develop testes,” the article stated.

Enh13 in the genome is coordinated to boost SOX9 to produce testes at the correct time in development. If these are clipped off the genome, then the male mice become for biological and sexual organ purposes female.

AI for Africa Through Google

June 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Quartz reported on the developments of artificial intelligence in Africa due to Google with the develop of more AI research through an infusion from Google with the Africa AI research center.

It will be based on Accra, which is the capital of Ghana. Ghana's Accra is known for a vibrant technology industry. This may be a surprise to some compared to the other African cities of Lagos and Nairobi, in Nigeria and Kenya, respectively.

The report stated, "Google had been laying the pipeline, both figuratively and physically, for future developments in Accra for a few years now. Back in 2015, the Mountain View, California tech giant started work on a fiber optic network, called Project Link, across the city to improve internet speeds."

It seemed like the workings of a larger plan in order to develop the computer industry in Africa through infrastructure provision and construction from Google.

"Ghana also has good a font of young talent from its public universities and newer centers like the computer science program at the highly-regarded private institution, Ashesi University," the article continued.

The team lead for Google Brain, Jeff Dean, had difficulty in the selection of a location for the project.

Dean stated, "In the end, we chose Accra because of a strong ecosystem of local universities and its proximity to a branch of the African Institute of Mathematical Sciences, and our experience in the country."

The intention, or hope rather, is to develop these things further into the future. The developments of more AI research center locations through the continent of Africa.

"The company says it's trying to bring together top machine learning researchers and engineers at the new center dedicated to AI research and its applications," Quartz said, "Google is making a big bet on AI for its future. In 2016 alone it invested \$30 billion on AI and machine learning research."

If AI begins to take hold and gain traction, as is increasingly the case, in Africa, then the developments of its industries will increase quite a lot, arguably. The curve in Moore's Law makes things much cheaper for the computer hardware for people to do things.

If cheaper, then the space, finances, and team or company staff sizes are not needing to be as big. That is, it means less volume taken by computers, fewer finances to buy the hardware, and fewer people in order to make strides in science and technology with the power of AI in a shorter period of time, too.

"In Nigeria, machine learning is being used by doctors for the early detection of birth asphyxia—the third highest cause of under-5 mortality in Africa. China, on its way to become the leader in artificial intelligence, is using Zimbabwe as the test ground to help its facial recognition systems identify faces with dark skin," the article explained.

With the taking away of manufacturing jobs, the AI industry may provide for those with the talent and education in Africa, and in particular Accra at the moment, to be able to gain jobs, finances, and contribute to the wealth of continent.

The article concluded:

Research from PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated “artificial intelligence technologies could increase global GDP by \$15.7 trillion, a full 14%, by 2030 of which \$1.2 trillion would be added for Africa.”

The Search for Fundamental Particles by Canadian Scientists

June 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Globe and Mail talked about the search for new particles by Canadian scientists.

With 10 quadrillion high-energy collisions in the world's largest particle accelerator, there may be some answers to questions about the potential for other missing fundamental particles in the Standard Model of Particle Physics or elsewhere. This raises questions.

The questions about the potential for discoveries by Canadian scientists and researchers through international collaboration. "Canada is one of dozens of countries participating in the project, which will eventually see the collider's performance increase tenfold by the middle of the next decade," *CBC News* stated, "Researchers hope the higher number of collisions that result will increase the likelihood that they will spot some extremely rare clues to a more fundamental theory of matter than the current standard model of particle physics."

The TRIUMF accelerator in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, associate director Oliver Krestor, talked about this as the next big stage in the work of the LHC. The LHC or the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva, Switzerland empirically verified the existence of the Higgs Boson.

There seems not much left to see for the Standard Model of Particle Physics. However, as things have progressed, there has been hope to develop a theoretical and eventually empirical framework for the incorporation of dark matter into the Standard Model of Particle Physics.

"The situation has perplexed physicists who are looking to replace the standard model with a new theory that can encompass dark matter, a substance whose existence has been inferred by astronomers through its gravitational influence on stars and galaxies, but that has never been directly detected," the article explained.

The Director-General of CERN, Fabiola Gianotti, wants to find the smallest potential deviation from the current evidence to see if there are other portions not accounted for in current theorization.

"The LHC works by accelerating protons in two opposing beams around a 27-kilometre-long circular tunnel. The beams cross at only four points where protons that are travelling at nearly the speed of light can collide and release enough energy to spontaneously form new particles, such as the Higgs," the reportage explained, "These decay in an instant, but they leave their traces in the building-size detectors built around the collision points. Canada supplied hardware for one of those detectors, called ATLAS, and is currently developing new components for an intermediate upgrade that will begin after the beams are shut down for two years starting in November."

It is a complicated affair. The round of data gathering take place between 2021 and 2023 with the overhaul happening to incorporate a more potentially ground-breaking series of experiments through the collider's superconducting magnets being replaced.

The purpose is to increase the amount of data coming from the experiment of the collider. 150 researchers work at the LHC. They are working for the improvement in the future of the particle physics research.

Science and Faith: Is There Really a Conflict?—A Conversation with Professor Tom McLeish

June 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D., is Professor of Natural Philosophy in the Department of Physics and works at the Center for Medieval Studies and the Humanities Research Centre at The University of York.

Scott Douglas Jacobson: Where do you stand on the perceived conflict between science and faith?

Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D.: I stand on the extreme non-conflict end of the spectrum. I am off-spectrum because I don't recognize the question of conflict as a real one, in this sense. I am a scientist. I am a theoretical physicist. I am a Christian. Occasionally, I preach at my local church—but all these things are of one life, not two in conflict.

I have some theological training as well. When I am asked, "How do you reconcile your science with your effects?" it sounds to me like the question, "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" There is no good answer to this.

The question presumes a whole mindset. I am not there. The question of conflict doesn't even mean anything.

Jacobsen: So, we shift that conversation to where those questions become meaningless. It is like people trying to resolve some paradox in philosophy between being and non-being. It shifts the question.

McLeish: How do you resolve a conflict between your religious faith and your gardening? You grow tomatoes. Then you believe this extraordinary stuff about God creating the tomatoes and the gardener and you. Do these conflict? Well, no, they don't.

Because your story, if I am talking to someone who is a Christian or a Jew, is not a made-up story. It is a real story. It is a true story. It has a beginning and a middle and an end. You are reading it somewhere. You are in it, with lots of other people.

Also, you believe you are here for a purpose. You might think, "Tomatoes are purposeless. Nonetheless, here you are doing your gardening. The reason there is no conflict is that your gardening rests within your largest story."

Science is from God. So, I see science not as a threat to faith, if you like, or a threat to belief in God. I see science as a gift from God. God is a rather particular, rather advanced, way in which we know the universe in which we find ourselves.

Jacobsen: When it comes to formal argumentation for a god, in particular, a Christian God, what arguments do you find more appealing or convincing?

McLeish: So, I haven't always been a Christian any more than I haven't always believed in quantum mechanics either. So, if science is evidence-based, based on reason and experience, then to a large extent, faith must be as well.

Faith is supposed to be believing in ten impossible things before breakfast. Or maybe six. Of course, it isn't like that to me. It doesn't feel like that to me. The sense of religious commitment feels like being in the middle of a scientific project.

This is how it works: you have a strong hypothesis that looks very possible, but the only way to test it is to get inside it and start experimenting. So, if that is not a direct answer to your question, it puts it in context. Living the life and thought of a Christian is a bit like doing a large experiment.

On the other hand, you want the truth. Let's look at four or five categories of things that make me suspicious that theism should be taken seriously. So, the fundamental issue is ontology. Why should there be things? Why should anything exist?

In an atheist's worldview, that is a non-question. You will never know why things exist. They exist, live with it. But it is entirely legitimate to ask about the reason that things exist. The ground of all being, if you like.

The second, we find mind and structure in the universe wherever we look. It is rather extraordinary, the deeper we look in the atom, the furthest out to the furthest galaxies. Or into the structures of life, we see structures, anticipate structures that can be grasped by our own minds yet are not simply echoes of our own minds.

We're finding ourselves stretched. Quantum mechanics, whatever it is. Even Feynman says no one understands it! It is a feature of the physical world that we did not expect to find, but we have the mental equipment to begin to approach it. That is miraculous in the old sense of the world. It makes me wonder absolutely.

The third reason is an odd one; not many people quote reasons for believing in God as this, as normally it is a problem for them. But for me, the existence of evil is a strong pointer towards God rather than away.

To the objection that there cannot be a great God out there, in the face of terrible, evil things, I say, "What did you say? How do you know that evil? How is it that one of our human observations is wanting to point to things that are irreducibly bad, horrors that we want to be unrepeatable? Particularly after the 20th century?"

That is almost like observing the Big Bang. Looking at worldviews that are honest about evil was one of the reasons that attracted me to Christianity in particular. Because it made a realistic account of the existence of non-relative evil.

Another reason I was attracted to Christianity when I began to understand it, was that it is an *anti*-religion in an important sense. Its whole dynamic is completely inverted to all that is 'religious'—rather than humans attempting enlightenment and perfection across a huge divide, God makes the move in the opposite direction. I was rather attracted to that.

Then you have the witness of history. You do have things, documents, individuals through history, the extraordinary creative power of this revolution. The unbelievably humble and never recorded little thousands of miracles a day of people who tell you that they're doing this in obedience to this person.

This person they might call Jesus or might call God.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Professor McLeish.

J50 and the Desperation for the Save

August 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

American and Canadian scientists are working feverishly, together, to save an orca. It is endangered.

The killer whale is called J50. It is quite emaciated and lethargic and has lost approximately 20 percent of total body weight. J50 is one of only 75 southern resident killer whales that travel between British Columbia and California.

She is a 4-year-old whale and, as a female, is important for the reproductive capabilities of the low level population there, with only 75 left. However, according to Michael Milsten from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the United States, there has not been an observed orca of this type come out of this rather low survival level before.

One potential solution proposed is to feed chinook salmon to the killer whale while having medication in the chinook salmon. However, this strategy has not been used before.

This indicates the rather desperate measures considered for the overall health of the orca. The purpose is to nurse the whale back to health in order to not have J50 dependent on people for sustenance and proper feeding.

However, in despair over the poor health of her, many are worried about the proverbial clock that they're racing against.

"They feel the situation is dire, that she probably has potentially a matter of days. Nobody knows for sure, (and) if we were going to attempt something that we would need to do it pretty soon," Milstein said.

Interview with Professor Gordon Guyatt on Critical Thinking and Medical Advice

February 1, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Gordon Guyatt, MD, MSc, FRCP, OC is a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence and Impact and Medicine at McMaster University. He is a Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

The British Medical Journal or BMJ had a list of 117 nominees in 2010 for the Lifetime Achievement Award. Guyatt was short-listed and came in second-place in the end. He earned the title of an Officer of the Order of Canada based on contributions from evidence-based medicine and its teaching.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2012 and a Member of the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame in 2015. He lectured on public vs. private healthcare funding in March of 2017, which seemed like a valuable conversation to publish in order to have this in the internet's digital repository with one of Canada's foremost academics.

For those with an interest in standardized metrics or academic rankings, he is the 14th most cited academic in the world in terms of H-Index at 222 and has a total citation count of more than 200,000. That is, he has among the highest H-Indexes, likely, of any Canadian academic living or dead.

By Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What should the public keep in mind about critical thinking with regards to some health recommendations, those that can come their way. It can come from reliable sources including experts in the country, from non-governmental sources, and others of similar weight. That's one class of information resources.

But then there's another set of them. They can include, for instance, pop up ads on Facebook or questionable publications giving medical advice. What are some tips you might have in mind for some the general public?

Distinguished Professor Gordon Guyatt: If I were getting one thing, or even anything, if it comes off the internet, it is safest not to believe it. That would be the first thing. They should critically evaluate interventions. It is not easy. It's not an easy thing and what is an easy thing is to present a much rosier picture of an intervention than the truth.

You have these real catastrophes like multiple sclerosis, the vein hypothesis about vein obstruction causing multiple sclerosis, and so on; people got terribly excited about this and went off to various places in the world.

And it turns out to be completely bogus. So, you have big disasters, and you have smaller disasters. And the thing is the bottom line, there are reliable sources for patients, so that many major organizations and reliable textbooks up to date have sections for patients and those would be the sort of source that would be reliable.

But ultimately, it may look good in general, but things are always specific to individual patients and wherever else you get your information talk about it with your doctor.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Professor Guyatt.

PLACE 9: INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIGEST

The Drug Epidemic & Decriminalization

There are 70,000 to 100,000 individual deaths from opioid overdoses each year. It is estimated that there were 99,000 to 253,000 deaths from to illicit drug use in 2010 and 8,440 overdose deaths occurred in the EU28 in 2015. This is a clarion call for us to make the world safer for the next generations. What can we do?

One of the main global organizations for the health and wellness of the public is the World Health Organization. The main collective entity representing the world's population, and which produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 70 years ago, is the United Nations. Both the World Health Organization and the United Nations issued a joint statement calling for the decriminalization of all drugs.

Former Portuguese Prime Minister António Guterres launched the decriminalization of drugs in Portugal. Today, Guterres is the Secretary-General of the United Nations and is also calling for decriminalization globally, as well. The late Kofi Annan also made a call for the decriminalization of drugs around the world as did the Global Commission on Drug Policy which is comprised of 12 powerful former heads of state.

In Canada, two of the three major federal or national political parties have also called for the decriminalization of drugs. The main health officials of some of the most populated city centres in Canada—Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto—have called for decriminalization. The reason is stark, and clear. Canadian citizens are dying because of overdoses. The punishment-oriented or punitive approach is the methodology for dealing with drugs most visible in countries like the United States. They imprison and fine drug users or holders to make an example of them. The evidence indicates that these measures tend to increase drug use and overdoses, not decrease them. That is why the experts are not calling for more criminalization of drug users. It impacts the poor and minorities disproportionately.

But what is the alternative: harm reduction. Decriminalization is part of the process of implementing a harm reduction philosophy. There's a wide range of policies, programs, and practices devoted to the reduction of harms associated with drug use. When HIV was becoming a pandemic, harm reduction began its early development processes. Some of the first beneficiaries were drug users who got high with needles. In Canadian society, we see the work of safe needle exchange sites to reduce the transmission of HIV and infectious diseases. Without a clean needle, HIV can spread from user to user through contaminated needles. Canadian health providers are also distributing a drug called naloxone, which can block the opioid receptors of the body, thus preventing opioid overdoses.

The criminalization of drugs is the problem. Illicit opioids are often laced with fentanyl, a deadly drug. Regulating fentanyl in opioids would save lives. In Portugal, there are no arrests for drug possession and more people have begun to receive treatment. As a direct result, the total number of people having addiction problems, HIV/AIDS, and drug overdoses have plummeted in Portugal.

Given the demographics of who is imprisoned or fined, the public health benefits would help to the most vulnerable members of society. They would receive treatment, while also avoiding being imprisoned from drug usage. This would do wonders to end the prison-industrial complex in the US, which disproportionately impacts minorities.

The next steps in the fight to end drug addiction will be education of the global public about the empirical benefits of decriminalization. We should work towards a national and international collective set of efforts to solve the issue of drug abuse and overdoses. Human beings have used drugs for thousands of years. We have the means to reduce the harm to those all over the world impacted by addiction, drug abuse, and overdoses.

The best part of these solutions is that they are typically low-cost, low-risk with a high-payoff. They respect the individual to make their own informed choices about drugs and provide the health services to the public. It respects all involved parties, produces real positive outcomes for the population, and works to create a more stable world for all.

Who can help work towards these goals? Our communities, policymakers and researchers, to name a few. Then, there are those heading out into the world as the next generation of educated workers and leaders. You are the future of the world. The problems of the drug epidemic are one of those grand challenges recognized by the most influential organizations and people in the world as a problem. Become a part of that future. We need you....

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