

A long-exposure photograph of a starry night sky, showing prominent star trails that curve in a circular pattern around a central point. In the foreground, the dark silhouette of a person stands with their back to the camera, looking up at the sky. The overall tone is dark and contemplative.

BOOK OF STUFF

4

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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BOOK OF STUFF 4

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Scott

PLACE 1: SECULARISM IS A WOMEN'S ISSUE

Ghana: The story of a de-conversion

January 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

You grew up as a Catholic. You went to Holy Child School, Cape Coast as well. What is your story as a youth growing up in a religious household? What was the experience?

I attended Catholic schools, St. Theresa's School in Accra from primary, junior high school and in Holy Child School I got my Senior high school education. They were one of the best schools at the time and provided us with the best teachers in all subjects. The major criteria for admissions was to be a Catholic and I was baptised at the St. Theresa's Parish so it was easier for me to gain admission. In primary school, we had 'Worship service' on Wednesday mornings as part of our curriculum and from 1st grade, we were read the Bible and taught to understand it.

In the beginning, I did not really understand it, especially when it came to topics on the afterlife since my mother had died when I was 4 years old and I had still not come to understand the concept of death by then. I must have tried to discuss the existence of God once to my classmates, but I was told that I could go mad (mentally ill) so I stopped. I then made it a point to understand and accept Christianity because I felt that everyone believed in it and it was the right thing to do. By 6th grade, I attended catechism classes and had received my First Holy Communion.

My Senior High School was an all-girls boarding School and was built by the Catholic church in a town called Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana in 1946. It had been run initially by British nuns for decades and later by alumni of the school. It was strict and aimed to form students into 'women of substance' who would grow up to be the best in the country at home as good wives, at work, and in the Catholic church.

Obedience, discipline, and morality were the core teachings there with religion and especially Catholicism at its core. It was compulsory for all students to attend Mass at least 3 times a week and observe 'The Angelus' prayer' 3 times a day. Most of the students were Catholic, but we had Anglicans and Protestants of various denominations as well. I became more exposed to Christian Charismatic teachings, joined nondenominational prayer groups and underwent a period of 'being born-again', which cemented my belief on God. It was there I had my 'Confirmation of the Holy Spirit'.

Due to my mother's death, I was brought up partly by my mother's family and later by my dad's. My mother's family is mostly Catholic and conservative who encouraged and supported me to be a good Christian and was proud of me whenever I hit a milestone in my religious life. My father's side of the family is mostly Anglican and also went to church often, but were more liberal and reformed.

I was encouraged there to think for myself and I learnt to care for myself and my sister at an early age since there was no mother-figure and my dad was not really 'there' either. Staying at my dad's, my sister and I grew up with lots of books and educational programs on satellite TV, which at the time was expensive for most homes to have. As my mother's side taught me to be obedient and subservient in their understanding of being respectful, my father's side of the family encouraged me to ask questions and express myself freely.

You de-converted and became an atheist in 2007. What were the major reasons, arguments, evidence, and experiences for the de-conversion?

I had finished University where I acquired my BA in Linguistics and Modern Languages and I had made lots of friends in the expat community. At the time, I had come to realise that I had certain views such as feminism that a lot of Ghanaian men were not interested in due to cultural and religious reasons so I seemed to connect well with foreigners. Dating a Serbo-Croatian then, I became familiar with the Eastern European community in the Capital, Accra.

I came to realise that most of them were non-religious as most people from Europe tend to be including my partner although they were baptised in the Orthodox church. I also started to notice that whenever I made religious statements, there would be a short awkward silence and a change in topic. I felt then that I was not doing my job properly as a Christian if I could not teach them about the Word of God and pass on the teachings of Christ. It was at this juncture that I set on a personal course to do objective research on the origins and importance of religion, especially Christianity, in order to properly inform my friends about it. We had Satellite TV then as well so I gave more attention to programs on channels like the HISTORY channel, which at the time showed objective documentaries on the life and times of Jesus Christ and the origins of the Bible.

This was eye-opening because all my life, I had watched the same type of movies and documentaries which were shown every Sunday and especially on Christian Holidays, but those ones had certain relevant information left out of it and they also did not give archaeologically documented information so came my first 'shocks'. I also watched the Discovery and National Geographic channels for scientific documentaries on evolution the possibilities of life on other planets and these baffled me further because I had been taught to believe in only Creationism and I did not know there was another way of explaining how humans exist. At that point, I had not gotten any information to preach with and I had no one to talk to about my findings.

I went through stages of grief, disappointment, sadness, anger, and finally stopped going to church. Even when I stopped going to church I felt that God would strike me with lightning for disobeying him or 'betraying' him, but as time went by and nothing bad seemed to happen, my fear lessened. I did not know how to explain it to my family and friends. So for years, I kept my non-belief to myself and gave excuses for not attending church and sometimes hoped that I could be proven wrong with my non-belief so I could go back to worshipping God but that time never came.

You studied French at the University of Ghana for a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics and Modern Languages (French and Spanish). Was this education assistive in personal and professional pursuits during postsecondary education and post-graduation?

Yes, it was. Actually, at the time, the University of Ghana did not give much room for choice by students. They mostly took subjects you excelled in from High School and gave you subjects in that field to study and since I passed exceptionally in English, French and Geography, I was given the Language subjects. I grew to enjoy Linguistics which was a social science program and it interested me greatly as its history taught me a lot about who we are as humans and how far we have come in terms of communication in our development as a species.

I studied various courses in pragmatics, phonetics, syntax, linguistics in Ga (my local language) and Linguistics in English. In Spanish, history and literature formed a big part of our studies and

French grammar as well. As Ghana is the only Anglophone country in Africa completely neighboured by Francophone Countries, it became integral that I learnt it as it could get me a long way in the job market although I never really used it much in my career. It came in handy in translating for visiting clients, contractors. I loved studying Spanish for the love of it and linguistics helped me in my career as an administrator in creating and reviewing company documents. I speak 3 local languages and knowing 3 more foreign languages came in handy in my social life meeting people from all over the world.

How did you become an activist?

I became active in activism after joining the Humanist Association of Ghana. I gained confidence to 'come out' then as atheist and I wanted to help share what I knew now just as I was as a Christian but this time, based on evidence. I also realised how religion was destroying my country and continent due to ignorance, lack of education, and human rights abuses, and I felt I had to do something to help change things for the better. I felt that if I knew of an alternative to the dogmatic teachings I was given, I might have been atheist earlier and maybe, I could give someone else the opportunity to be a freethinker, which I was never given.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

My family had no idea that I would turn out to be atheist/humanist. I used to know that my uncle (father's brother) who moved to the USA over 40 years ago was a deist by then, but never got the opportunity to discuss it with him until now. My sister's godmother was also a German atheist, but it was never discussed perhaps because I felt it would be rude.

My sister left the Catholic church to become an Evangelical youth prayer group member while I was turning atheist. It was not until 2 years later that she became atheist. Even though we are so close and tell each other everything, it wasn't until 3 years after her de-conversion that I got to hear about her story during a HAG group meeting. I definitely had no influence from Family. The best they helped was by giving me a good education and logical reasoning skills.

Did you have early partnerships in this activist pursuit? If so, whom?

Not really. I did not know about humanism until after I joined the Freethought Ghana group from which HAG came. Once I was introduced to it and I was able to recognise that humanism describes my personal philosophy of life, I began to identify as a humanist. The group then organised the 1st ever West African Humanist Conference in 2012 and after learning what steps other groups across the West African region were taking, we started to realise the importance of organising and formalising our group from a social group to an activist group.

The conference also gave the group the opportunity to meet other groups and their representatives that are working on humanitarian projects on human rights activism such as now Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Mrs. Nana Oye Lithur who spoke to us on the LGBT situation in Ghana at the time, Mr. Gyekye Tanoh of 3rd World Women's rights group, Mr. Leo Igwe a renowned African humanist from Nigeria who was then doing his research in Ghana on Witchcraft accusations in the Northern region for his PhD in Germany and other humanist groups from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. They gave us an insight on what they had been doing and gave us ideas from which HAG was inspired to join in.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes, I do. I am of the view that as a humanist who bases her ideas and decisions on logical reasoning and human value, I have had to rethink a lot of negative dogmatic beliefs, superstitions, and culture. I believe that Ghana, and Africa as a whole, is knee deep in ignorance and social dogma, and that is why we remain undeveloped for the most part. I love my country and my people of various tribes and cultures and for that, the need to create a better future for our next generations urges me on to fight age-old systems that stagnate our progress as a people.

Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

Progressivism, in my opinion, has not got to do with any belief in the supernatural or deities. There has been no proof of that and so moving forward for me, would mean totally discarding those beliefs and critically thinking of ways people can create better systems of living as a civilised nation that takes into account the responsibility of the well-being of its people.

However, I personally believe also that people have their right to association as enshrined in our constitution and therefore, need to have their rights respected but monitored so that its members and the general public are not badly affected by negative religious practices that would infringe on their rights. Rather, the religious can also be freethinkers with progressive views using religion as their source of inspiration.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Personally, I have always been progressive since I was young. I was a member of the Wildlife club and Girl Guide Association since Junior High School and in Senior High School, I became President of the Wildlife Club of my school as well as held the position of Public Relations Officer of the Student & Youth Travel Organisation (SYTO) in 2002. With these organisations, I advocated for the rights of animals and the plight of near-extinct species, the rights of girls, participated in various donations and awareness campaigns such as HIV/AIDS and Breast Cancer.

I believe that becoming atheist made me more aware of my passions and my part to play in advocacy and the promotion of human rights based on the realisation that there is no one and no god to help us other than ourselves as people.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

It is very important since our lives and our well-being depend on the environment and the kind of society we are in. Having bad cultural practices, harmful traditions, and laws could lead us backwards rather than providing us with a bright future for ourselves and the next generations around the world. I have grown to witness and live with hearing cases of child abuse at homes and in schools, seeing child trafficking on my streets, the handicapped begging, the mentally ill left naked to roam the streets, people dying of diseases that could have been prevented or cured, the loss of trust in policing and the judicial system and the effects of bad governance, bribery, and corruption on a populace.

People are growing ever so desperate that they are falling for the con of others using religion as a means of using them for their sexual perverted desires and money. Poverty is driving people to abandon their loved ones or accuse their own mothers of witchcraft in order for them to be put to death or banished from their communities for life. It is important that we do away with these in our societies as we have come to know better and rather look to our past which in the Akan language has a term called “Sankofa” which teaches us to learn from our past to build a better tomorrow.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the Ghana?

A major investment into Ghana's educational system and the review of our school curriculum. Almost all government and private schools are influenced or owned by religious institutions and they dictate what should and should not be taught to our children. It is in schools that major indoctrination starts and stifles freethinking in children. It is also there that teachers are given a right to beat up children to enforce 'god's will' of the "spare the rod, spoil the child" culture. If our educational system is revamped as our 1st President, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, a humanist himself, started and envisioned it to be, Ghana could have a well-educated and empowered workforce to develop the country in all the other sectors.

I attended the first University built by Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, The University of Ghana.

You became a member of the Humanist Association of Ghana (HAG) in 2012. You helped organised the first ever West African Humanist Conference (2012), which was sponsored by the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO). What tasks and responsibilities come along with volunteering and organising for the HAG?

At the time, our group was quite small but vibrant.

It was an exciting time to meet other Ghanaian atheists and agnostics and we were very pleased that IHEYO would entrust us with organising such a big event despite us being so new as a group. We did not have any formal leadership or an Executive Committee at the time so most of this was planned by volunteering members especially Graham Knight who helped to bring us together and started the Freethought Ghana group. I was then working for an Australian Mining Company out of Accra so I made myself available to attend and help with last minute preparations like picking up delegates from the airport to their hotel and vice versa after the event.

During the event, I volunteered to be at the information desk where I helped to register attendees, distribute pamphlets, notebooks, pens and provide drinking water. I also took it upon myself to film the conference since the funds were not enough for photo and video services. I also represented the group for interviews by local and international media. To be a volunteer, to me, is about helping however, wherever and whenever you can. Whether financially, using your skills or socially, any help at all goes a long way to achieve a successful event and team effort makes it even more motivating, fun and organised.

In Ghanaian culture, what are some of the more effective means to teach critical thinking within the socio-cultural milieu?

Ghana is made up of a culturally diverse population. It consists of roughly 100 linguistic and cultural groups. These groups, clans and tribes, although very different from each other, have certain similarities in various aspects of their culture. In Ghana, a child is said to be raised by the whole village rather than just the nuclear family. Traditionally, information was passed on from generation to generation mainly through song and dance. However, in modern days, education not only begins from home but in schools, mainstream media such as TV, radio and religious institutions. As humanists, our focus has been with the youth in schools and social media.

What about modern scientific ideas?

Most of the understanding of things around us are taught from home by parents and extended family members who usually pass on what they learnt from their elders. This is mostly dogmatic

and superstitious rather than scientific even though the end result is meant to educate. Educational institutions are good grounds to teach modern scientific ideas. Ghana can boast of some of the best science institutions such as the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology as well as research centres such as the Noguchi Memorial institute.

We also have some of the most renowned Medical Teaching hospitals in the West African region such as the Komfo Anokye and Korle-Bu Teaching Hospitals. Ghana has the only Planetarium in West Africa which is 1 of only 3 on the continent, which HAG members patronise and promote. There are also science programmes and quiz competitions amongst schools on TV.

What are the main barriers to teaching critical thinking and modern scientific ideas?

Lack of infrastructure, dedicated science teachers who are poorly paid, medical personnel and government interest has made our science sector struggle as compared to more developed countries. The average Ghanaian sees science as more theoretical and career-specific than practical. The understanding of science is seen mostly as a 'Western' construct than a global one. This could have stemmed from the fact that most modern inventions known to us came from Europe and the USA.

As a Ghanaian and African, what seem like the positives and negatives of religion and religious fervour on individuals and communities in Ghana and Africa in general?

Using the major religions like Christianity, Islam and Traditional worship, the positives of religion are that they give a sense of community, feelings of love, boosts self-esteem and gives hope and inspiration. The negatives however, are countless. Many of which include spiritual leaders taking advantage of people financially and sexually, having delusional thoughts out of superstition and religious indoctrination, self-loathing, and guilt from unnecessary thoughts, a sense of false hope, illogical reasoning, lazy attitudes towards work and charity, a false sense of entitlement, mandates to abuse yourself and others most of which turn out to be fatal, etc.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

1. Lack of governmental/State support
2. Lack of funding or insufficient funds
3. Mismanagement of funds
4. Lack of public support
5. Inadequate and outdated rules of law
6. Insufficient legal backing and law enforcement

How important do you think social movements are?

Social movements are very important especially in 3rd world countries in being the voice of the people and putting pressure on government and the people to review and approve the living conditions of people and the state of affairs of a country and its environment in the best interest of everyone. This is because despite democracy being adapted as a system of rule in most African countries, most of the time, cultural, traditional and religious biases steer the governments in the wrong direction and also because most of the countries may not have enough funding to care for its citizens and infrastructure.

In November, 2015, you became President of the HAG and in July, 2016, the Chair of the IHEYO African Working Group. What do these elected-to positions mean to you?

In the beginning of joining the humanist movement, I honestly never really saw myself as a leader. I just wanted to contribute my quota. However, I started to realise I had it in me to do great things for my group when I wrote my first article and got the most hits online! I received over 200 comments within days of posting it.

Most of the comments were negative but I felt I had left a mark and got people thinking. It also got the group recognised. I was recommended to IHEYO for a position as Secretary of the African working group in 2014 and at the time, I did not have much on my portfolio as an activist so I was so surprised and over-the-top excited when I got the news that I had been elected by international humanists who barely knew me from a record number of nominations!!! I was grateful that they read through my nomination and entrusted me with the position, which I held for 2 years.

I took it very seriously and had a lot of guidance from the IHEYO EC whose President was Nicola Jackson. I saw how long the working group had been dormant, and so many things I could do to bring it to life and so many ideas started coming to me. I increased social media presence on our Facebook page for the African Working Group and membership increased from 12 to 183 members within 2 years (It is now over 230). I also started a new Twitter page, @IheyoAfwg, with 130 followers including local and international humanists and humanist organisations. I helped create a network of African humanists and humanist organisations that are in regular communication via email, skype and WhatsApp and I discovered several African humanists and organisations that I am in constant contact with to advise and guide.

In December 2014, I together with the Humanist Association of Ghana, hosted the 2nd West African Humanist Conference (WAHC), sponsored by HIVOS and IHEYO. Please see below for links to the videos of the 2-day event which was aired live online setting a record for my group: Day 1 — Day 2— I founded the HAGtivist podcast project and started it with other volunteering members of HAG.

I had been a contributor to the IHEYO newsletter Youthspeak personally and from various member organisations in Ghana and Nigeria, and I represented the working group at the recently held General Assembly (GA) in Malta this year. I was part of the team that helped to organise the first ever continent-wide humanist conference held in Kenya called the African Humanist Youth Days (AHYD 2016) in July. This year, I knew that if I won the election as Chair, there would be so much more I could do to lead the Working group and despite a new resolution to have only Working group MOs voting this time, I came out victorious once again.

I am grateful to my fellow African humanists for their support and belief in me. It was on the same day I also received news of our election from HAG that I had also gained the position from Interim President in November 2015 to President elect in July 2016. It was truly humbling that my work was recognised and my fellow members had given me the responsibility of representing our group of highly intelligent, creative and wonderful people. These 2 positions come with the responsibility of representing Africa positively, dedicating a lot of time and resources, being passionate, bold, charismatic, firm, principled, professional, discerning, and diplomatic.

I believe that history is to be made this time round with young African humanists, and I am really happy to have the opportunity to be one of the ones at the forefront of change at this time setting a foundation for generations to come.

Who are personal heroes within the culture?

Historically, there are many personalities that are celebrated in Ghana. Some of my personal heroes are Yaa Asantewaa, an Ashanti Queen mother who, in 1900, led the Ashanti rebellion known as the War of the Golden Stool, also known as the Yaa Asantewaa war, against British colonialism. Her courage and bravery for a woman of her time inspires me.

Our first President of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah is also one of the most renowned figures in Africa. He was born in a small village in Ghana and was able to finish his education in 1 of the most prestigious institutions in the world at Oxford University, returned home a humanist and fought for Ghana's independence from the British, making Ghana the 1st African country to be free from colonial rule in 1957. He was able to transform Ghana by providing us with our first and largest Hydroelectric dam, free basic school education, universities, science centres, Highways, our only International airport, our biggest port, etc. which we enjoy to this day.

In modern times, I have come to admire the work of our current Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, Nana Oye Lithur. Although Christian, even before her Ministerial appointment, as a Lawyer, she has helped fight for the rights of the LGBT community despite serious opposition, worked Pro bono to solve many domestic cases especially those against women and children and is working tirelessly through her Ministry in assisting alleged witches banished from their communities.

What is your favourite scientific discovery ever?

Electricity! It forms such an integral part of modern day living that I cannot imagine where we would be without it.

What philosopher(s), or philosophy/philosophies, best represent your own views about aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and politics?

I do not follow any philosophers in particular because I have not read about any. Instead, various documentaries have helped shape my thoughts on various aspects of life. I am a lover of nature, science and art. I am not interested much in politics and I derive my ethics from logic, constant research and debates amongst friends and members of HAG.

Who seem like the greatest anti-scientific representatives in Ghana?

Religious leaders!

What about the greatest anti-scientific and anti-humanistic movements within Ghana?

Ghana's greatest enemy in the progress of science and technological advancement is religion. It is the only and greatest barrier because it allows for so much wrong to go on with little or no opposition. From faith healing, false prophecies, work ethics, illogical theories, women's oppression, authoritarianism, human rights abuse, bribery and corruption, etc. Ghana is highly religious in the sense that everything that happens is attributed to a deity or superstition or both! If something good happens, it is "By His (God's) grace", if something bad happens, it is "God's will" or "the devil's work" or "a bad spirit" or "angry ancestors". It is almost impossible to argue with people no matter how educated because of this train of thought.

Religion is not a private matter as most religious countries practice. Here, it is allowed everywhere and anyone who stands in the way of their ideology or spiritual leader is an enemy of progress to them. Most homes force relatives to pray at odd hours loudly and some go on the streets at midnight to pray or preach. In the public buses, herbal medicine traders who also

double as Christian pastors are allowed to stand and preach for hours during the journey. At work, highly religious entrepreneurs and Managers force employees to sing and pray before and after work. All official meetings and occasions, private or public begin and end with a prayer. Our entire lives are circulated around prayer and worship of one deity or another. There is little space for intellectual conversations and critical thinking.

What can external associations, collectives, organisations, and even influential individuals, do to assist you in your professional endeavours in Ghana?

I implore all external associations, collectives, organisations to partner with legitimate, active organisations here especially HAG. I advise that not only should they support the work of HAG, but also keep following up on our work. You may support the activities of HAG through bringing in substantive ideas, financial aid, materials such as books, clothes, Resource persons, promoting our activities on social media and mainstream media and influential people can also visit to help promote our work and start fundraising campaigns that would be widely reached.

International women's empowerment, equality, and rights are important to me. What is the status of women regarding empowerment, equality, and rights in Ghana?

I am very happy to be born at a time when women empowerment is starting to benefit the masses. However, there are several factors that are hampering empowerment and gender equality in Ghana, which include Cultural and religious beliefs. I wrote an extensive article regarding this issue in March 2016.

Can humanism improve the status of women in Ghana more than traditional religious structures, doctrines, and beliefs?

Most definitely it can! This is because, humanism emphasises the value of all human beings regardless of gender and promotes wellbeing of people whereas religion and superstition creates an illusion of differences between the gender making men feel superior than women. Humanism also brings about a sense of selflessness and working to better the lives of the deprived in society which are mostly women.

Thank you for your time, Roslyn.

The Problem of 'Faith Schools' in Britain

October 13, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Angelos Sofocleous

In the United Kingdom, a faith school is one that teaches a curriculum based on a particular religious denomination or sect. This means formal associations with religion in education for the young. Whilst the United Kingdom may not be governmentally secular, the UK is a secular culture, and this can be an issue, even a major problem, and continues to be a source of contention among the young, adult, and elderly sub-populations. What are the issues?

In this piece we will try and address the main issues we think are paramount to the discussion about the legitimacy of having faith schools here in the UK. Here is the first: the public at large pay for faith schools, which they do without the consent of other citizens, even citizens who may have no formal religion. Now, why should non-religious citizens pay for religious education rather than a non-discriminatory education, especially for the young and vulnerable sub-populations? In other words, those without a formal religious background, or even at-a-distance advocacy, and with kids, are having their children sometimes indoctrinated into formal religious education as per the general curriculum associated with a particular religious denomination or sect, at times against their wishes.

Indeed, these schools can actively discriminate against parents that are humanist, atheist, agnostic, apatheist, and so on, by selecting children based on religious association. What is the justification? This can limit the number and type of schools available to the non-religious in the United Kingdom. Thus, in case parents want to send their kids to a specific school, they will not be allowed to for reasons based solely on religious grounds, which is a form of religious discrimination against the non-religious in a secular society.

In addition, there are assumptions about the beliefs of children in relation to the beliefs of their parents or guardians. That is, the children without particular ideological stances, economic, political, religious, socio-cultural, and so on, are asserted in the socio-cultural milieu to have the same stances, ideologically, as their parents. This is a logical fallacy, a few in fact such as "argument to the people" with the bandwagon approach, appeal to tradition, appeal to biased authority, and, of course, the fallacy of division.

The argument to the people with the bandwagon approach takes the form of many, even most, people are doing this with their children and, therefore, it is the right thing to do. The appeal to tradition is that "everyone's done it", and "it is tradition", and, thus, we should support faith schools (because it's tradition). Appeal to biased authority comes into effect when the parents, the religious, or religion's membership are taken into account on the decision of the faith school, who are, well, rather biased on the matter. The core of the arguments come from a fallacy of division, which is that the children are a part of a family with one or both parents that are one particular religion (or lacking them) and that means, therefore, children (being a part of the family unit) are a part of that religion (or lack thereof).

It should not be promoted. Children should be encouraged to think for themselves and not just be put into a specific ideology, either if that is promoted by the state or if it's the ideology their parents follow.

Now, in light of the qualms we just details, we will argue for the following necessary approach which will, we believe, stave off the dangers that faith schools invariably pose, a position that will hopefully substantiate as the article develops: (good) schools without religious association should be increased in addition to the decrease of independent faith schools. Schools should be a place for secular education apart from religious denomination or sects. Schools should not advocate for a particular religion. As the Secular Charter of the National Secular Society states: “Religion should play no role in state-funded education whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum settings, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.”

Children do not seem old enough to have ideological stances considered and chosen - let alone have them imposed upon them at youth. In fact, some say there should be no compulsion in religion and others tell the Parable of the Hypocrite, or all speak of the Golden Rule (positive or directive form, negative or prohibitive, or empathic or responsive forms) which seem like good principles to uphold, whether religious/irreligious, and worthy of enactment at the national level down to the individual (the young and the old). In other words, school should be a safe place for children apart from, at times and to a degree, the indoctrination from authority figures, whether educational or parental.

Now, in light of our suggestion just detailed, we want to preempt possible responses. some might argue that children behave better in faith schools as they have better morals. In this manner, faith schools might try to enforce certain moral values, consequently managing to impose the idea that religion is sufficient and necessary for morality. In fact, quite the opposite takes place.

According to the Social and Moral Development index, religion around the world, instead of promoting equality, respect for human rights and toleration of non-religious individuals and institutions, as some say it preaches, it greatly suppresses them and in most cases it punishes them.

Children may be seen as unable to develop their own moral code at a young age, or it's substantially inchoate, but that's no legitimate reason to impose a specific moral code to them. Undoubtedly, they should be taught to respect, tolerate, develop their way of thinking, be open-minded and do not discriminate. And these can not take place in an institution that discriminates on students in its own admission process.

Now, there's another reason why we think the approach we pose should supplant the status-quo: there is little evidence that faith schools will do any good for the whole community. They will decrease, rather than increase, children's knowledge on religious education. Rather than taking religious education through humanist manners, where all religions are equally considered and are treated wholly through a sociological perspective, faith schools will be biased towards their religion, and even if they teach about other religion, there is great doubt that they will not do this in a proper way.

Moreover, there are fears that faith schools will not take the scientific approach in science classes, but instead, teach what they believe themselves to be true. This will happen as, unfortunately, there is little control or inspection on what faith schools can teach. As a result, each faith school will be free to teach children about creationism and abstinence before marriage, and also promote their homophobic and anti-abortion ideologies as facts rather than mere beliefs.

Faith schools definitely have no place in a secular country. Not only this will create segregation between preadolescents and teenagers but they will act like a dogma, imposing to them certain

ideologies, rather than teach them to think for themselves. In addition, education will be put in the hands of people who are not much regulated or controlled by the state, and this creates an unsure future for our society. Faith schools, by their very own nature, will discriminate on children, their parents and teachers, as they will not accept children who themselves or their parents are not members of a specific religion, or will prioritise over religious children or parents. The same applies to teachers.

What makes our suggestion viable? Unlike the status quo, our position is not based on illogical premises and logical fallacies. What is more, our suggestion can, through manifesting secular society in education, restrain outmoded theological immorality against children, and the abuse of educational, parental, and religious authority. Schools should be open to all, have fair admission policies and respect and promote each student's individuality. Trying to dogmatize education will undoubtedly bring disastrous results to our society and bring it a step away from being secular. As a result, a society where faith, not reason, and discrimination, not acceptance, will prevail.

Sodfa Daaji on the Urgent Case of Noura Hussein Hammad in Sudan

May 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sodfa Daaji is the Chairwoman of the Gender Equality Committee and the North Africa Coordinator for the Afrika Youth Movement. Here we talk about Noura Hussein Hammad's urgent case.

The hashtag: #JusticeForNoura.

Daaji's email if you would like to sign: daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *What is the baseline description of Hammad's case?*

Sodfa Daaji: Noura is a 19 years old Sudanese woman, victim of gender based violence, marital rape, domestic violence and forced child marriage at the age of 15 years old. At first, Noura tried to change her fate by escaping to stay with her aunt in Sinnar city, but her father convinced her to come back at home.

He has promised her that the wedding was called off, but she has found herself married against her will. She has spent her in Khartoum. The first three days she stood and didn't want to give up on her right to say no to any intercourse with her husband. Her refusal brought her husband to call his brother and his cousins and on the 4th day he raped her while they were holding her on the floor.

The next day he tried to rape her and, as stated by Noura during a conversation with the activist and director of SEEMA – the organization that is following directly Noura's case in Sudan – she took a knife and told him "I die or I will die tonight," while he replied, "Let's see who will die tonight."

Noura stabbed him twice and escaped to her parent's house. After admitting what she committed, her father took her to the police station.

Jacobsen: *What is the likely outcome for Hammad?*

Daaji: At this point, in my opinion, we should take in consideration different factors. First of all, the condition of human rights in Sudan. We are talking about a case that came out just few days before her trial, and the main reason is behind the way the government is continuously silencing the freedom of press. Secondly, Sudan is under sharia Law and there is not that much space for the judges for interpretation.

Noura was charged under the article 130, even if in Sudan is recognised the marital rape, but they have not taken in consideration her complete case. Another point that I would like to highlight is the fact that she is a woman. We are pressuring for the way women are perceived in the Sudanese society, and how the rape is justified as a normal act, a sexual intercourse between husband and wife.

The fact that Noura stood for her right as a young girl is not taken in consideration. And, most importantly, what is taken in consideration is the fact that a woman dared to say no, and in some

way to break and go against that fate that was written by her parents, and a culture dominated by combined weddings. In Sudan wedding is possible from women's puberty.

Last point is the husband's family: According to Sharia, to resume we can say that "you can pay or you can die". The husband's family is wealthy and they do not need Noura's money to compensate their loss. That is why during the upcoming trial on the 10th of May 2018 they will surely condemn Noura to death penalty.

The lawyers of the husband's family are pressuring for the economic help that Noura's family has received during the years of the wedding. With just this sentence we can see how Noura was and is perceived: an object sold which duty was just to obey to her husband.

Unfortunately, no matter how much we have pressured on the last days, we acknowledge that time is short and in 15 days will be hard for us to save Noura's life. In order to do so we need to reach the Sudanese president, who's bad track record on human rights is not making us positive about her case.

Jacobsen: *How can people get the word out or help out?*

Daaji: We are trying to make some noise with the aim to be heard by United Nations, Africa Union and African head of states, who are in touch with the Sudanese president. That is why we have an official hashtag #JusticeForNoura and a petition is online:

https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/LAWYERS_HUMAN_RIGHTS_ACTIVISTS_SAVE_NORA/?wEvafnb&utm_source=sharetools&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=petition-518899-LAWYERS_HUMAN_RIGHTS_ACTIVISTS_SAVE_NORA&utm_term=Evafnb%2Be n

Anyone is free to join the official FB PAGE

<https://www.facebook.com/Justice-For-Noura-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7-1261677983968203/>

and to join us on twitter @sodfadaaji @ENoMW @AfrikaYM

Last, we want to address a letter to the High Commissioner of OHCHR. That is why, we kindly ask to human's rights organizations to read the letter and to sign it with the name of the organization and the name of a representative of the organization. Individuals as well can join by providing us a short bio, their full name and country of origin.

To receive the letter, feel free to contact me at daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com

I have learned in this last two days that the power is on us, if we just try to work together without borders. We have a voice; we just have to learn how to use it in order to be heard.

Thank you very much for the opportunity, and for taking your time to talk about Noura's case.

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

Sudan: Global solidarity with Noura Hussein Ahmed, child bride forced into marriage

May 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *Noura Hussein Hammad is a new case of a woman with the death penalty. What is her brief story?*

Helie Lucas: She has been given in marriage by her tutor (wali) (in this case, her father—as this is legal in Sudan) at age 16, against her expressed will. She even fled her father's house and lived for three years at her aunt's, hundreds of kilometers away to make it clear she was not accepting this marriage... This actually means that her father signed a marriage contract with the husband to be, eventually out of the presence of the bride to be. The consummation of the marriage may take place at a different time during another ceremony.

After three years, the father sent a message asking her to come back home, stating that he abandoned the idea of marrying her off against her will. He lied about it. When she arrived, she found out that everything was ready for the 2nd stage of the ceremony. She was then forced to go to her husband's house, where she steadily refused to allow for the consummation of the marriage, for several days. The husband then requested several male family members to hold her down and he raped her in their presence. The day after, he tried to rape her again, but she ran to the kitchen and defended herself with a knife. He died.

She then went back to her father's place, but he disowned her and took her to the police. She admitted the facts.

She has been judged and sentenced to death by hanging, for murder.

This is a case of child marriage, forced marriage, gang rape, and killing in self-defense. Sudanese law as well as international law both criminalize forced marriage of underage girls. Rights defenders are calling for an annulment of the judgment and a due process, taking into account all the mitigating circumstances that surround the husband death, including human rights abuse, rape, forced marriage, child marriage. They also ask that the state of terror and mental instability in which she must have fallen after the gang rape be considered.

Jacobsen: *How can people help her in particular and others in similar situations in general with advancing their ability to fight theocratic laws and violations of human rights?*

Helie Lucas: Sudan is a signatory of several international treaties and conventions regarding human rights. It must be held accountable vis a vis international law. It seems that this is the best avenue at the moment to save Noura's life. On the ground, Sudanese rights groups are creating a climate of awareness for women's rights and children rights. There is also a growing mobilization in Muslim countries in support of Noura, which denounce a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam as well as contradictions inherent to the discrepancies between the constitution and some institutions like that of wali (tutor), which deprived women of a number of rights otherwise guaranteed under the Constitution. Internationally AI is demanding a revision of the judgment and due process taking into account the specific circumstances of the husband's murder and the various forms of violence and human rights abuses suffered by Noura.

It is absolutely crucial for supporters outside Sudan to understand that they should first and foremost support the efforts for justice from within. Women's and rights groups in Sudan know how to best fight for Noura's life and for women's and children's rights. They should keep the lead in this struggle. The mere existence of such progressive forces need to be given visibility, their courage in fighting for justice and human rights in such dire circumstances should be given a well-deserved appreciation, and their expertise fully acknowledged. We should also publicly acknowledge Noura's courage, for resisting all pressures and for, in the end, not turning to self-destruction but to self-defense. In similar circumstances, many young women commit suicide or fall into mental illness. She is one of these rare cases, publicly fighting for her freedom and that of other women and girls till the end.

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

Sudan: Marieme Helie Lucas on the Case of Noura Hussein Hammad

May 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Marieme Helie Lucas is an Algerian sociologist, activist, founder of 'Secularism is a Women's Issue,' and founder and former International Coordinator of 'Women Living Under Muslim Laws.' Here we talk about the case of Noura Hammad. Noura has been sentenced to death and has 15 days to appeal the decision.

The hashtag for the campaign: #JusticeForNoura. Email name and country if you would like to sign the petition: daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *How come is this inequality in the law for women?*

Marieme Helie Lucas: As you know, Scott, in many – but not all – instances women in predominantly Muslim contexts are never considered as coming to adult age; and they are considered, in the law, as forever legal minors – it took a long time everywhere (including in the West, of course) to grant women legal equal rights.

As in Noura's case, we can be given in marriage by our matrimonial tutors or wali (most of the time our fathers but otherwise any male guardian in the family); interestingly enough, this wali can even be our youngest son: being a male is what is being considered...

It is important to note that many so-called Muslim countries do not hold these conservative views, do not try to hide patriarchal ideology under the guise of religion, and that their national laws grant women citizens a lot more rights, including the right to sign a contract (marriage or commercial) – and in some countries equal rights in marriage.

However, the global trend in the past few decades has been a political tightening by broad alliances ranging from conservative to extreme right forces, which, among other undemocratic provisions, severely curtail women's rights – legally and otherwise.

Jacobsen: *Why are women having to resort to extreme measures in self-protection from sexual violence in forced marriages?*

Helie Lucas: Certainly because they do not have the protection of the law, but moreover, as can be seen in Noura's case, they do not have the protection of their immediate family either. Religiously sanctioned patriarchy is prevalent everywhere.

So-called honor crimes exist over all the continents (last year, one woman died under the blows of her male partner every three days in France) – even when the law criminalizes such crimes.

Hence the importance of pushing for changes concomitantly – at the same time: at the level of changing laws, of course, but also at the level of changing society, where there is a crucial need for support for women's rights, and for human rights work in general. Right now, funding for women's organizations has drastically fallen, everywhere.

But even where there are organizations for the defense of women, it is difficult for ordinary people to access them. Women are most often left to fend for themselves, and, in desperation,

they usually attempt to their lives; the cases where they physically defend themselves against the aggressor are much fewer.

From age 15, Noura has steadily refused a forced marriage for four years before taking arms against the husband imposed on her against her expressed will, and she only resorted to self-defense after having suffered a first public rape in the name of marital rights and being threatened with a second one.

She is a hero. She deserves to be supported the world over.

Jacobsen: *How does the family, community, society, and religion conspire to restrict women?*

Helie Lucas: I think I answered that question first. What I want to underline here is that, against all these regressive forces, there are – everywhere, always, I can testify to it, very courageous women’s organisations and progressive individuals, male and female, who stand up for universal human rights at the risk of their liberty and sometimes of their life; they affirm that this human rights stand in no way contravene to their interpretation of their religion; that in no way does it contradict their being deeply rooted in their local culture, nor does it conflict with their national identity.

These voices are rarely heard outside the national context and they need to be heard, in order to confront ideological simplifications of ‘they’ (barbaric ones) and ‘us’ (civilized ones) that still prevail.

The danger in Noura’s case is that it would be used to stigmatize specific countries (‘backward’ Africa) or a religion (‘violent’ Islam) and reinforce racism; this can be avoided by simply supporting the work of Sudanese and African local human rights and women’s rights advocates and organisations, by giving them the visibility and credentials they hardly ever get.

It will also help progressive westerners to overcome their ‘white guilt’. We need them now: they should not avoid supporting Noura for fear of being labeled ‘Islamophobic’ or ‘racist’. Support the existing local women’s rights and human rights work and the young courageous Noura.

One cannot even think that Noura deserves fewer rights than any other human being, just because she is Sudanese and was raised in a Muslim context: this is sheer nonsense... No cultural relativism here, please...

Jacobsen: *What is the current state of Hammad’s case?*

Helie Lucas: Noura will be delivered a sentence today; she admitted to her crime in self-defence and willingly went to the police station with her father to explain the circumstances; women’s rights organisations which have taken up her defence in Sudan think she will be sentenced to death today, but still hope international pressure will save her life and avoid execution.

She has 15 days to appeal the judgment.

Jacobsen: *How can people best help her, and others like her in the future?*

Helie Lucas: Support local organisations standing in her defence – follow their advice, they know the context best; write to Noura in the prison; alert your local human rights and women’s rights organisations; send letters to Sudanese authorities; and to the African Union, the UN and special rap on violence against women; speak to the media about the case: 15 days is a very short time to save Noura’s life...

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

The hashtag: #JusticeForNoura. Again, the email if you would like to sign:
daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com.

Sudan: How to help Noura in Sudan and similar cases?

May 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen interviews Marieme Helie Lucas on how best to help Noura in Sudan and other similar cases

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *How are the gender roles and legal rights different and unequal for men and women in many Islamic theocracies?*

Marieme Helie Lucas: I feel that your question presupposes that so-called Muslim countries - or Muslim majority countries - are automatically theocracies; that is definitely not the case, they are mostly democracies, technically speaking. And as far as knowing whether they are 'Islamic' i.e. really in conformity with Islam, or not – it would be for theologians to say so... This is why I do not use the term 'Islamic' which refers to a doctrine, a philosophy, an ideology, a vision of the world, a faith, and I use the term 'Muslim', which refers to human beings who claim faith in this ideology, and to what they do in the name of their faith. We are not here debating at the level of ideas, but of actions, laws, practices, i.e. of sociology and politics. In actual fact Muslim majority countries are anything but homogenous; they range from theocracies to democracies, from ultra conservative to socialist in name.

The rights granted to citizens in general and to women in particular therefore vary from country to country; factors that account for these differences are essentially political, economical – far more than religiously grounded.

If you read the Koran – or the Bible for that matter -, you will find both the god of wrath and punishment, and the god of mercy and tolerance. You can endlessly oppose progressive and conservative theologians in Islam, all armed with their antagonistic quotes from the holy book... But isn't it similar to what happens in Christianity, between those who have a progressive reading of the text and their opponents?

The problem indeed is political: *who* makes *what* political use of religion, *where* and *when*, in which circumstances - that is the real question. What is the balance of forces between those - and the defenders and advocates of secularism is the next question. This is what really determines the status of women, among others. In Muslim contexts like anywhere else.

The real problem is that for some time already, ultra conservative political forces have been steadily growing and they are now taking over in many regions in the world (a good number of countries are led by the far-right in Europe at the moment - with Catholics and Orthodox Christian fundamentalists next to it -, and both far-right and evangelicals are rising hand in hand in Trump's America, to start with). The particular form the rise of the extreme right is taking in some countries is through religions (See Modi's India with the rise of Hindu fundamentalists to power and the ensuing backlash on minorities, see also the Buddhist far-right terror in Myanmar and Sri Lanka). This is definitely the case in Muslim majority contexts – but this should be analyzed, not as a specificity of "Islam", but as part of the broad rise of the far-right the world over.

Indeed, in predominantly Muslim contexts, gender roles and legal rights are different and unequal for men and women – but more so under conservative governments and less so under democratic ones; and even less so in socialist regimes. Even though Islam was still the religion of the vast majority of people in Libya, Iraq, Syria or in the Central Asia Republics, women had the right to vote (sometimes long before some European women did, French women for instance only gained voting rights in 1945, i.e. after WWII; as for Swiss women, a last canton gave them voting rights in the last decade – would you believe it?), girls went to school (virtually 100% in primary schools in Libya, and those who went to university received state grants). Meanwhile, in some rich oil countries in the Arabic peninsula – and not just in impoverished isolated Muslim communities in Asia and Africa – women were secluded and maintained in illiteracy... In the so-called ‘Muslim world’, one can find all the political shades vis a vis women: for instance, from quasi equality in marriage laws to the most horrendous submission of women to their male relatives, - father and husband first and foremost.

If we want to fight it, we better be clear that we are being confronted to a far-right movement working under the guise of religion. In our case it is Islam, but in other cases it is Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc... To believe that ‘Islam’ is the cause of inequity between men and women is to look at the tip of the iceberg. At the moment, for instance, many countries in Europe are facing reiterated attempts at curtailing reproductive rights, from Spain to Poland, you name it...

Would you say religion is the cause or would you name the far-right forces (eventually backed by Christian fundamentalists) that use Christianity and fear of god to prevent women’s access to contraception and abortion?

Let me clarify one thing: this is *NOT* a defense of ‘Islam’, I’m just trying to position ourselves better in understanding the political forces we are confronting, whether or not they pretend to represent Islam. We should not fall into the trap they set for us.

Jacobsen: *What are the rights violations and gender inequality in the situation for Noura Hussein Hammad?*

Helie Lucas: Traditionally, ‘marriage’ in Muslim contexts usually takes place in two parts: one is the signature of the marriage contract and the other is the consummation of the marriage – these are two occasions of festivities. The time span between these events can be from a few days to a few years. In Noura’s case, it was a few years. She was married against her will, i.e. her father signed the contract as her legal tutor, her *wali*, when she was 16. This is legal in Sudan and in a number of Muslim countries, especially those following the Maliki school of thought - but not in all predominantly Muslim countries. The bride does not even have to be present during this signature, as she is ‘represented’, as a minor, by her *wali*. Then Noura was sent to her husband’s house for the consummation of the marriage when she was 19. She never flinched in her refusal of this marriage. Both Sudanese laws and international law prohibit forced marriages. The problem is that it comes in conflict with the institution of *wali*, which maintains women in a status of forever legal minority, with male tutors signing contracts in women’s place. The institution of *wali* is specific to the Maliki ritual that prevails mostly in North Africa; it is not practiced in all schools of thought in Islam.

Although forced marriages are generally prohibited under the law of the land, not all countries take it to heart to implement these laws.

This is also a child marriage. However under the growing influence of fundamentalist preachers, the actual – and sometimes also the legal – age of marriage has been decreasing to actual puberty of girls; in many places today, girls are married off as early as age 9 or 10.

The second violation committed against Noura is rape – and not just, if I may say, ‘marital rape’, but it is gang rape, as - in order to crush her physical resistance -, husband sought help from several of his male relatives in order to pin her down and hold her arms and legs while he was raping her in front of them. From what her lawyers said, she had bruises and scars from the fight. The day after this horrendous ‘marriage’, when the ‘husband’ tried to rape her again, she defended herself with a knife and killed him. She then went to her father’s house, but he disowned her and took her to the police.

She was convicted with murder and sentenced to death. With no consideration for the circumstances, and for a case of self defense. Hence Amnesty International’ recent demand that this judgment be annulled and for a more equitable trial to take place.

Apparently, Sudan, like some other Muslim countries – not all – have a legal provision for ‘blood money’: the family of the victim can demand a financial compensation for their loss, - rather than a death sentence for the culprit. In Noura’s case, the late husband’s family refused compensation and demanded the death sentence.

Jacobsen: *How can gender roles advance within Islam? How can progressivism provide a better foundation for the rights of women compared to conservatism and traditional religion?*

Helie-Lucas: I am afraid that it is not ‘within Islam’ that we should all fought together for advancing women’s rights – but within each of our societies. I feel no responsibility for changing Islam from within, or Christianity or any other religion for that matter. As a citizen, I feel responsibility for changing laws in democratic ways, towards more equality between all human beings, regardless of class, age, sex, beliefs, etc.... As a secularist, I do not want to live under non-voted un-changeable a-historical supposedly-divine laws. This is the essence of democracy. Many activists in predominantly Muslim contexts work hard and take enormous risks to fight conservatism, to promote progressive ideas – including for women’s status in society - , to change regressive laws. In Algeria, women have been fighting since 1984 to put an end to the institution of *wali*, so that women be finally considered legal adults and not forever minors who cannot enter into a contract, by themselves, without a male tutor. So far, they have not succeeded. The courageous women’s rights organization “20 ans Barakat !” (‘20 years is enough!’) promoted this struggle with a powerful clip that you all should watch in order to realize how many women (and men) are engaged into this type of struggle, on the ground, in our countries.

Vidéo here: WACHDAK :collectif “20 ans barakat”par www.algerie-femme.com ...

► 4:33

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNkHmEN0III>

The clip shows for instance, women’s demonstrations in the capital-city, Algiers, during which fundamentalist threw home-made bombs at demonstrators.

These initiatives need to be supported – not led - from the outside. In Sudan, on the forefront are the women’s rights and human rights organizations that are leading the struggle for Noura’s rights. They do so at great risk for themselves.

These progressive forces exist everywhere in Muslim contexts, just as they do elsewhere. But they are little considered outside their countries – especially in the West which globally tends to

ignore them. Noura's case is a good opportunity to reach out in solidarity to progressive, feminist, humanist, secular forces in our parts of the world. It is an opportunity to create working links that would last even after we save Noura's life - as I am now convinced we will, collectively, manage to do.

USA: The Existential Risks and Trauma of Leaving a Cult

May 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He 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 greater their self-identity was broken and reformed as part of the group. In other words, group members' existence was attached to monastic identity, name, and position within the spiritual-organizational hierarchy.

Cloistered spiritual groups are most undemocratic and unequal. The superior, powerful members are those closest to the leaders. Group members learn quickly how to please and fight their way to maintain or climb up the spiritual-corporate ladder. It's a kind of spiritual-ego formed within the context of the organization.

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 a lower risk of failing to reintegrate into society outside.

When you think about cults, the aim of these groups and the members who join them, is to break down the old self-world identity. Labeled as spiritual training, the aim of groups based on ideological thought-reform leads to abuses of its members: whether political, social, or religious groups.

For religious cult-groups, the aim is to remold members into the image of the God, Guru, or perfection as idealized in the spiritual practices of the group. In cults with an Eastern enlightenment-bent, the path is purportedly divinely designed to bring follower-practitioners to perfection, to realize self as Self, soul, or God or Nirvana.

The practice and progress to the aim are measured by degrees of selfless service and obedience to the spiritual teacher, and distrusting self. Through the aims and ideals of the group's spiritual training, members allow themselves to be destroyed, broken, and in the old self's place a new self is created, fashioned to fit the group.

This is not a secret. It's openly discussed by members that the outside world is dangerous, evil, or deluded and inside the group, close to the master-teacher is spiritual safety and illumination. Psychologically cult groups break the member's sense of self and then reframe follower's self-world identity.

Essentially members surrender their existence (their self-world image) to the authority of someone who claims to know what is best for the disciple-follower. For members who've lived for years and decades inside, psychologically these groups, the damage is irreparable.

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 to leave the group for many reasons. In the SRF ashrams, for example, we were taught that as ordained monastics we were somehow special, were chosen by God and Guru to help with his divine dispensation of SRF teachings and meditation techniques.

Our belief in our specialness made us feel superior and powerful—with the weight and authority of Creator of the Universe behind us, who could ultimately be against us?

Surrender and obedience to external authority become easy when you are told you are special, superior, and forerunners of a new race of spiritual beings destined to raise the consciousness of humanity and the world.

The darker side of our belief in this story is that if we ever left the guru-teacher or broke our vows of loyalty then we were told we would not only risk losing everything spiritually but would possibly have to wander in darkness, suffer, lost in delusion (Maya) for seven future lifetimes (future human incarnations).

That is heavy fear and pressure to stay physically and psychologically with the group and its leader-teacher.

There is a certain degree of an annihilation of self that occurs upon entering, staying, and psychologically leaving the cult doctrine. 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.

We humans have a deep need to create meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. Our cultures (cults: familial, social, economic, political, philosophical or theological) breed and offer meaning, which we seldom take time to examine carefully.

I think this is why existential philosophers, like Nietzsche, declared God is dead but acknowledged the fact that the natural world was a nightmare of horror tinged with moments of art and beauty.

When a member of the cult group, that pretends to offer the ultimate answers to life and 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: If a member of the ashram left or was asked by group leaders to leave the ashram, and yet they didn't psychologically leave behind the SRF monastic ideology, then leaving physically didn't make much if any change in their cultic worldview.

Perhaps, the members who left physically but not psychologically have to struggle with guilt and shame of not being good enough to stay, even if they "chose" to leave.

There are numerous former monks who I talked with after I left, though they physically left the ashram, clung psychologically to the Yogi-cultic doctrines of the teacher Yogananda, SRF, or kept revolving their worldview around devotion to God and Guru and spiritual liberation through yoga meditation.

Some former ashram members told me that 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 that is somehow meaningful and real beyond doubt.

When their understanding is these mystical experiences (mystical interpretations of the natural world), which were implanted into our minds in the first place by the external authority, teachings, or teacher, how would they know that is kundalini in his spine?

Didn't some external authority tell him that and give him that distinction and interpretation? He's psychologically trapped in the teacher's ideology, though he left the ashram a decade ago.

Clearly many former cult members have not "left" the cult psychologically. They don't leave behind the underlying premises that brought, kept, and controlled them while they physically lived inside the cultic group. Many continue to believe and practice the underlying teachings or doctrines of the external authority.

My own leaving psychologically unfolded gradually. For years and perhaps a decade or more starting while I lived in the SRF ashram. Then when upon physically leaving the group I at first believed that my reason for leaving was flaws of organized religion, of imperfect humans.

I continued to meditate and believe in the underlying premises (God, guru, meditation powers and energies) espoused by SRF and mystical, spiritual yoga meditation or enlightenment. Though I could not make sense at first of why I failed to interpret my experiences as special or mystical and enlightening as the teacher and group had promised.

Eventually, 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. In the U.S., there is an underlying premise in society everybody should be able to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and not expect anyone, certainly not society, to take care of us.

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 seems to be no end to the supply of members joining and leaving 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. But there seems to be a little more public conversation 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 members to be independently interdependent; to be part of a supportive community not conditioned by conforming to a set ideology is, I believe, extremely important for social progress and for the survival of the natural world of which humans are part.

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 join, knowingly or unknowingly, for the promise of spiritual training, which begins by breaking down the ego, self-identity. There's much trust placed in God, Guru-teacher, and spiritual truth.

When the promises turn out to be false, that breaks members too. As the member's self-identity softens, breaks down, the member submits to the cult's reforming, reshaping into a new self-identity.

The break-down of self at first can often feel exhilarating, elating, ecstatic, liberating. But this breakdown and reshaping of self-identity is at best a waste of time, at worst dangerous. Members may never regain the lost years in the group: time wasted, not spent building useful skills, relationships, family, career, intellect, and so on.

Many former members never really seem to get over their trauma. Many turn inward on themselves: to guilt, shame, or depression, sometimes suicide. Again, the guilt and self-world

break-down is part of the conditioning, or spiritual training, underlying membership in cultic groups.

Members blame the victim, even if it's them. The underlying premises are the spiritual teachings and teachers are perfect and if anyone doesn't find that perfection in them then it is the member's fault.

They are not spiritual enough or too blinded by ego-self and so on. Many former members are perhaps damaged for the remainder of their life. Often current and former members have huge trust issues: lack of trust in self and others.

A need for existential meaning and a need to seek answers from external authority. I have been working for years since I left the ashram cult to rebuild self-world identity and regain the relationships that I had abandoned with family and friends.

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.*

USA: Interview with Amitabh Pal, Freedom From Religion Foundation

May 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Amitabh Pal is the Director of Communications for the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). Here we talk about his work and views with the FFRF..

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *How did you become involved in the secularist movements?*

Amitabh Pal: I've been at the intersection of progressive politics and journalism my entire professional life. The separation of state and church has been always of importance to me. (I'm extremely proud of the fact that the three countries I'm from — the United States, India and Germany — are all secular.) We were ardent defenders of secularism at The Progressive magazine, where I was at for a long time. One of the main projects we had during the Bush years, for instance, was calling out his “messianic militarism” and the damage it did the world as a chief cause of the Iraq War. We also had regular exposés of the Religious Right and its harmful influence. Anyone who cares for a better society has to work for secularism, and this is something I've done with zeal.

Jacobsen: *How did you become involved in and work at the Freedom From Religion Foundation?*

Pal: After many years at The Progressive, I was in the mode of transitioning out. I had worked with FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor as the editor of The Progressive's op-ed service (the Progressive Media Project), for which she had written a number of columns. So when I saw an opening at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, an organization I was familiar with and deeply respected, I immediately applied for the position. I was delighted when, after the selection process, I was offered the job.

Jacobsen: *Now, as an important footnote to this conversation, you are highly educated, which includes two master's degrees. One in journalism; another in political science, these are important accomplishments. How does this inform your work as the director of communications at FFRF?*

Pal: Obviously, the journalism degree impacts and informs all that I accomplish here at FFRF. The writing and editing I engage in were seeded at UNC-Chapel Hill (Go Tar Heels!). The coursework there gave me the skills I'm applying at the job day in and day out. But the political science degree has been very handy, too. The work we do is by its very nature political, and having a good grasp of the underlying dynamics helps me be a better writer and editor. I have a special interest in international issues, and so I've written blogs and press releases dealing with such matters (for example on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo). The more you learn, the more it comes in useful.

Jacobsen: *Also, you wrote at the Progressive for many years. How did you work there? What did you do? What were the results of your writing and work there? (What did you learn?)*

Pal: I was at The Progressive for almost two decades — and it taught me a whole lot. I started off as the editor of the Progressive Media Project, an op-ed service associated with The

Progressive that sends out columns on a regular basis to hundreds of newspapers all over the United States and abroad. This prepared me not only to write and edit on a wide range of subjects but also to quickly turn around pieces, qualities that have come in very handy here at FFRF. Then, for more than a decade I was Managing Editor of The Progressive magazine itself. I specialized in doing long-form interviews for the magazine, interviewing such folks as Mikhail Gorbachev and Jimmy Carter, among many others. I wrote a lot of web columns, feature articles and book reviews. And, certainly, I further honed my editing skills. It was an incredible experience at The Progressive.

Jacobsen: *You have a Hindu background. You can understand the religion and potentially the mix-up with politics too. The ways in which religion get involved in politics are complicated, but, nonetheless, they differ on a number of metrics and in different nations. Hinduism is prominent in India and mixed up with the Modi leadership.*

If you have any knowledge and can compare and contrast between the mix-up of Evangelical Christian and Roman Catholic Christian religion in American politics and Hindu religion in Indian politics, how do these differ? How are these similar? How are these the same?

Pal: I could go on and on about this! This is because I am literally writing a book on the populist majoritarianism of President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Their attempted dismantling of the secular setup in their countries as a part of their political projects is a big focus of my book. The Religious Right In India is in command right now, just like its counterpart in the United States. The ironic thing is that in spite of its supposed hatred of Islam and Christianity, the Hindu political movement is trying to make Hinduism like these religions by imposing a central dogma and belief on a faith that has historically lacked these features. The result is proving disastrous — both for the religion itself and for India at large. The implications of the world's two largest democracies heading in a calamitous direction should make us all very worried.

Jacobsen: *Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion based on the conversation today? Any updates to the communications activities of the FFRF?*

Pal: The Freedom From Religion Foundation is experiencing a tremendous growth spurt, and this is reflected on the communications front. We have a new TV interview show, “Freethought Matters,” which is broadcast in the Madison area and is posted on our YouTube channel. Among the people we’ve interviewed are Steven Pinker and New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg. We have a weekly Facebook Live “Ask an Atheist” feature, which can also be seen on YouTube. We have a pithy “Newsbite” segment discussing the highlight of our week that we post online. Our long-running radio show is going strong. (Check all of this out at www.ffrf.org.) And our endeavors and triumphs in the service of freethought are getting more and more attention from major media entities and local outlets all over the country. Exciting times indeed!

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

PLACE 2: ADVICE FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED YOUTH

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 1 – IQ 199: 1-in-Several-Billion

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

May 15, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Gifted and talented youth decades ago did not have as much support as they do now. Gifted and talented have tremendous amounts of support now, but can fall through the cracks.

They are spotted more often, but fall through the cracks. That leaves room for parents and gifted and talented youths to dodge those cracks that they might fall into in their life course.

Let's jump into your history, through some non-standard 'power tests,' you seem to score in the top or at the top of the intelligence test score scales with an IQ of 199 at the highest performance – if assumed credence to these alternative, untimed tests.

You seem to be one of the most gifted people in the Western hemisphere on an average day.

Richard Rosner: Alright, so – not every gifted kid grows up to be a gifted adult. And it's arguable whether or not I've grown up to be a gifted adult. I've been a pretty successful TV writer, but I don't know if that qualifies as giftedness or just extremely hackiness.

But by any standard, I qualified as a gifted child because I taught myself to read super early.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 2 – Age and Ethnic, and Class, Differences

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

May 22, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What age?

Rick Rosner: Super early for back then, 3 3/4, I was ready and able to read anything, just any adult stuff. There are stories about me at the barber shop reading the magazine and asking what premature ejaculation is. And me at around the same age reading a magazine while at the table when my mom had the Bridge club over, and asking her what tampons were. And back then, very few kids came into kindergarten being able to read.

Now, there are entire school districts where highly invested parents make sure their kids learn stuff super early.

Jacobsen: Are there ethnic differences and socio-economic class differences for these kids – then and now?

Rosner: Sure, people of different ethnicities are always sitting on a knife edge of falling into trouble. If you're a black kid from Chicago, you can be gifted as hell and still get shot, still live in some terrible neighbourhood.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 3 – James Flynn

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 1, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You're pointing out tremendous amounts of stress growing up. You pointed to one major event can cut you out of the story altogether. What about small things that can small, but persistent, effects over time such as stereotype threat?

Rick Rosner: If you look at James Flynn, he's the Flynn Effect guy. he says most of the differences for IQ are due to upbringing and environment.

Jacobsen: What percent? What ratio?

Rosner: I don't know. And pinning down percentages with that stuff is a ticket to ugly arguments. You can go ahead and say 50/50 to 40/60 or 60/40 one way or the other. You can say that the outcomes are better if you grow up in a sophisticated, educated, and affluent, safe household.

Jacobsen: They talk about asynchronous development. Kids emotionally at their age, but intellectually say they're 5 and at the intellectual age of 10. Even when they grow up, and they are in their circumstance, they will be in substandard housing, poorer nutrition, worse schools, and high stress environments and may not necessarily emotionally understand what's going on or be able to emotionally cope with the circumstance – even though they have the high ability.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 4 – John Hughes Movies

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 8, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: To start your study of these kids, you want to watch John Hughes movies. He's said that his classic movies of the 80s like *Sixteen Candles*, *Weird Science*, *Breakfast Club* – probably have more characters in them that are asynchronously developed than any super popular movies ever. You can probably throw *Lucas* in there. The 80s were kind of the era for high school movies and movie characters who were frustrated because they were smart, but immature, and didn't know how to work around that.

Hughes talked about the difference between geeks and nerds, where a nerd is going to be a little weird and off for their whole life. But a geek just needs a couple years to level off physically and emotionally to where they are intellectually.

But from what you're saying, a geek who doesn't get the right kind of support or doesn't develop the right life strategies could freeze into a nerd, permanently maladjusted and at odds with society.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 5 – Nerd Societies

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 15, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We have issues to do with high levels of dropout, low levels of performance, and high levels of diagnoses for ADHD for boys.

Rick Rosner: Before you move onto this whole other thing, society has become very geeky and nerdy, where I'm sure there's still lots of schools where the football players run the schools and nerds get thrown in the garbage can on a semi-daily basis, but the overall culture is more accepting and embracing of geeks and nerds than it was in the 80s and before.

I was born in 1960. People born in my era were given a lot of IQ tests. I was an early reader and good at math, but there was very little in the way. there were few enriched educational opportunities. Occasionally, I would have a teacher that saw I needed more challenging material and they would set me up with that stuff, and that would keep me out of trouble for a year or two.

One of those teachers, I had for 5th and 6th grade. it gave me two years on not fucking up. But back then, the default assumption was that everybody was being served well by public schools. Most people went to public schools at least where I went to public school in Colorado, and people assumed everything was fine and everybody turned out okay.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 6 – Mom Doesn't Know

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 22, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: My mom didn't know what to do with me. She was afraid of not properly dealing with a kid with, a gifted kid, a kid with gifts. She thought the best way to deal with that was to treat me like a normal kid in the hopes that I would turn out normally, which to some extent was not the worst thing.

I was tested in first grade to see if I should be kicked up a grade. And I had the academic and intellectual skills to do it, but then they saw me on the playground as a loner, and correctly realized that putting me with kids a year older than me would've further isolated me socially.

So, and then going to school in the sixties and seventies in America, at least, there was not – the era in general and me specifically – there was not a lot of push to excel academically beyond getting good grades. It was nothing in terms of academic push compared to now. I didn't get homework until junior high, and it was minimal.

There were few AP classes offered and few people took them. The highest you could go in math in school was calculus, and few people made it that far. And there was much less competition to get into selected colleges, which meant that people didn't have to work very hard at all to demonstrate academic performance strong enough to get into a really college.

The acceptance rate for Harvard during my era was four times the current acceptance rate. 20% of applicants got in compared to 5% now. So, my generation was not pushed enough and the current generation is probably pushed too hard.

Also, it was much less socially acceptable to be a geek. Geeks got bullied and persecuted more. And didn't get to go out with girls, the current era is much, much more accepting of geeks and nerds and nerd interests.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 7 – Bullying

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 1, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: Now, even though there's still a lot of bullying and there are new ways to bully people online, it's a much more, I think, diverse personality types are more accepting. One reason is that people who were once geeks have completely reshaped the world through technology, and everybody enjoys the fruits of technology, and entertainment that focuses on stuff that was once geeky like superheroes is some of the most carefully and expensively wrought entertainment there is.

And thanks to social media, people are less isolated and can find support from each other even if their social situation at school isn't great, but I think overall people are better informed. I mean yea everybody looks like an idiot on their cell phones.

But I think people are a little bit more grown-up because there is more information and people have more information about life. Back in my childhood, even TV was useless at telling you anything real, there were shows like or classic/beloved shows like the Brady Bunch or the Partridge family.

They barely touched on any real issues and offered no help or no real help with how to deal with stuff. They offered easy situations and platitudes, and were just kind of terrible to watch because they were so lazy.

[End of recorded material]

Advice to Gifted and Talented Youth 8 – SAT and ACT

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 8, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What can students and parents do to prepare for the SAT, which is becoming less important, and the ACT, which is becoming more important?

Rick Rosner: The SAT is becoming less important because it measures a bunch of skills that are not needed in other areas of school, whereas the ACT tests knowledge that you should be picking up in your class. That's why, I would guess, there is an increasing preference for the ACT.

For both of them, or either of them, the best thing you can do is to take as many practice tests as you possibly can so that you are as familiar as you can get with the materials and the questions that they will throw at you.

If you can, you should take 12-20 complete practice tests. You don't have to take them all at once – take them section by section when you have 25 or 30 minutes. You should really end up work. You will gradually see improvement. That strategy is a little more applicable to the SAT. The SAT doesn't test knowledge as it measure the ability to think on your feet a little bit in SAT terms, whereas the ACT measures knowledge that you picked up in English, Math, Science, and a whole bunch of science and math for taking a whole bunch of ACTs.

If you already have a decent grounding in those subjects, it will at least give you a good picture about the landscape of the knowledge that they're testing. So, where my advice for the SAT is to take 12-20 practice tests, ACT maybe do half of that and supplement in between the practice tests studying the material that you didn't get right on each test.

What you didn't get right should point you in the direction of where you need to study more, what goes along with this is not paying \$100/hr times 20 or 30 or 40 hours, or however many hours, for a private tutor, you can get all sorts of feedback from SAT and ACT books on why the correct answers are correct.

You don't need somebody walking you through everything all of the time. You definitely don't need somebody sitting there picking up the hourly charges while you take practice tests. You can have a tutor in for an hour or two once a month or every six weeks to help to get you to go through some of the stuff that you got wrong, didn't understand, or don't know how to tackle on the tests, but it shouldn't be a weekly thing.

You should be able to get more taking practice tests than sitting with a tutor going through problems, especially on the SAT. The SAT, it helps if you see thousands of SAT math problems and you know every kind of problem that they throw at you.

You may not be able to solve every one of them, but at least you'll have an idea about whether you want to skip the problem or not.

[End of recorded material]

PLACE 3: THE HUMANIST

Secular Activism and Latino Nones: An Interview with Dr. Juhem Navarro-Rivera

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 23, 2017

“[T]here are more people using their secular label as a way to move forward and counteract the attacks on women, the attacks on science, and the attacks on facts, based on what their secular values are telling them.”

Dr. Juhem Navarro-Rivera is a political scientist and a humanist. He has a specialty in American and comparative political behavior, which provides a unique insight into the political issues of the day. More specifically he is interested in the political behavior of the religious “nones,” Latinos, and Latino nones.

TheHumanist.com: You have expertise in the political behavior of the nones (those who answer “none” when asked for their religious affiliation or identity). In terms of the activism taking place since the inauguration, what have the Nones been up to with the new Trump administration?

Dr. Juhem Navarro-Rivera: In previous years or recent times political activism among the nones has been related to issues of church and state, of science, and religion. These are the bread and butter for the secular movement. What I have seen lately is some real movement in political activism with people running for office who are openly secular and running for office without running away from those [secular/atheist] labels. The [Freethought Equality Fund](#) has been finding some of those voices. But even at these early stages of the administration, which is a little more than two months old, we are seeing a lot of movement in terms of [secular Americans seeking office]. A lot of interest in mobilization.

I live in Washington, DC, and was able to see multiple secular organizations marching in the Women’s March on January 21. I know that prominent secular people and secular activists are getting very involved in the March for Science (April 22) and also the People’s Climate March (April 29). I am seeing some level of activism in an openly secular way—not necessarily just secular people who are members of other [non-secular] organizations working in their activism.

I can include myself. For my day job, I work for a progressive organization. I do certain political activism in that way, but not necessarily identifying as a secular person. There are secular people, or secular-minded people, who work for non-secular organizations. But now I get the impression that there are more people using their secular label as a way to move forward and counteract the attacks on women, the attacks on science, and the attacks on facts, based on what their secular values are telling them.

TheHumanist.com: Let’s talk about Latino nones in the United States. What are the demographics, and how has their political activism looked?

Juhem: Most of the big surveys, by which I mean those by the Pew Research Center, the Pew Hispanic Trends Project, or Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), find that about one in five Latinos identify in some way as secular (atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular). The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, which I worked on as an analyst, found that 12 percent of Latinos were nones. So there has been incredible growth in just under a decade.

Certainly this has been driven, like the general population, by young people. PRRI estimates that 30 percent to one-third of Latinos under thirty claim no religious identification. That is an interesting fact because one thing we know about political participation in general is younger people tend to be less involved for various reasons.

In general, Latinos tend to support the Democratic Party candidates over the Republican Party candidates. That holds true even more so for Latino nones. I don't have data for 2016 in terms of race and religion polling, but I know that PRRI, where I was employed and worked on surveys a few years ago, found that Latino nones were more likely to vote for Obama in 2012 than Latinos in general. We certainly know that Latinos nones, like nones in general, are more liberal than the general population. Latinos generally lean heavily Democrat in voting, and the Latino nones are even more so.

In terms of the new presidential administration, for many young Latinos, the main issues are immigration and the deportations that have been carried out.

But to what extent secular Latinos are disentangling their Latino identity, as a racial and ethnic group of the United States, or whether their religious identity is a factor into that, I am not sure. As a Latino myself, though not under thirty, that is something that I have to deal with. I've had the Latino concern about what is happening to my fellow Latinos who may be of any religion, but feel under attack by the administration.

What I think is, and I don't have a lot of evidence for this, is that young people, particularly young Latinos, were more likely to vote for Bernie Sanders than Hillary Clinton, even though Clinton won the overall Latino vote. I think this is consistent with the evidence that they are more liberal than their peers, and the younger secular cohort are even more liberal than older seculars.

Latino nones are looking for a space. They're looking for a space not only for political activism within the Latino community and within the larger secular movement. I think it's a two-pronged battle. So I think some of them that are politically minded may have to decide where they want to put their energy.

#NormalizeAtheism: An Interview with Mark Nebo, Steve Shives, and Sincere Kirabo

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

April 4, 2017

Atheists continue to be stigmatized by the general public and regarded as immoral and unapologetic “sinners” not worthy of trust or respect. A new initiative underway called #NormalizeAtheism seeks to increase visibility and encourage dialogue to challenge misconceptions about what it means to be an atheist.

Be Secular founder Mark Nebo started the #NormalizeAtheism campaign in 2014 and more recently Steve Shives (atheist video blogger) and Sincere Kirabo (American Humanist Association’s social justice coordinator) have signed on as managers to assist the development and expansion of the campaign. I spoke with Nebo, Shives, and Kirabo about their promotion of atheist awareness through social media and apparel.

TheHumanist.com: How did the #NormalizeAtheism campaign get started?

Mark Nebo: I started it in 2014 after really taking to heart David Silverman’s message in a speech about using the term “atheist” openly to help make it the norm. I initially started using the hashtag myself and a few others caught on. Once the Richard Dawkins Foundation retweeted me, it went viral. I made the first batch of awareness shirts and sold about 200 of them. The campaign didn’t really become a campaign until the fall of 2016 when Sincere, Steve, and I got together and decided to try and take it to the next level.

TheHumanist.com: Why is the #NormalizeAtheism campaign important?

Steve Shives: There are more people who identify as atheists than ever before, and an even larger number of people who don’t call themselves atheists, but who also don’t claim any particular religious affiliation. And yet there’s still a great deal of stigma attached to being avowedly non-religious, and especially to being an atheist. #NormalizeAtheism is a way for us to do our part toward reducing that stigma. I don’t want to speak for the others, but I feel safe saying that Mark, Sincere, and myself are all believers in secularism, which means that society should be religiously pluralistic but that no particular religion should be treated better under the law or given any special advantages. People of all religions, and people of no religion, including atheists, should be free and equal. #NormalizeAtheism is a way of pushing us toward that goal where atheists are concerned.

TheHumanist.com: Could you elaborate on the power of narratives and representation when it comes to society?

Sincere Kirabo: Media and culture thrive off narratives—established values and attitudes, as well as social group representation and stereotypes, are all influenced by this aspect of human socialization. Author and academic Robert McKee rightly points out, “Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world.” The stories we are repeatedly told and believe shape our worldviews.

Most commonly accepted beliefs rely on mainstream narratives. The problem is that dominant group input is a key factor in what stories become routine and lodged in the cultural imagination.

This means there is a tendency to normalize the ideas, concerns, anxiety, preferences, and agenda of majority group representation at the expense of other groups who, as a consequence, become misrepresented or marginalized.

Representation matters. This is why atheist activists fight against legislation influenced by religious assumptions. This is why atheist activists oppose organizations like The Good News Club that try to indoctrinate children in public schools. This is why atheist activists confront various expressions of religious bigotry so well-integrated into society that it's considered normal. This is why it's vital that atheists are brazen in our pushback against social norms that demonize us.

Atheists aren't anomalies. We're everywhere. We are relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and peers—desensitizing this taboo is long overdue. If nonbelievers are to gain more public acceptance, it will take openness as well as broad, consistent exposure.

TheHumanist.com: What are the current initiatives and goals of the campaign?

Nebo: Currently the goal is simply awareness. The more people go out, wear atheist gear, show they're open about their disbelief, talk about their atheism, use the #NormalizeAtheism hashtag on social media, and so on, the better.

Shives: I think we would all like for this to become something of an outpost for positive, active, socially conscious atheists. There's a great need for more of that, particularly online where sadly some of the most visible atheist voices are not terribly admirable, to put it extremely politely.

TheHumanist.com: How can people participate in the #NormalizeAtheism campaign?

Shives: The easiest way to get involved is simply to tweet using the #NormalizeAtheism hashtag. That helps a lot. Get that trending! And if folks want to support the campaign, they can go to the official [#NormalizeAtheism website](#) and buy something from the store.

Nebo: People can also follow the campaign on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and by following the [Twitter hashtag](#).

Mark Nebo is an activist, atheist, father, husband, public speaker, and veteran. (Photo via twitter.com/marknebo)

Steve Shives is an atheist video blogger and social justice advocate who examines atheism, science, woo, politics, and social issues. (Photo via twitter.com/steve_shives)

Sincere Kirabo is the social justice coordinator at the American Humanist Association. Sincere is a longtime humanist activist and writer. His work can be found on [TheHumanist.com](#), [Everyday Feminism](#), and [Patheos](#), among other media.

Interview with Social Justice Activist Ashton P. Woods

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

April 29, 2017

Ashton P. Woods is a social and political activist in the Black Lives Matter movement and the co-chair of the Black Humanist Alliance.

TheHumanist.com: You've been an activist for a long time. What was your first moment of political and activist awakening?

Ashton P. Woods: When I was fifteen I co-founded the first gay-straight alliance at my high school in New Orleans. I got tired of seeing people being bullied for being different, not just LGBT, but different, period.

TheHumanist.com: Now you're the co-chair of the Black Humanist Alliance. What tasks and responsibilities come along with being the co-chair?

Woods: The way I see it, we're not just organizing black people as a monolith, but organizing with the knowledge that black people come from different walks of life, including those who happen to identify as humanist or atheist in the secular community. There are more of us out there than people perceive to be. One of the things that I do as a co-chair is I focus on social justice.

TheHumanist.com: You note that the black humanist community isn't so visible in the public eye. What efforts are being made to overcome that barrier of public perception?

Woods: First, it is about being visible. The more people see you out there doing the work and identifying like they do, then they have a stake in the game. They have something to relate to. I have worked in activism. And in general, it requires a certain level of relatability. That way, people are more inclined to be part of a movement or part of a project, and are willing to listen.

We must gain visibility within the atheist community as well. I went to the Nashville Nones! Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, and I could only count ten, maybe fifteen black folks. It wasn't on a weekend, so most people were at school or work, and there are also financial barriers.

So signing up and being part of those particular events is important, as well as my social justice work, and emphasizing that there's a place for the secular community in the Black Lives Matter movement, in feminism, and in HIV activism. It can be tedious when it's needed. For some reason, I never found it hard to do. I just do it, if that makes sense.

TheHumanist.com: Yes, thank you for that. Also, you mentioned HIV activism. When did you find out that you were HIV-positive, what were the feelings that came up, and what have been some of the difficulties?

Woods: I was twenty-one years old when I was diagnosed with HIV. That would make it 2008. And I had never been educated a lot about HIV because I've been on my own since I was sixteen. Deliberately, I went to community centers that were part of the LGBT community, and in the black community as well, and learned what I could because I had friends who died from it. So when I found out that I had HIV—of course, you can't die from HIV, but you die from complications with AIDS—I found the biggest reaction was that I broke out in hives.

I didn't want to be around people. I remember the conversations with friends, who are no longer here, that it wasn't not a death sentence. It was about destigmatizing HIV, but in the black community, in 2008 or even in 2017, people lack the common knowledge of how HIV works, and what it does. There's a stigma that it's about promiscuity. But it's so varied. Some people with HIV were raped. There's a lot that needs to be unpackaged there with HIV.

I feel like if we're going to talk about Black Lives Matter or any other types of black activism, we need to make sure we're including people who are living with this virus, and know that health is a main issue that should be discussed. So when we talk about, for example, Black Lives Matter, we say, "Black lives matter. Black health matters. Black women matter. Black LGBT people matter."

I came out in 2015 publicly and by the beginning of 2016 I was on the cover of an industry magazine that covers HIV issues, which was a very rapid rise in that context. But it is about knowing what's affecting your body. It's about knowing how it affects everybody else. Because it doesn't just affect the people who have it—it affects those around them as well.

TheHumanist.com: Tell me a little about your path to atheism. Was there a single moment of realization or a progress away from a traditional belief system into atheism?

Woods: Well, the irony is I don't fit into either one of those boxes. I actually grew up religionless. It was around me. Others practiced it, but I was never forced to go to a church or forced to try to learn. I was offered, but it was never forced. I was left to make the choice on my own. I never really believed. By the time I was ten or eleven years old, I was like, "This isn't real to me. I don't believe in this." As an adult, I did try to join a church just to see what it was like, and to see if I could deal with it, and to see if I could believe in it. But no—it was, no. It just didn't work. It's not that I didn't have any respect for the people because there are some good people there. But it's not who I am. I never experienced agnosticism either. There was just never any God for me.

TheHumanist.com: You're the co-founder and lead organizer for Black Lives Matter Houston. What are some of its main initiatives at the moment? What are you hoping to achieve in the next one to ten years?

Woods: My part in the Black Lives Matter movement is to affect policy. One of those things that I have been good at is working with elected officials to change laws and policies. I've been at the Texas legislature helping to look at language in bills, testifying on panels, and meeting with elected officials to convince them to vote for particular legislation. These bills basically abolish the ability for police to arrest you on misdemeanor charges. There's also victimless crime. You get a citation and then go.

I've also been involved with the Sandra Bland Act. I was very involved in protests [at the time of her arrest and subsequent death in police custody]. The act basically makes it so that a police officer has to prove probable cause. It's one thing to protest in the streets; it's another thing to expand that protest to where you're actually engaging in the political process.

While we would love to dismantle this system of pain, we are still in it. It will take some time.

An Interview with Deborah Williams, Humanists of Houston President

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

April 26, 2017

TheHumanist.com: As the president of the Humanists of Houston, what tasks and responsibilities do you find yourself conducting?

Deborah Williams: “What don’t I do?” would be an easier question to answer! [Laughing] The job entails doing interviews like this one, but more importantly, it’s about providing a touch point for organizations through interfaith ministries, Black Lives Matter—anything for social action, like Meals on Wheels. (We’ve delivered hurricane boxes to them.) It’s about expanding what is available to our members, finding out their interests, and giving them what they need.

One of our members ended up in the hospital recently after she fell and broke her pelvis. As happens in a church when somebody’s ill and the pastor steps in, I [was a conduit between her] and the rest of the community. It’s more personal stuff than I envisioned before becoming president. Lots of hand holding. I don’t want to use the term ministering, but it’s similar.

TheHumanist.com: What are some of the social and political activities of the Humanists of Houston at the moment?

Williams: We were one of the sponsors for the March for Science. We’re also part of Texas legislature meetings. They meet every couple of years. We are part of the reproductive rights movement here. We’re involved with SB-6, which is the Texas version of what are known as the “bathroom bills.” We’re fundraising to help LGBT folks fight the SB-6 bill.

With the current US president and the Texas legislature off its rocker, we have lots to do. We can’t reach everybody. We try to post everybody’s events, but things happen fast. We focus on Texas issues such as science education. Also, they keep trying to ban abortion in Texas.

TheHumanist.com: Something I’ve come across in numerous interviews with nontheist groups is a lack of knowledge about what the heck the terms mean—even “humanism.” Do you notice this too?

Williams: I would say there’s a tremendous disconnect about what humanism really is, even among our membership at times. We have atheists who say, “How can you say that humanists are taking a stance on this bathroom bill? We’re progressives.” It is very disconcerting at times when it comes from your own membership. We had our own first meeting, the Humanism 101 meetup. We discussed what the Humanist Manifesto III says, and what the American Humanist Association says.

We try to educate members and the public. We were at the Pride Festival this year and had people ask, “Are you Satanists?” Here, in Texas, we reply, “No, we don’t believe in that either. Thank you.”

The idea of what to call ourselves is, I think, a problem we all have in humanist chapters. I am not a fan of the “friendly atheist” designator because when it comes to things regarding injustice, there’s not always space to be friendly. With SB-6, for example, it is a civil rights issue. We have to stand up and do the right thing.

TheHumanist.com: With the ongoing changes in America, politically and socially, what are some of the main concerns for you?

Williams: It's interesting—in Texas, the laws still says that if you don't believe in God, you're not allowed to hold elected office. Trump's election didn't change that so much. We have several older members who are concerned that there might be a push to make people join churches. They are very concerned about the separation of church and state in Texas, which really wasn't that separate to begin with.

On the positive side, the election has helped a lot of people become awake to the fact that they live in this little urban bubble in Houston, and the rest of the people in Texas can take that away from you. So what I see among the Humanists of Houston is an awareness that we have to stand up and be involved in politics. We don't have to endorse candidates, but we can take a side for our own protection—protection of our children and protection of our environment.

TheHumanist.com: Any final comments?

Williams: Humanism has a long way to go in spreading its message, especially with the nones. There is a real opportunity if we are consistent and thorough. We are not a local club that meets in the local UU church. We should do some outreach. In Houston, for example, we have our community giveaway to the homeless community once a month. We need to do more.

Catholic School Students in Ontario, Canada, Can Opt-Out of Religion Classes

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 10, 2017

Based on a recent human rights settlement case with the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board, Catholic school students in Ontario, Canada, can now opt out of religion classes.

Claudia Sorgini, a student at St. Theresa's Catholic High School in Midland, Ontario, filed a discrimination complaint in 2016 when the school refused to let her take other courses in place of religion classes. Eventually this led to a settlement via the Human Rights Tribunal.

The standard protocol for Catholic schools in Ontario is to teach religion classes. Some took issue with this because since 1982 Ontario Catholic schools have received public funding through the Constitution Act, Section 93.

Only half of the students at St. Theresa's are Catholic, and about one thousand students were part of the standard religion classes.

Sorgini accepted the classes as mandatory until her senior year, when she made the formal request to enroll in a science course in place of the religion class. It is instructive to note Ontario banned public prayer in the public school system in the 1980s, so religion classes as explicitly optional would seem a likely next step.

Sorgini reported feeling pressure to halt any attempts at exemption from the course. And once the switch from religion to science class was granted, she says she faced retaliation that made applying for scholarships and attending high school prom more difficult.

The school board denied the claims. However, the Human Rights Tribunal wanted the rules for opting out to be as transparent and easily understood as possible, and it kept the board accountable to their original process of religious class exemption and ensured that Sorgini (and other students who wanted an exemption) got one.

The settlement read, in part: "Students who apply for the exemption will not be asked to provide any reasons for their request, nor attend any meeting with school or board officials as a precondition to the application being recognized and accepted."

Some cases of opt-outs still require parental approval, but the settlement encourages the other twenty-eight English Catholic school boards to adopt these updated policies.

The atheist community welcomes the news that Canadian Catholic schools have lost some influence to indoctrinate children, adding hope to the future of international irreligious movements.

PLACE 4: THE FUTURE OF...

The Future of...1 – Welcome to the Future

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

May 2, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: We don't think much about the future. The reason being that the future has looked much like the present. In the 14th century, if you lived in a village and made shoes, there was a good chance that your kids and grandkid would make shoes, and things moved slowly. The future wasn't a threat. Now, of course, the rapidly approaching and rapidly changing future is here. Of course, the increasing pace of change means that the future is a threat.

We started to think about the future more, if only for entertainment, but I think we can benefit from doing a lot, a lot of thinking about the future. One way to start is to look at the different flavors of possible futures. That is, look at visions of the future that are already out there, one version is technological paradise, technological utopia, or the Kurzweil future. Kurzweil being an inventor who believes in the Singularity, which he says will be an era of practically infinitely powerful synthetic thinking, AIs.

He thinks that in the 2040s or sometime in the 2040s that we'll be able to build AIs that build each other and AI will have made itself so smart that it will be able to answer any questions. So we essentially become gods via technology and can make all of our wishes come true. Another flavor of the universe is the technological dystopia, which is the world of terminator. That AIs get really smart and decide to eradicate us.

And in between the technological utopia and the dystopia are various technologically dominated futures that are take your pick of futures that anywhere along the range of horrible to awesome. There's still some main features of those. The augmented human future, where everybody is modified technologically and biologically so that we have a bunch of people running around with superhuman characteristics.

Or if you are setting a movie in the future, you have a few people with those characteristics having adventures. Aside from those utopias and dystopias are apocalyptic futures, some are related to climate change or other fiddling with the environment due to human malfeasance. Others are like if you have zombie—in addition to different flavors of future, there are different degrees of seriousness or plausibility of the possible futures.

So on the implausible end of the apocalyptic futures are the zombie futures, the zombie apocalyptic with the entertainment value. Nobody is seriously questioning whether or not zombies will be a thing. Also, on the implausible end, but possibly slightly less implausibly because we can't set up the possibility of this happening are the alien invasion versions, but they are still towards the unbelievable end.

Then there are ongoing apocalypse futures and then there are the miserable post-apocalypse futures and relatively peaceful agrarian and often with aspect of medieval culture post-post-apocalyptic futures. Society has rebuilt itself, but on a smaller scale and not in tune with wrecking the world. Either because we don't have the resources to wreck the world or have found a way to live in more peace with the world.

Other soft-soft post-apocalypse futures are the Renaissance fairs and such, the green utopia futures with occasional cars around, humanity has made the decision to live more with the environment. We've left our rapacious technology for green technology. We've been rejiggered to be more gentle creatures too, away from the war-like aggressors that we evolved to be and humans are gentle and better able to co-exist.

That would be the range of boring-ass futures. Then there's stuff that can be extrapolated from the crap that politicians say. On the Make America Great Again side. What could be presented as the Conservative-Republican future, where Christian values and culture has won out and established that a Godly shining city in the hill, I don't know if anybody has fully fleshed this out in terms of utopia.

There is a *Handmaid's Tale*, which is the most famous example of a Christian dystopia, but alternately. There should be a Christian utopia, where America stands as a bastion of traditional Christian values in defiance of a Godless world. On the other side, there would be Liberal political utopias. The futures presented by politicians tend to not be fleshed out. Because politicians aren't in the business of creating worlds and politicians are in the business of getting votes in the here and now.

So a lot of their bullshit about the future is not well thought through or relates to specific policy positions. That's a problem for all presentations of the future. It is hard to put together a cohesive world or a cohesive set of predictions given that changes in culture into the future will affect every aspect of culture. All of culture will change. Most projections about the future. Whether rhetorical or serious by politicians or the United Nations, whether they are statistical projections of science fiction presentations of the future, most pictures of the future are incomplete because they only take a few different factors into account.

There are only a few writers who have impressed me by making convincing attempts to address all aspects of the future in creating their worlds. There is Neal Stephenson who created a series of future worlds 10, 100, 1,000 years into the future with *Accelerando*. There's the guy who wrote *The Wedding Album*. Doctorow is decent at this sometimes. Very few writers are interested in writing plausible, convincing future worlds.

Most are interested in telling entertaining stories. The guy who wrote *The Wind Up Girl*, which has a semi-plausible future. But it takes place in one city for 2 weeks undergoing a technological battle in the aftermath of what has been an unfolding ecological crisis that has devastated the Earth, but the adaptation of new green technology is there.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of...2 – Food (Part 1)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

May 16, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Continuing on the future of food. And there's an aspect of people that should know better, who are into raw food-ism, non-GMO-ism, organic food-ism. You know the deal? And, you...

Rick Rosner: Yeah.

Jacobsen: You noted off tape, it's a bit of snobbery. And to me these people should know better because, they're actually at, probably risk for health problems because they're using older methods. And these older methods are worse. They're less good than current ones.

Rosner: Let's put it in a larger framework.

Jacobsen: Okay. What's the larger framework?

Rosner: I consider it part of the larger framework of liberals versus conservatives where, right now in America, there are more idiots among conservatives, because idiocy has been cultivated by... By conservatives. Because they... It's politically expedient. But there's still plenty of idiocy on the liberal side. And you see it in taking Kumbaya principles to an extreme. Being nice to yourself, being nice to the planet, embracing alternative ways of healing.

So, you were talking about raw food people and vegans and... There are plenty of good reasons to be vegan or vegetarian, but once you join that cohort, you put yourself in the company of a lot of lunatics and/or idiots, including like the... I consider part of that kinda general demographic, like anti-vaccers, anti-vaccination people, who... People who buy, who... A lot of conservatives fall for conservative bullshit.

But there are a bunch of liberals who fall for hippie bullshit, which can include the whole thing about vaccinations causing Autism and maybe some other stuff, even though it's been well substantiated that vaccines don't cause Autism, and even the thing that, in vaccines, which was thought to cause Autism hasn't been... The derivative of mercury, I forget the name of it, but... Amerisol, I think.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of...3 – Food (Part 2)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

May 17, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rosner: That stuff hasn't been in US vaccines in a decade. And it's... Even that has been proven not to cause Autism. And if there are prudent ways to deal with vaccinations. If you have a certain amount of fear of it, you just... If you're worried about it, you still do the socially responsible thing, and you get your kid vaccinated, you just space out the vaccinations, so the kid doesn't get three or four on the same day, and you're doing the right thing, the prudent thing, for both your kid and for society.

And, you've taken a small measure of... Exercised a small measure of prudence if the lunatics are right. But yeah, there's the anti-GMO people, genetically modified organism people, who think that anything that's been genetically engineered is gonna kill you. But I buy the alternative argument which is that all the food we eat has been genetically engineered through centuries of human... Millennia of human breeding programs. Yeah, we couldn't get in and directly tweak genes. But, we tweaked it... Endless tweaking...

Corn was this weird wheat-like stuff thousands of years ago, before we bred it into these fat ears of golden kernels. And a lot of food is like that, where it was fairly edible until we bred it into something that's hyper-edible. And so, if you wanna be anti-GMO, don't do it on scientific grounds, do it on the grounds that maybe companies like Monsanto have somewhat obnoxious business practices.

Jacobsen: I got two minutes.

Rosner: Okay. So, and then, yeah, there's food snobbery. Like there's... LA is full of lifestyle snobbery with yoga moms trying to outdo each other. And there's fattery and I don't know, that's all I have on that.

Jacobsen: I mean, to me it just seems like, it seems to me like something corrosive of culture. It makes culture, in a way, less valuable because it's less... It reduces the well-being of people in it.

Rosner: Well, it's, math, because some of it goes back to information, where people can only absorb a certain amount of information about stuff. And people's behavior towards food and lifestyle is to some extent influenced by information, and there's a lot of information now. And a lot of the information is bullshit and people have to shop around for what... People don't have to, but people will shop around for what fits their prejudices and fears.

So, anyway, everything is optimal strategies for dealing with food is it's a probability cloud like a lot of other stuff where you can, trying to optimize stuff but you're trying to aim at the center if you have the patience for it. Well, everything's a function of people's patience and prejudice, discipline and snobbery, and all this forms a cloud of, an end space of food-related behaviors, where some people are gonna be towards one end of the cloud in terms of hyper-disciplined behavior which encompasses hyper-discipline plus dumb-faddish or under-informed behavior like people who use homoeopathic medicine which is basically paying a lot of money for water.

Jacobsen: Okay.

Rosner: And then on the other end, there are people who, in the hyper-undisciplined end of things, the super resigned people or belligerently indulgent people, and I'm sure there are people who, at the lunatic end of conservatism, eat unhealthily as a gesture of defiance of the liberal dictators of what's good for you. So, that's it.

Jacobsen: Okay. Okay.

Rosner: Okay.

Jacobsen: I'll leave you there and thanks for that.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 4 – Time Travel

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

May 22, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We were taking off-tape about the future of time travel and how it will not be a thing.

Rick Rosner: We talked about what will and won't happen. Those aren't practical for a couple of reasons. One is being that there is not infrastructure for the first topic we talked about, flying cars. One is that you can't get aloft by hauling ass off your street.

Two, there is not much cost savings for using a system like that. It is not like if you're so into flying that you need a plane that you'll somehow save money by buying a combination car-plane. The instances you need a car will not be the ones in which you need a plane.

There is not much of an overlap for most people. So, there is no market for it, little infrastructure for it; In general, in the mid- to far-future, say 50 years and beyond. The amount of travel per person on average, I am guessing, will decline as a telepresence gets better and better.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 5 – Travel Inefficiency

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 1, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: Because travel is super inefficient in a lot of ways, where the person weights 120-300 pounds. What a person travels in and in America that is often a loaded car, they will weigh 2 to 4 thousand pounds. So you are already wasting a lot of resources by transporting more than 10 times your weight just to run errands and stuff.

Plane travel while efficient in subways is very polluting. Eventually, there will be a pain where a lot of things will be more easily achieved by just remote conferencing. Consider the amount of business we do via phones.

I don't know what percent of our communicative life is based around a device rather than face-to-face. It has got to be for the average person now, over 75%. Once we get past some uncanny valley, which we're not approaching via telepresence, more and more people will virtually do more and more of their lives.

I just saw an article without reading it about how much of retail—without seeing an article, that is obvious. Malls and retail strips are just getting eviscerated. So anyway, people are going to move away from transportation.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 6 – Ultimate Travel

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 8, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: I'm sure there will continue to be fancier ways of transport, but the emphasis for transport will shrink. We will still build a bullet train to Vegas eventually, so California or LA idiots can get there quicker. Transportation is interesting.

Another thing you just brought up is time travel.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: It is the ultimate form of travel.

Rosner: Yes. Some will say it is the worst because most shows assume you will be anchored to your spot-on Earth as you time travel, even though the Earth is travelling around the Sun and rotating and the Sun is in the Solar System and moving in the Milky Way and the Milky Way is moving in among billions of galaxies.

All that movement is something you must track. It is another reason time travel is goofy. Every moment is a quantum web, a quantum event. It is non-replicable. Under Newton, who thought the universe, or theorized as if the universe had absolute space and time, which includes infinite precision in objects' locations, you can imagine the universe being an experiment in billiards, where you can just run back the world.

But the world is incompletely defined and information about the past that you might use to replicate the past is not completely recoverable as we move into the future. Everything wobbles, even if you could run times backwards.

There are particles like positrons and whatever you call negative protons.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 7 – Thoughts on Time

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 15, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Jacobsen: Maybe, we've been thinking about time the wrong way then.

Rosner: How are you thinking about time?

Jacobsen: When we take time, we take a number line with integers, so you can go positive and negative. In Newtonian Mechanics, or Classical Mechanics, you can go backwards or forwards and it won't make a difference. You're at $T=0$, and can move from there.

In quantum mechanics, there is a different backwards if you go forwards or backwards. Maybe, the proper representation is sets of paths where even the past is another possible path.

Rosner: Yea! Okay, I think that's the right way to think about it.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 8 – Future, Present, Past

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

June 22, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Because the implied past and set of possible futures is a set or a larger set of possible nexts, it is probabilistic.

Rick Rosner: I see the present as the way in which existence—I see the present moment as always, the most defined moment in a timeline, and before and after the present moment. You have probable past and future moments.

People build whole theories about one of those possible moments have real existences, like Multi-Worlds Theory, even Multi-Futures theory. You can talk about Multi-Pasts Theory.

Jacobsen: Also, to clarify, we should probably say world line rather than timeline.

Rosner: Yes, sorry, world line. The limited amount of information that we have—we have limited information about the present. There are many possible presents. We don't know what is happening on another planet or in another country at this moment.

Same with the universe. It is basing judgments on limited information. The idea that you can get exactly back to a past moment. I don't think is admissible under the laws of quantum mechanics. There are some instances in which you can do that under General and Special Relativity.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 9 – Quantum Stuff

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 1, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: However, we're talking about quantum events and the universe consists of macro objects, which are composed of quantum particles acting in quantum ways. Where everything calms down to Newtonian behaviour, the macro world is like the 32-year-old compared to the 19-year-old.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What I am imagining is a 2-dimensional grid, then you flip it 90 degrees, so it is perpendicular to your vision, then you make it bubbly along that plane for the 3-dimensional part of it. Whatever is the highest peak or lowest valley are the point at which there is the most emphasis, and that is the current moment, Kind of like that?

Rosner: Yea, yea, it's also like a rubber band with a bundle of sticks with the rubber band pulling the sticks together. One each side, it looks like teeth sticking out. But since we live in a macro world, it lets us have relatively certain knowledge about macro events that happened in the past.

We focus a lot of information according to its storage on the world. It is basically what we do anyway. We get better and better at it. Which means that in the future, we will get better and better at simulating and replicating the past.

Which means that if you make a list of the reasons as to our inability to know the world, it might not preclude us from having the benefits of time travel. One benefit of time travel is to correct past mistakes.

A massively recordable simulatable world. There's not reason why future people couldn't get the wish-fulfilling aspects of time travel by going back and seeing the way things would be lie if they had done something differently.

And then another purpose of time travel is to know what the future will be like – and to avoid doing the wrong thing, testing courses of action—

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 10 – Quantum Stuff (Part 2)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 8, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: We already time travel with cognition. To some extent, we simulate the future, what will happen, according to certain actions. I'm not sure the entire math and mental space involved in all of this because whenever we come up to a red light.

We don't see what would happen if we crossed the street on a red. WE DON'T SIMULATE THAT IN FULL. We just don't do it. So, I don't know how much that counts to be prediction of the future rather than simulation of the future.

But not doing it doesn't preclude us having a model of the world that incorporates knowledge about the world that is applicable to the future, which is some kind of – I want to say tacit, but I overuse “tacit” – simulation that we're always running.

You don't walk into the wall. You have a model of how doors and walls work as you plot your course from one room to another. I assume that as our cognition gets better via AI, then our understanding of the world. Our modelling of the world will get better.

We may be able to anticipate more and more of the future, but our best course of action will not be necessarily time travel.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 11 – Starship Enterprise

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 8, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: Will we have a future utopia or dystopia where everyone is dirty or hiding underground? Either a utopia or a dystopia will be—the future of human stuff is going to be altered by our ability to alter, and the will be influenced by the convenience and power of altering ourselves as we continue to merge with technology.

Scarlett Johansson is part of a movie called *Her* is like a movie in the future, where things are just slightly different than reality. But that's about as far as people are going to consider these things believably.

We will not have the *Starship Enterprise*. I talked about the idea of half-tronauts, who will get blown up in the war, and then those people will be the astronauts because you don't need the lower half as much. You won't have that. But the entities who will pilot our spacecraft will not be purely human.

Unless, those spacecraft are launched in the next 50 or 80 years from now. The grand exploring expeditions that set off for Alpha Centauri and other nearby stars won't be staffed by people who staffed the *Starship Enterprise*. Everyone will be super modified.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 12 – 7 of 9

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 15, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: People will probably be modified in sleek ways with their minds and bodies modified without necessary external and obvious representation, like the Borg, for instance. It won't be 7 of 9.

Rick Rosner: We send people into deep-ish space, into interstellar space. If they have human forms, it will just be out of sentimentality, or the feeling that we need to maintain some humanity rather than—because that is going to be the aesthetic choice because humans are somehow the best thing to send into space.

We will send people via packages, but those packages will do more than humans do, even partially. Also, there is a lot of science fiction that has slight difference between the ship and the crew. There may be a situation where the ship is the crew.

[End of recorded material]

The Future of... 13 – T-1000

Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner

July 22, 2017

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: It may be all part of one entity that is to a greater or lesser extent—That will apply to a lot of stuff. People can be their own cars as physical forms become more flexible and information processing systems including consciousness become more fungible and more transferable.

People will be more and more their own tools. We will be our own transformers, but not as clunky – unless it is expensive to do so. I am sure there will be – at different periods of the future – different costs to morphing yourself.

We are not all going to be T-1000s to be able to take on any form at any time. Unless, we're living in cyberspace completely. Even there, whatever cyber societies that we have, there will be sets of traditions and rules that will provide some limits.

[End of recorded material]

PLACE 5: FRESH START RECOVERY CENTRE

An Interview with Mr. Stacey Petersen, RSW (Part One)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What is Fresh Start Recovery Centre?

We provide addiction treatment. We own a 40,000 square foot purpose-built addiction treatment centre for men and for families through which we offer an intensive 12- to 16-week live-in program as well as outpatient. We have our family healing program, which is open to anybody in the city, in the country. That's been affected by someone else's addiction. They do not have to have somebody in our facility to attend it.

Also, we have second-stage housing. This long-term housing is intended to be safe, sober and affordable. We have a very strong alumni association. They meet here weekly. They celebrate birthdays here monthly. They hold their own events. They also support the main house event. Our 12-stop Ride for Recovery, which happens this August 27th. That's an absolutely amazing event. It is probably one of the most incredible motorcycle runs that you will do because it is not a typical motorcycle run. There is something to do at every stop. This year's fourth stop will blow people's minds.

We have our BBQ, which is July 15th. Also, we have a satellite office in Niagara Falls. We are involved in recovery on a lot of different levels. I sit on the National Recovery Advisory Committee, the Alberta Addiction Service Providers, and the Canadian Research Institute for Substance Misuse. We are involved with Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada. A lot of community partnerships that we are involved with seek to provide greater solution and awareness surrounding addiction recovery.

One of them is MESH, Mental Health, Employment, Substance Abuse, and Housing; hence, MESH. That's with Prospect Services, Horizon Housing, Aventa Addiction Treatment for Women, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), and, of course, Fresh Start Recovery Centre ('Fresh Start'). The impetus of that is to help individuals enter any one of those organizations with a central agreed-upon intake process. Someone can be accepted into any one of those agencies and then enter into the mix of whether they need employment through Prospect Services, housing through Horizon Housing, women's treatment through Aventa Addiction Treatment for Women, mental health through CMHA, or men's treatment through Fresh Start Recovery Centre.

We won a Calgary award in 2012 for community advocacy. We've been chosen by the Fraser Institute out of Vancouver as the #1 treatment centre in Canada in 2010, 2013 and 2014. 2014 was the last year they held the awards program. We were also chosen as the #1 social service agency in Canada in 2014. In addition, overall, we earned the Drucker Award for not-for-profit management.

We've been in that top 3 every year since 2006. We were chosen since 2007 as a recommended Canadian charity by Charity Intelligence, a four-star agency. Also, Bhayana awards from the United Way supporting our partnership with MESH. So, all of that. Those were all great. However, the story that it tells is that I have the best people in the world working together with me.

These people have hearts the size of cars. All of us together. The Fresh Start crew has about 350 years of recovery under their belts as well as the paper work on the wall. It varies from there. It ranges from 29 to 25, to the 20s, some 15s, a smattering of 10s. I hire people based on their ability to reach another human being.

If you cannot build a genuine relationship with another human being, there's no point being in this work. The most therapeutic tool you have in a helping relationship is the relationship.

What are some of the factors that might play into that screening of individuals for their ability - in terms of predictive validity - to work with people, reach out to people, and build that relationship?

I'm going to look at transferable skills. I'm going to look at the paperwork. I'm going to sit down and have a conversation. I am going to meet with them. You can tell somebody in a heartbeat if they are genuine, isn't motivated by fear. I usually have a way of making people feeling comfortable. I try to focus my energy from a loving perspective.

Same for the rest of my crew. I don't want to work with people that are fear-based. We are guiding people to stay sober and clean so we had better be driven from a place of love rather than fear ourselves. I am not saying we are perfect, far from it, but we strive to be the best we can to serve these men and their families.

Is fear a big problem there? You mentioned it, twice.

I think fear is a big problem in society, Scott. We have two sources through which we govern ourselves on any given day at different levels of intensity. That is either fear or love. I was asked to do a TED talk in 2014. They said, "Do it on innovation and change." I spoke on fear and love, and how that affects our resiliency and ability to cope day-to-day in life.

The key to all of that is a simple thing. Everybody tries to get that hole filled from outside sources. It is an 'inside job.' There are a few things to do this gig. That is love who you are and love what you do. From that, you cannot fail. I like what Zig Ziglar said, "You can have everything in life you want, if you will just help other people get what they want".

An Interview with Mr. Stacey Petersen, RSW (Part Two)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

With respect to Zig Ziglar, personal experiences, professional work, and observations of others going through ‘tough times’ in life, what are some of the most heartwarming stories seen by you?

Ah, man. I have been to over 300 funerals. On the flip side, I’ve seen far more recovery. When I think about recovery, I think about no more absent fathers and lost sons and daughters. I’m watching a guy on Facebook. He’s a single father. He’s got custody of his kids. My God, it is so heartwarming to see this. He’s with his two kids. They’re 12 and 13. His son and daughter, the process of him working every weekend building the yard, putting fences up, and laying down patio blocks.

He’s building a space to have campfires with his kids. He’ll come home from work one day. Both of his kids are working on the fence. I think about what it must have been for those kids before recovery happened for the father. I’m watching a 16-year-old kid present his father with a 4-year medallion. Obviously, his dad became sober at the age of 12. Those are some of the things.

For every parent watching a child go through the process of addiction, my friend, Scott Oake, from *Hockey Night in Canada*. Him and his wife, Anne Oake, are working to build a treatment centre for their son who passed away. Scott said, “We are only as happy as our unhappiest child.” If you have a child that has an addiction, it is part of your daily life. It is with you every day.

When they get clean, the parents think, “Please let this be the last time.” I sat with a colleague of mine. I came across him in a parkade. He was crying. I said, “What’s going on?” He said, “His son had overdosed and died.” The one thing that he said that he would do in a heartbeat is that he would take it all back in terms of always being on him about the drug use. He would have taken it all back and spend that time loving him.

When I think about that, I think about our family healing program. It isn’t about fixing the addict in your life. It is about learning to live with your own feelings. Addiction is a family illness. Everybody in the family is affected by it.

I was in Washington last October at the Unite to Face Addiction Rally. It was huge. There were thousands and thousands of people on the national mall with huge concerts. Barack Obama spoke, Ringo Starr, Paul McCartney, Joe Walsh, Steven Tyler, it was fantastic. I got to meet Steven.

Subsequent to that, the Obama Administration released \$1.1 billion to the recovery movement. I think that what is happening is the stigma is being broken because people are tired of keeping things quiet. Their loved ones. Their families. Their friends. They are suffering and dying. When our government can accept that addiction is a chronic illness, that’s fantastic, but we have some ways to go before the general public can have the same level of acceptance and treat addiction as you would any other disease.

If you look at families, communities, and even individuals, at the socio-cultural level, what can they do to assist in the prevention of this problem in society or in helping those suffering get through those ‘tough times’ in their lives?

First and foremost, they can have the conversation and not be afraid to have the conversation. I know that many parents probably don't know. It's scary. I have to tell you. With the advent of the internet, our kids know more about what's out there than we do. I had a conversation with my son one day. I am reasonably on top of him about personal responsibility and this is what I see every day.

He looked at me. He said, "Dad, I know what's out there. I know where they are. I don't go near them." I had to go back and have the conversation and say, "You know what, I trust you. I know you're going to make some good choices." I think a lot of parents don't know. You've got some progressive schools. They are going to gladly put that out on the table.

People across the country are talking about mental health and addiction. We worked with Rob Nash. He put on some concerts here. He is fantastic at spreading the message. We've got Sheldon Kennedy out there right now. He is doing an amazing job around addiction, abuse, and trauma. It is about continuing to have the dialogue. We don't, or we haven't in the past, because of fear. It is fear of judgment. Who is going to speak about the fact that their son has a mental illness or their daughter has an addiction?

Now, I got to tell you. I sat in my office with another gentleman here. He is the CEO of an oil company. He is talking to me like I'm talking to you. He told me for the third time that he had to perform CPR on his son to keep him alive from an overdose.

The third time he had to do it for 45 minutes until help arrived for them. Can you imagine having to perform CPR on your child for 1 minute?

You mentioned President Barack Obama put out \$1.1 billion for this movement. With respect to Canada and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, what could be done at the federal level – outside of groups, communities, and individuals?

That's the National Advisory Committee work and the CCSA. In January 2015, there were 60 organizations from coast to coast to coast. We hammered out a commitment to recovery for Canadians. That went to the House of Commons in March, 2016. That was read in the House of Commons. That got a standing ovation from the House of Commons. I think what needs to happen is that the transfer payments that go to the provinces need to have a trajectory on them that isn't in your regional health ministry.

The Feds can make determinations on how funding should be spent within the provinces. I would suggest at least 50% of the funding for addiction treatment should be directed towards funded agencies within the provinces. Maybe, that's a bit high, Scott. I would say an equitable percentage. The truth is the organizations on the ground are producing excellent outcomes.

The social return on investment is staggering. There's a group out of Washington called Success Market Inc. They calculated ours and some others. They have a link to Charity Intelligence. The return on investment to the community is \$17 to \$29 based on \$1 investment in programming. That is phenomenal.

Cost avoidance, when we were working on the 10-year plan to end homelessness, we calculated conservative numbers at approximately \$100,000 per person per year stay. That speaks nothing

of the return, unless the dollar is spent. The priceless impact of returning a father to his family, or a son to his family, or to a community. That is priceless.

What does that mean for generations? They look at an ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) for a child's first experiences and how that affects children's resiliency, and the implications surrounding addiction later in life. So, when you start to heal families and people, you start to heal communities.

Why do I do what I do? I am blessed, fortunate, whatever words you want to choose, to be able to do this. I get to see kids get their dads back. I get to see families get their children back. I get to see employers have phenomenal employees again. I get to meet some of the most incredible and talented people that I have ever met in my life. Not just those in recovery but also those that support us and my crew. Like I said they are amazing!

My kids talk about doing what I do in profound ways. They are young but they get it. We have so much in our lives. We get to make a difference. We don't do what we do for the recognition or for money. I can't imagine doing anything else. I think we are some distance from the recovery movement being as big as it should but we are headed in the right direction.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Petersen.

An Interview with Tony Kokol

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

This audio interview edited for clarity and readability.

Scott Jacobsen: To begin, how did you come into the world of addiction services? Was it a personal reason, or a professional reason and public concern?

Tony Kokol: It comes out of my personal story. I am in recovery. Due to my addiction, I ended up in prison. I got released to a treatment centre/halfway house. It was there that I cleaned up. It was through that process of recovery through that treatment centre that my journey on this side of the fence started.

Jacobsen: Given your personal experience, if I may ask, and given your experience with Fresh Start Recovery, are the demographics divided between men and women slanted more towards men than women – addiction and recovery?

Kokol: I don't know if they are slanted. I know my personal experience. That women, when they are out there in the real world, they are more susceptible to abuse and being taken advantage of – just given what they are. Their physical presence. They are susceptible to that. They probably can't protect themselves as much or as easily out there. I would think on the treatment end of it. It always has been a struggle to afford the women courtesy as much as the men have in regards to treatment.

I think a lot of the time with women too. Their struggle lies with a family or having children. They have to go to treatment. What do you do with the children? They will break up the family to help this woman get better. I think that's where a big struggle lies. I think it would be fantastic to have a treatment centre where the children could be with the mother, and not break up that family.

Jacobsen: When it comes to the process of recovery, from addiction, what stages tend to be the most emotionally difficult, even physically painful in terms of withdrawal?

Kokol: It would probably be the initial. That initial detox, the first 90 days or the first year. There is a continuum. They talk about a three-year continuum for the process of recovery. We touch base on that physical aspect. We are still physically detoxing. The cells in our body are rearranging and getting back to normal. The toxins are leaving our bodies. Once we detox, and are able to focus, and our memory comes back, the mental capability will start to be able to place our emotions a little better, and to prioritize them.

In third year, they talk about touching base with the spiritual aspect, where we learn to think of others and aren't so self-centered and start placing other people ahead of us – and start understanding empathy and compassion a bit more.

Jacobsen: What has been one of the more emotionally touching stories that you've heard in your time at Fresh Start Recovery?

Kokol: I've heard a lot. There's a fellow in my group right now. His wife has cancer. She wants him to complete treatment. She wants him to remain at Fresh Start. It is an extended program. It is 4 months long. His heart breaks. His wife is sick. She's taking care of everything. She has a job. She's a real go-getter. It is a realization that she might not get better. She wants him to stay

there. It might be a cold reality that she wants him to be there because she might not be there when he's done.

So he can be a good dad, when she's not there. It can get pretty deep. You can go a few layers down. It can get heart wrenching. We live a crazy life there. I have been at work. Where in the morning, we get news of one of our men passing – one of the alumni, then in the afternoon or evening there is a celebration of a gratitude ceremony. Men are laughing and reuniting with their family.

That morning, we were shedding a tear with a mother who lost a loved one.

Jacobsen: Of course, there are many factors. But if you could target not one cause, but one strong positive correlate, of addiction in Canadian society, what would it be? How would you recommend Canadian policymakers and even on-the-ground activists help deal with what seems like a growing issue, in this country?

Kokol: That's a tough answer. I think probably the biggest situation that I've seen is accessibility. There are many layers to it. It can get really deep. I am only one level. I am at the frontline, almost the frontline. These are the struggles that I see. There are many more when it comes to policies and laws. That sort of thing. What I see is the individual that is ready for treatment, but not having that opportunity due to bed availability, we have 100 people on the wait list.

What happens when an individual will come to his senses, hit that dark point in life, be ready, and is in the vulnerable point, on the cusp, it can go either way. He is on the edge and seeks help. He knocks on the doors of recovery and there isn't a bed. It is disheartening. I run into it all of the time. All of the time. People reach out to me, "Hey Tony, help me." I know a lot of people, but I am not in charge of the intake or who gets a bed.

But I know, we never have enough. If there was anything that we could do, it would be the politicians and the powers that be to raise an eyebrow about this. If we want to do something, they need to get well. From there, I don't think there is a 30-day program or a 90-day program. There isn't a quick cure. We need to embrace these people. It is a long-term solution. Let's provide some structured housing after that.

Let's not throw them back on the street after that. Let's make sure they are gainfully employed and trained in the program, and get them some assisted housing, so they can get back on their feet – to see them until the end. That's what I think.

Jacobsen: You noted long-term care. The continuum of care, and I am not an expert, seems like a growing part of recovery, officially, where recovery centres will deal with recovering addicts for the long-term. How has this been for you – if you're undergoing this process yourself?

Kokol: I've done it. I've lived it. I've seen it on the other end. I've seen men go through it. I believe it is the only way to go. The truth of the matter is that the time most people hit a bottom and are ready for treatment. Most life areas have been dampened. They have annihilated them. They annihilated their financial resources, family, and social support. It is a time in their life when they not only need to recover from addiction, but all areas of life.

You can't sober someone up, and then boot them out to the door, especially when they are unemployable, have financial issues, housing issues, and so on. All you've done is sober up the

person who is still afflicted. It is a social fact of social return on investment. It is something like every dollar we invest, then we get seventeen dollars back from that person giving back to society. I proved it myself.

I was the guy that needed treatment. I came in so broken that I needed someone to help house me, clothe me, help me get into the workforce, help me to text, to run a computer. I lost these skills over fifteen years of being on the street. I lost living skills even. I needed a hand. So I embraced that support net and structure. It turned out fine for me. It is ironic you phoned. Today is my nine years clean.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] It is the anniversary?

Kokol: Yes, it is the anniversary.

Jacobsen: For those that are just reading this, basically, we've had trouble calling [Laughing] and it is basically a random call. So congratulations.

Kokol: I know it. I know when I come to treatment that I am broken. All major life areas are annihilated. Nine years later, I live a happy, productive life. I have a home. I have all of the things that people would want. I have a career. People are important to me. Family is important to me. I don't break hearts no more. I'm not a burden. I contribute. I have self-esteem. I have purpose. Thank God nobody gave up on me, I was forty-six-years-old by the time I hit a bottom to be willing to change.

It was forty-six years of screwing up, screwing up. Thank God for Fresh Start, there were parole officers, counsellors, and people in the twelve-step community too – and certain family members. Thank God, they didn't write me off.

Jacobsen: By analogy, people see problems with volunteers for international organizations. Young people, for instance, in college will travel to another part of the world to volunteer, but they might be a little reckless in the way they volunteer. They might have good intentions, but they can do some damage. Sometimes, more damage than good.

To draw that analogy over to the context that we're talking about, for those that want to help volunteer in the homeless community or those that are addicted, or their family members or extended family members in their own recovery processes, what are possible landmines in their path that they can avoid to reduce the amount of harm that they might cause, even for the best of intentions? What tend to be the more effective ways of volunteering for the recovery community, and the addicted community?

Kokol: Landmines, I think the only landmine the person would have is themselves and the attitude they approach to work with this demographic of people, and to realize this is someone's brother. This is someone's father. This is someone's mother. This is someone's sister. To always exercise empathy and compassion, and to prepare yourself, they are not less. They are not less. They've got the disease of addiction. The brain doesn't work the way everybody's else does.

They've indulged in a substance for an extended period of time. That was their own choice. Just like everybody else, but that was their choice, for certain individuals, they cross the line. The brain becomes hardwired after doing it for an extended period of time. Sometimes, it is only a couple times. Other times, it's a few months. Everybody is different. That is where this line is drawn with this disease of addiction.

People scoff at it, or they don't understand it. But it is true. The phenomenon of craving occurs. Other people can do it. They don't cross the line. They don't experience this craving. It is not that they didn't make bad choices. Maybe, not more than any other teenager who chose to experiment. I think everybody has to have empathy and understanding, and to realize that we're not all exempt from a perfect life.

I think, as a society or as a healthy person, we owe it to the less fortunate to assist them and to enhance their quality of life. If there is any landmine, it would be: How do you approach the task at hand. And how do you go about it? And what's your motivation?

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Tony.

Kyle Williams Interview

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So let's start off of family background. What's the short of the long?

Williams: So, I was born in Ontario in Ottawa. We're all good Canadian folks; dad was born in Halifax, mom was born in Ottawa, and we're all basically your run-of-the-mill Canadians when it comes down to it. I was a family of four; I have a younger sister and my folks, and my sister is three years younger than me. My dad comes from a family of five boys, so you've got four uncles on side and on my mom's side she has a sister and a brother, so a couple uncles and an aunt on side. We're not too exciting when it comes to family background.

Jacobsen: And I mean you were a typical kid sports and things. How was elementary school for you or the things would you do the time?

Williams: Elementary school; my parents and teachers always used to joke my favourite subject was recess. I was always an active boy, spent time playing hockey, riding my bike. I was always an active outdoorsy kid, and in elementary school. It was around the time my parents got divorced and as most young boys do I was trying to fit in and have fun and then next on the priority list was to do well at school.

Jacobsen: Junior high and high school, how did this then transition into life?

Williams: Junior high and High school, we moved a little bit, but in Calgary. My dad had the same house, but we, my sister and I, were transitioning back and forth between houses week-on-week-off. My mum moved around Calgary, so we were always either closer or farther from friends. I learned to be independent, whether hopping on the bus or riding my bike somewhere and with independence came of drinking and drugs. For the most part, junior high was spent trying to be as good an athlete as I could, but I would experiment in parties with alcohol, and then high school athletics took a back seat to the partying and to the good times lifestyle. I was a wizard at skipping classes and managing to scrape by, but it was an interesting time for me. It was what I thought was fun but I didn't take anything all seriously.

Jacobsen: And do you think your parents' divorce was a significant factor on this?

Williams: No, I don't think so. I went to a couple therapy sessions. I believe when my folks got divorced. I was seven years old and by the time I had made it into high school; from Elementary School to Junior High to High school, I'd seen so many of my friend's parents get divorced. It wasn't a... something I saw taking a toll on my life, it was something happened and I recognized it was happening everywhere, so I don't think it was bearing on me at point.

Jacobsen: As you were a young experimenter with drugs and alcohol, you did attend university, but you have noted this was at a time of being a "Full blown alcoholic." What was the first note, the first story, or a realization you had this was indeed the case?

Williams: I'm on a bike ride right now, riding across the country. I had time to think, and so I think the first time it was ever apparent to me was earlier than that, but, while in university, I carried the same party lifestyle I wanted in high school. But now, I wasn't living under my parents' roof. I wasn't answering to anyone, except for teachers and the grades I had to pull. There wasn't a whole lot of motivation and ambition left. I became interested in partying and

getting drunk or high all the time. And I think it was apparent when I was blocking out almost every time I drank, or disappointing friends, disappointing family. I have been in the hospital twice; once to get my stomach pumped, once to get re-fuelled up on saline solution, I was in the first week or two weeks of university. So it was apparent from the get-go.

Jacobsen: Given you were partying in university; was this a common set of friends you had that you were partying with?

Williams: I think down in Lethbridge there are parties every night of the week if you want. There's something going on, so I was constantly able to find someone to hang out with. So there were common denominators along the way, I think. I would be the most common out of all of those. It was a large group of friends. I also had many groups of friends.

Jacobsen: Do you find yourself being the encourager as well as the one being encouraged to use alcohol?

Williams: I think peer pressure, especially in age, as well as setting is pretty apparent. It is pretty prominent amongst groups of friends even if it's the old adage: "Let's go for one beer." I think that's super common. Everyone does it. So it was how I would peer pressure people into it, and how other people would pressure me into doing it, but I had a rubber arm; it was pretty easy to twist.

Jacobsen: How did you, or when did you, find 'Fresh Start' as a way to bring you back into a more stable life?

Williams: I wish I found 'Fresh Start' earlier, but I went to university from the age of 19 to 23 I think, then I was down in Lethbridge until 2014. When I came back, I was working in night clubs in Calgary. It was a continuation of the lifestyle. I called for myself down in the university. I didn't find Fresh Start until last year, until last April, and it was from series of hospital visits, series of people, who maybe hadn't seen me in a long time calling me up and saying, "Hey, I saw you the other night and you aren't doing so well." As well, a strong family support network. I have an uncle who is familiar with Fresh Start; he's been in recovery for 15 years now, and I was lucky he brought me in there to show me around and to introduce me to some people and that's when I realized it was probably the smartest decision for me to go in there and turn it around.

Jacobsen: And now, you're doing the Journey to Recovery. There are two hash tags; one is #journeytorecovery, and the other is #freedomthroughfitness. What was the inspiration for this, and what is the intent and purpose?

Williams: So last year, I did a cycling trip on a much smaller scale, not without challenges, but I was fresh out of treatment. I was on a little family vacation down in Kensington and through treatment though I wasn't living there. I woke up every morning and rode my bike to Fresh Start. It was about 12 or 13 kilometres depending on which way I went. I would sit down in Penticton and I had my bike with me, and instead of packing my bike up and flying it home I decided I was going to ride it home. I was riding at the time with a single speed bike. So, I trekked through the Rockies about 625 kilometres or so. I've called this ride "Changing Gears" because I have a bike with gears on it, but I've also helped through this past year. I have changed gears in my life and have gained what has kept me in the right head space and kept me going. Freedom through Fitness, it's a fitness community and being able to go for a workout and have extra people who have a common goal. It's any meeting, but it is people from all walks of life. And I think it's a strong wellness model and the purpose of this tour, this ride, has been I want to show anything is

possible. Riding across the country is no small a feat, but I want to show people and talk to people at treatment centres along the way about how an active lifestyle and a fitness regimen you can be a strong levelling tool when you're not feeling great, or when you are feeling great. It's something I would to see more people and more places incorporate into their programs Fresh Start did.

Jacobsen: You have noted the ride itself does embody four principles; one was kindness, second was authenticity, third was reliability, and the fourth was love. I do note those four words in order spell the name K.A.R.L. Why these principles and why acronym?

Williams: So when I was living in the height of my partying and addiction days. I had a friend who used to say I would take on a drunk alter ego or an alter ego that wasn't as pleasant as the person I was when I was sober. It wasn't necessarily I was an angry, mean, or a hateful person, but I wasn't the person I would want to be known for. And it wasn't until I moved back to Calgary a friend of mine said, "Hey, when you get drunk or when you get high you aren't Kyle anymore, you're Karl." It almost became a big joke. It almost became an action word people were getting. At one point, I was lying in bed and I was either in treatment, started treatment, and my uncle and I had been talking about developing a code to live by. I started looking at the opposites of the way I used to be. I said I wasn't an angry person, but I was not also a kind person. I wouldn't help someone if they asked, so kindness was something I wanted to try and embody. Authenticity was something I wanted to try and embody because when I was drinking or using drugs. I felt I was constantly being or trying to be someone I was not. It seems to be tiresome all the lies and the thoughts I had to protect this person I thought I was. I was lying to family, I was lying to friends, and it became exhausting. So I wanted to be authentically me without worrying about people judging or without worrying about what others might have thought. So that was an important piece. Reliability, I wasn't a reliable person. I was drunk all the time. People would ask today if we wanted to come to some sort of function or if I wanted to help them move or with their regular daily life things. I would say, "Yes," and then not show up. I'll find an excuse to not be there, and so I think reliability is such an important piece of life in general when you say you're going to do something, then you do it. So that's something I wanted to live by. And then finally, love is when you can truly and wholeheartedly love, I think that's the only way to live, and doing so in day to day life whether that's your family, friends, relationships. I want to be able to love with no holds barred, nothing holding me back. And I kid you not. It's hit me like a ton of bricks when I recognized this way of life has become the acronym for K.A.R.L. It was something I knew that I needed to share. I knew I wanted to live by those words and that's how it became a piece of the ride, how it's become a piece of my life. And I wake up every day grateful I'm now this Kyle as opposed to the old Karl.

Jacobsen: Thank you for that. And do you find almost this ride you changing gears is almost a riding away the old Karl? So you can say you can then more embody the newer one?

Williams: I hope so. It's a piece of my life I wouldn't change. It has made me the person I am today, but I think this ride for sure will be the start of bigger things to come, and the memory of the old Karl in the minds of friends and family will be less apparent and this new version will be more prominent.

Jacobsen: And for those would to help donate, or become involved in another way, how can they do so?

Williams: Donations are always greatly appreciated as well as a simple follow on Facebook or Instagram. I have a website. It's changing-gears.ca. You can read my blog, post comments, ask questions, check out some of the pictures. We're trying to get as many of those as possible when it's not raining. There's also a link there if you want to donate. It's a donation through Fresh Start Recovery Center. They've been gracious and super helpful when it comes to partnering up with me for this. I also have a Facebook page and an Instagram page you can get to through the website.

Jacobsen: How important do you find working in community for recovery?

Williams: If you look at it in some terms of a 12-Step way, it's extremely important. People say working with the newcomers keeps them sober and keeps them on a path of recovery. I think working in the community doesn't necessarily have to be with the new comer. It can be with anyone. And so one of the ways I'm working in the community is I help lead a grassroots fitness movement called November Project in Calgary; they're popping up all over the world. It's a way you get out and interact with people who have a similar view on the world, but also all kinds of walks of life. So I think it's important for anyone's psyche to be out in the community and working with people. That's what I'm trying to do.

Jacobsen: Do you have any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion based on the conversation today?

Williams: First, I'd like thank you so much for doing the interview. I also appreciate the support from Fresh Start; they've given me a great opportunity. I want to thank some other sponsors, an oatmeal company is sponsoring me called Stoked Oats as well as some help from Muscle Milk Canada without all of the support and all the donations have poured in this wouldn't have been able to happen. I'm so incredibly lucky to have this opportunity. And the same goes for some of the media and the interviews I'm able to do. I want to thank you again and it's been a pleasure.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time, Kyle.

Williams: Yeah, thank you.

As you sit at the front desk and work away, you may have a unique insight into the first evaluation, the "face value" of people coming to FSRC. What do you first notice of people coming into recovery? What about them leaving back into mainstream society?

The first thing I notice is relief (that they are finally in the facility) and nervousness (what's coming?) If they are a returning client, they are grateful to be back and know what is expected in the coming weeks. Some men are physically unwell and unkempt and arrive with next to nothing while others arrive with everything. New clients arriving are welcomed by the other residents in treatment and they become comfortable quite soon. Clients come from different places, i.e., Corrections, Detox, Northern Canada, self-referrals and other geographic locations and they all display nervousness and relief upon arriving.

When Alumni leave us, they are excited about where they are going and the plans they have. Each and every one of them has expressed they will miss FSRC and the peer support, meals, sharing...Some of have said they miss going to "group" because of the structure and sharing.

What is the biggest myth about addictions in the public mind?

The biggest myth is that a short stint in "rehab" will fix you up! Treatment can provide tools and knowledge for the addicted but it cannot provide the motivation for long term recovery. The

desire for change must come from within the individual and he will need to build his support system for his success. We can all agree that certain activities will promote recovery and some of them are attending 12 step groups, helping others, doing service work.

How can Canada do better by our addicted and downtrodden citizens?

Canada needs to provide capital and operating funds for treatment centres to help those who are addicted. Not all of them are downtrodden (yet) because of addiction. We have such a high proportion of people who suffer from mental health issues and addictions, incarceration and addictions, and with specific groups of youth, seniors and families who are affected by the disease. The current Federal government needs to look at providing support in housing, rental subsidies and addiction and mental health services.

How can religious institutions help addicts? How can secular institutions assist addicts?

While 12 step groups do not promote religion, they do refer to a “higher power.” The “higher power” can grow to be “God” and have the effect of belief, faith, peace, serenity, and prayer on the individual. Not all people will agree to the “God” idea but will find what works for them. There are many different agencies and organizations that provide counselling, other support groups, meditation and physical training. All of these offerings are available to everyone and different ideas or activities will help everyone. Now, if I may, I want to add one note with some concluding questions, please. You are free to answer or skip them. You are in long term recovery. When did you become an addict? When did you realize over time that it was a problem? Where did you first get help?

I first realized that I had become alcoholic when I was 30 years old and had to go to Detox after being on a two-week binge. I went to a short term treatment facility and had 3 years clean and sober. During this time, I had moved twice and married for the second time. Unfortunately, my new husband was also an alcoholic (we unconsciously search out fellow alcoholics) and we enabled each other for fifteen years. When it finally ended, I again ended up in detox and fortunately I was able to go to the same short term treatment, and then onto to a 4-month treatment program for women. After that I lived in sober housing for close to eight years. My recovery was “grace given” and it took a long time. I had lots of support and attended many meetings during that time. I am now in my 17th year of “recovery.”

What is long term recovery? How does it look from the recovering addict’s perspective?

I don’t know what long term recovery means to others, other than the length of time a person has been clean and sober. There are those who have many years of sobriety and yet have found no joy in life. I do not believe that’s long term recovery. For me, it means I no longer want a drink or to be around people who are “under the influence.” I feel free from any obsession or desire to drink...my life is good!

What is your main message of hope for those that have fallen through the cracks of society as addicts and fear for their lives, are destitute, downtrodden, psychologically bruised, and nearly emotionally broken, even physically emaciated and socially isolated? Just keep trying! You can’t fix everything – but you can start to fix yourself...get into detox or get help to stop using/drinking. We all care about you and what you’re going through. We want to help but sometimes we can’t (for any number of reasons). Start going to meetings and start listening. We do love you...and hope you just keep trying!

Thank you for your time, Connie.

An Interview with Counsellor and Outreach Coordinator Andrew “AJ” Jenkins (Part Two)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

You understand better and more than me. However, by my reading of the statistics, the majority of the cases by sex (or gender) are men in contrast to women. What is that? (Personal opinion)

I couldn't quote any documentation on that. Personal opinion is that men tend to think we can handle it more. Women are more – some women, not all, and some men, not all – more likely to seek support than men.

Because of that, I do not believe that there is a higher rate of addiction between men and women. It is 1 in 10 no matter the slicing. I believe women are more likely to seek support for their problems much sooner.

To intervene faster than men, men are taught the Ulysses story from centuries ago. We're supposed to be this big rock and hero. We are supposed to get through these things ourselves. It is a bit of a social situation.

I'm at a loss of quoting papers or theories at this point. From personal experience, it's because men believe in being able to handle this stuff. Addiction takes over, because we can't handle it alone.

That reminds me. Women attempt suicide more. Men are four times more likely to commit suicide, 'accomplish' suicide. ("Accomplish" seems like the wrong term for suicide.)

From personal experience with men here, we feel alone. We feel no support exists because of the perception of society or the man himself. We believe that he is able to handle this himself. It is not true.

I try to impart with the men. One of the strongest things to do as a man is to ask for help. It is one of the hardest things to do. It shows a real fortitude. Even when we think that we don't ask for help, we do ask for help all the time.

We learned to drive, work machinery, and so on, by asking for help. I remind the men that I work with of this fact. There is support. It's been there all along. We need to work access it. It's akin to not asking for direction when you're lost.

It's thinking, "I'll not get lost." It's asking for directions.

This has socio-cultural impacts as well, not economic alone. Countries come to mind such as Canada and the United States. We lead the developed world in single motherhood. It seems, not in totality, of course, but in part associated with it.

Substance abuse seems like a part of it. The men can be kicked out of the home, can distance themselves feeling ashamed of not being able to provide for their children and family, and so on.

Absolutely, that's one of the things that we deal with here. When we reunite men with their families and children, it has dramatic affect on their ability to move forward in recovery when they can deal with the things causing them a great deal of shame.

That's one of the pieces in treatment. They haven't seen their family or children. They haven't paid child support or maintenance for their children. We help them work through those things together.

We'll sit with them as they make the phone call to maintenance enforcement to help them come up with a payment plan. So, they can get their driver's license back, get a job, start paying maintenance enforcement.

It is one of the factors. It is a part of it. As men, we think, "Well, buckle down and get to work." Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that, when the disease of addiction is part of the equation.

With respect to provincial and territorial governments, and national government, what are they providing to the organizations helping with the integration of men and women with addiction and substance abuse problems into society?

(Laughs) Not very well! To be clear they are trying, they are realizing that addiction is a huge problem.

I can specify. Are provincial/territorial doing better than national?

I don't see those things. The only thing I've seen recently is Alberta spent \$174 million in 2014 on the mental health arm of Alberta Health Services. It was something like 80% went to mental health concerns. 20% of that went to addiction, about \$34 million.

90% of that \$34 million was spent on in-house, within Alberta Health Services, and only \$4 million was spent outside of Alberta Health Services. Yet, in Alberta, Alberta Health Services only offers about 10% of the services being offered for addiction within Alberta.

90% of the work is being done with 10% of the money spent. I read it. It shocked me. The revenue that provincial governments get from taking alcohol sales. Yet, they don't seem to spend that back to treating the disease that has been identified as a disease created by the sale of alcohol or is being supported by the sale of alcohol.

I believe it's coming around now. The federal governments and provincial governments are beginning to realize here in Alberta that over 270 deaths from one specific drug, Fentanyl, in 2015. There's been a state of emergency on the Stoney-Lakota reserve.

It was initiated this week due to fentanyl. It wasn't 18 or 19-year-old kids. It's mothers, fathers, and 40 to 50-year-old people becoming addicted and dying from that drug. The social impetus is there, but it always seems governments are the last in line to make those changes.

Based on the science, as far as I can discern, the science on drugs, alcohol and other substances, show that there's a scale of harm. Certain illegal drugs do far less harm than legal alcohol. Do you think that we need a revision in the laws and policies based on the science?

There's two schools. One is legal and tax it all. The other, the temperance movement, is make it all illegal. Fortunately, I'm not a legislator. I don't need to draw that line, but addiction does not discriminate.

It doesn't matter the substance, whether legal or illegal – or the level of harm. It will always cause those difficulties in those major life areas. No matter the substance. From personal perspective, it is not a point of legislation that will take care of this problem.

It is a point of identification that it needs to be dealt with as we deal with other diseases that rip communities and take lives on a grand scale. You can legalize it all. Addiction will continue to exist. You make it all illegal. Addiction will continue to exist.

It is getting quality care for those with the disease rather than the legislative end of it.

What would be your major solution?

It would be education. It always is in any society. It's going to be early intervention and education.

Thank you for your time, AJ.

An Interview with Tong Liech - Support Worker, Fresh Start Recovery Centre

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

This interview has been edited.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, was there a family background in recovery in any way or in substance use?

Tong Liech: No, my father was a bit of a heavy drinker in my younger years, but not anymore. So, you could say, "Yes."

Jacobsen: How was growing up in terms of observations of a culture of substance use, at least in this country?

Liech: I didn't get into stuff until I came to this country. I started going to high school here in Canada, when I came here. It all started when I was in high school. I was trying to fit in with the new crowd. It started there. Then it grew into an addiction.

Jacobsen: Do you think that is a common story among those that end up using early on?

Liech: I think so. It plays a part because, for me, I really wanted to fit in, and the only way I could fit in was to start drinking and smoking weed, and cigarettes, just to fit in with the crowd. Yes, I think back in my time that was part of it.

Jacobsen: Having some time growing up in Liberia and Canada, do you note this as a consistent thing across cultures?

Liech: I was young in Liberia. So, I wasn't paying attention that. I only know my father and uncle. They used to drink. I actually had my first taste of beer from my father. That's what I noticed. Substance abuse, I wasn't really aware.

I would hear about people smoking opium, but I was a kid. Right? So, I wasn't really registering. I wasn't really focusing on what that was. There is a big difference there between Liberia and Canada.

But I moved to Canada when I was 15 turning 16. When I came here, it was when I started drinking. Drugs came earlier on, I started drinking and then drugs came later on. I started smoking marijuana when I was 17.

Then in my early 20s, I got introduced to cocaine and stuff like that. That's all I can remember from Liberia.

Jacobsen: When did you find Fresh Star Recovery Centre?

Liech: I found them in 2007. I came in there in 2007. I was on the wait list for about a month or a month and a half. Before that, I was already at or had attended treatment twice. I failed twice. Both times, it was at Salmon House.

I came into Fresh Start in 2007. That's when I came there.

Jacobsen: What was the experience for you going there? What were some key moments of realization and awakening for you?

Liech: First, all of the staff working there. They were addicts. They understood me because they had all been there. That played a big part. They understood what I was going through. That was a big part for me there.

I mean, that was the main part. There were other parts like what they were teaching me in group and my daily routine. Things like attending AA and AA meetings a few times a week. It was helpful to me. The counsellors there were all good people.

What really helped me out was that they were all recovering addicts, that made it a bit easier to go through. They knew what I had gone through.

Jacobsen: You have been a support worker for them as well. What tasks and responsibilities come along with this? What are some of the more moving experiences for you?

Liech: They really care about every resident. I have seen guys come in and relapse, and then they were brought back in – again and again. That’s one of the big things that I see there. These guys running the facility really care.

They never give up on these guys. If a guy relapses, he’s still welcome back to treatment. They still have faith and won’t give up on the guy. Other people would have given up on these guys. Fresh Start people did not give up on them.

They went out of their way to help the guys out with whatever they need. They have great love there. That’s what I see.

Jacobsen: For those that starting to sense for themselves that they have problems with substances, and that they likely need help, what would be your message to them? How can they get in contact with Fresh Start Recovery?

Liech: For those struggling with addiction, and want to turn it around, they can look us up. We are online. You can Google us. You can read about us. You can call our number and ask us. We can give you all of the information that you need to know to get started.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Tong.

PLACE 6: HARVEST HOUSE MINISTRIES

Harm Reduction Philosophy and Drug Use in Vancouver – Problems, Solutions, and Outcomes

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Harm reduction philosophy is associated with social justice based in rights and respect for drug users.^[i] The focus is, as the title implies, to reduce the harm to drug users. According to the Center for Addiction and Mental Health, it states, “Harm reduction is any program or policy designed to reduce drug-related harm without requiring the cessation of drug use.”^[ii]

Its framework emphasizes theory-to-practice with comprehensive strategies. It contrasts with the zero tolerance approach and its big four consequences. Rodney Skager in a publication for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says, “Proponents of the “big four” consequences – exclusion from extracurricular activities, transfer to another school, suspension, and expulsion – believe that harsh consequences...will deter other students...”^[iii]

Unfortunately, according to Rodney Skager, zero tolerance approaches worsen the problem. It “lacks credibility” and is backed by “punitive measures” that foster “resentment and oppositional behavior.”^[iv] In short, zero tolerance approaches don’t work. Colloquially, zero tolerance is absolutist, or ‘black-and-white’, and harm reduction is more ‘grey’ by implication. This is the divide between zero tolerance and harm reduction approaches.

The harm reduction philosophy has impacts. Why? Its philosophy and theory imply practice. Those that live in British Columbia know about the drug problem in Vancouver. Therefore, the main question narrows in approach and location, “What have been impacts of the harm reduction philosophy in Vancouver?”

Bear in mind, harm reduction philosophy is a non-idealistic view of drug abuse and use. No society will ever be drug-free. That means the philosophy is pragmatic. The focuses are the harms of drugs and the means through which to reduce them. That requires more background because the case study in the harm reduction philosophy applied to Vancouver has nuance.

That means there are numerous facets to the implementation phases of the program. For examples, these can include (non-exhaustively) the Four Pillars, the Insite program, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), Karmik, Simon Fraser University (SFU) community engagement research into if food programs can be used for harm reduction, and Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) education on safe drug use, safe sex, Neighbourhood Needle Recovery Program, and the Safer Smoking Pilot Project, and so on.^{[v],[vi],[vii],[viii]} Multiple avenues for solutions.

One sub-tenant of harm reduction philosophy is harm minimization, which means the aim to reduce or prevent harms associated with psychoactive drug use. Those psychoactive drugs can be illicit or licit. A number of programs have been put in place to combat this issue. Take, for instance, the Four Pillars drug strategy of the City of Vancouver.^[ix]

It is based on a 1990s model implemented in Europe with four principles or Four Pillars.^[x] Those are the following:

harm reduction

prevention

treatment

enforcement^[xi]

In major cities such as Frankfurt, Geneva, Sydney, and Zurich, the Four Pillars or principles had the results of reduction in number of drug users, overdose deaths, and infection rates of hepatitis and HIV.^[xii] In short, harm reduction as the central philosophical tenet. Prevention, treatment, and enforcement as the practice in the Four Pillar strategy.

All good things with success on important metrics with tallies of the number of people and the drug use consequence severity, in Europe. The assumption based on the association of success with the Four Pillars is the general applicability from Europe to North America. Each done in major cities. Vancouver is one as well. There's good reason to predict success, or improvement.

Some areas, writings, and discussions might seem familiar residents and visitors of Vancouver. For instance, Vancouver's Supervised Injection Facility, or Site, (SIF/SIS) gathers media attention.^{[xiii], [xiv]} Insite works, too.^[xv] Harm reduction policy has not been comprehensive enough with reports on the inattention to crack as one case, though.^[xvi] However, VANDU focuses on heroine *and* crack. There's a meshwork of organizations devoted to harm reduction.

Some individualization occurs with publications emphasizing women's health via women centered harm reduction.^[xvii] Depending on the peoples, some First Nation, Inuit, Métis might find harm reduction policies against beliefs, customs, and traditions.^[xviii] These issues come into consideration as the program is implemented and expanded via networking.

This takes cultural awareness and sensitivity, specification of the drug type, number of people, and severity of use and abuse. Also, it might require tailoring the principles and program to the community and situation, and conducting outreach to the media to improve public perception of the issues of drug abuse and use in the public sphere. It can be grassroots too. On the ground, the homeless in Vancouver created tent city to advocate for social housing.^[xix] What does this mean?

Overall, and without an exhaustive description of the various aspects to the problems of drug use, from the general theoretical ethics and concerns of harm reduction to the particular organizations (grassroots and formal) and publications, harm reduction philosophy has been a net good in terms of outcomes in Vancouver.

Footnotes

^[i] *Principles of Harm Reduction* (n.d.). states:

Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use. Harm Reduction is also a movement for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs.

Harm reduction incorporates a spectrum of strategies from safer use, to managed use to abstinence to meet drug users "where they're at," addressing conditions of use along with the use itself. Because harm reduction demands that interventions and policies designed to serve drug users reflect specific individual and community needs, there is no universal definition of or formula for implementing harm reduction.

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[v] Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users. (2016). Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users. Retrieved from <http://www.vandu.org/>.

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There is likewise confusion when harm reduction measures are considered by Aboriginal peoples. Some First Nation, Inuit and Métis people maintain that harm reduction policies and practices go against their customs, traditions and beliefs. They believe using mind-altering substances causes a person to be “out of balance.” Others, however, consider that there are similarities between a harm reduction philosophy and traditional Aboriginal values. For example, respect is a traditional Aboriginal teaching—and respecting the choices of individuals, families and communities and “where they are at” is a premise of harm reduction.

In fact, the concept of choice underpins a harm reduction philosophy. Harm reduction policies and programs acknowledge that people and their communities are the ‘experts’ on their own experiences. As experts, they are best positioned to decide how to reduce the harm they experience because of substance abuse. Consider, for example, the Quesnel Tillicum Society Native Friendship Centre in northern British Columbia. Based on a need identified within and responded to by the community, the centre provides needles, condoms, swabs and needle exchange containers at no charge to community members.

Harm reduction, at its core, is simply a practice or strategy that reduces the harms individuals face because of their problematic use of substances.

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