



Short Reflections on Age and Youth: The Strange Arithmetic of Living

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
&
Dr. Herb Silverman

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Short Reflections on Age and Youth: The Strange Arithmetic of Living

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 15, 2026

Preface: Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Short Reflections on Age and Youth: The Strange Arithmetic of Living is the third collaborative book project with Dr. Herb Silverman. Its purpose is to offer a modest counterweight to the confusion, cynicism, despair, moral panic, and polarization of the contemporary period.

We look at age and youth from the viewpoint of a gentle, evidence-based, humanist, psychologically realistic, and skeptical lens. The emphasis is on how to live sanely in an ideologically driven age without supernatural scaffolding, by cultivating epistemic habits for deciding what is true, committing to be and do good since reasonable, and learning how to participate and build community.

Silverman looks to Lincoln and Gandhi as morally serious people, but with serious moral flaws, including racism, entanglement with caste, and some troubling conduct. He takes Bertrand Russell as a good summary of freethought ethics, while resisting the notion that a new paradigm is necessary for freethought movements. He instead emphasizes a slow, methodical, considerate, community civics-oriented, and universal, rather than radical or faith-based, approach to social change.

Freethought, with or without declining religious affiliation, has internationally altered the character of religious interpretation, belief, and practice. We see a decline in Catholicism and a rise in the Nones in Latin America. We see formal secularism embedded in law in Russia. We see atheism, humanism, and rationalism becoming more visible in India. Christian nationalists and hardline anti-science movements in the United States, generally speaking, are widely disliked by mainstream scientific and secular communities.

China represses some religions; that raises questions about freedom of conscience, even for views we dislike. The style of religious belief has changed substantially, too. Even so, we live in an age of disinformation and misinformation, with a vast dependence on a fragmented media ecosystem for being presented with the facts of our shared social and political worlds.

Freethought communities can serve as a cultural and ethical North Star for our young and our old. Our intergenerational dialogue provides a case study of these values and the freethought community's influence in practice.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 15, 2026

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 1 — Freethought for the 21st Century

2020/01/01

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about youth freethought issues with an American lens.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have published several books, on mathematics, on personal history, and on secularism. We published two. One last year. One this year. We agreed on a series devoted to younger generations of freethinkers. Let's begin: Who is the prime example of international vision and human values known in history to you? Also, what is the first principle of freethought for the 21st century?

Dr. Herb Silverman. It's not easy to choose just one person to feature as a prime example of international vision and human values, when so many come to mind.

I thought about choosing Abraham Lincoln, who was responsible for ending slavery in the United States. However, he did not always have humanistic views of black people. During the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, Lincoln said, "I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters of the negroes, or jurors, or qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people." He added that he viewed the white race as superior to the black race. Lincoln did not differ from most white males in the North and South at the time. Even though he was an abolitionist, and despite his many other good qualities, Abraham Lincoln was a white supremacist.

Another I thought about choosing was Mahatma Gandhi, who employed nonviolent resistance to lead a successful campaign for India's independence from British rule. Gandhi's campaign inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. He supported religious pluralism and, though Hindu, himself, was sympathetic to Muslims when part of India was sectioned off in 1947 into Pakistan, a Muslim country. Gandhi, however, was not without faults. He opposed calling a caste of Hindus "Untouchables," which he referred to as *Harijans*, or "Children of God," but he still supported the caste system.

While Gandhi supported many rights for women, he did not support their economic independence or equal rights in all areas. At the age of 38, in 1906, Gandhi took a vow of chastity (without first discussing this with his wife). When Gandhi's wife died in 1944, Gandhi decided to test himself by sleeping in the same room with other women (first in separate beds, then in the same bed with clothes on, and finally naked). Not a good example of human values.

My choice for a universal role model is Nelson Mandela, who was a South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, political leader, and philanthropist. He became involved in anti-colonial and African nationalist politics in 1943, joining the African National Congress (ANC). Its primary mission was to bring all Africans together as one people and to defend their rights and freedoms, including full voting rights for black and mixed-race South Africans. At the time, South Africa's white-only government promoted apartheid, a form of racial segregation that privileged whites. Mandela and the ANC committed themselves to overthrowing apartheid.

Mandela was repeatedly arrested for seditious activities and was unsuccessfully prosecuted for treason in 1956. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1962 as a terrorist and for leading the then-outlawed ANC. With growing domestic and international pressure, and fears of a racial civil war, President de Klerk released him in 1990. Mandela and de Klerk then led efforts to negotiate an end to apartheid, which resulted in the 1994 multiracial general election in which Mandela led the ANC to victory and became president. Mandela's 1994 book *Long Walk to Freedom*, describes his 27 years in prison, and rejection of bitterness after his release.

Mandela served as president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999, the country's first black head of state and the first elected in a fully representative democratic election. Presiding over the transition from apartheid minority rule to a multicultural democracy, Mandela saw national reconciliation as the primary task of his presidency. He emphasized reconciliation between the country's racial groups and created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate past human rights abuses. Having seen other post-colonial African economies damaged by the departure of white elites, Mandela worked to reassure South Africa's white population that they were protected and represented in the "rainbow nation," a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

As president, Mandela said, "South Africa's future foreign relations should be based on our belief that human rights should be the core of international relations." Following the South African example, he encouraged other nations to resolve conflicts through diplomacy and reconciliation. Mandela declined a second presidential term, and in 1999 was succeeded by his deputy. Mandela became an elder statesman and founded the charitable Nelson Mandela Foundation to promote freedom and equality for all. It focuses on rural development, school construction, and combating HIV/AIDS. He also founded the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund.

Mandela was raised Methodist, and theologian Dion Foster described him as a Christian humanist. Mandela never had a strong religious faith. He was influenced by Marxism, and he advocated scientific socialism, a society ruled by a scientific government whose sovereignty rests on reason.

I'll close this portion with some quotes from Nelson Mandela:

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion."

"We must strive to be moved by a generosity of spirit that will enable us to outgrow the hatred and conflicts of the past."

“You will achieve more in this world through acts of mercy than you will through acts of retribution.”

“As I am former prisoner number 46664, there is a special place in my heart for all those that are denied access to their basic human rights.”

“There can be no greater gift than that of giving one’s time and energy to help others without expecting anything in return.”

You also ask about the first principle of freethought for the 21st century. I don’t see why there should be anything special about the 21st century, other than that I’m pleased more people (especially younger people) are identifying as freethinkers. I like to see more people so identify, which is easier to do than when I was young and most people incorrectly equated religious belief with morality.

I like to put a positive face on freethought. We want to maximize happiness, which often involves making others happy, too. We have one life to live, and one chance to do something meaningful with it. The mathematician/philosopher Bertrand Russell summed it up nicely: “The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” But if I had to choose a first principle of freethought for any century, it would simply be the slogan on my wife’s T-shirt: “Be good, do good.” We really don’t need anything more complicated than that.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 2 — Freethought for a Multipolar World

2020/01/06

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about youth freethought issues in a multipolar world.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The 21st century will witness the decline and fall of some nation-states, even the rise, decline, and fall of others. In short, the world is becoming more and more plural, as we saw since the end of WWII.

The difference will be the rapidity of this geostrategic change in the world. Much freethought came from the United States in the 20th century. This, in some ways, reflected its dominant economic and military position in the world.

With legitimate individual nation-state (e.g., India, China, Japan, Germany, etc.) and coalition (e.g., BRIC) competitors, the world changes. Unipolar, i.e., America, in the middle of the 20th century. Bipolar, i.e., America and the Soviet Union, in the latter 20th century. Multipolar, i.e., everyone, as the 21st century progresses.

How should younger people be thinking about this issue? How will this change the thought landscape of the various secular identities adopted by individuals marking their freethought territory?

Dr. Herb Silverman: You mentioned BRIC, which is an acronym for the developing nations of Brazil, Russia, India, and China — countries that many believe will become the dominant suppliers of manufactured goods, services, and raw materials by 2050. In 2010, South Africa joined the group, making it BRICS. They then became a political organization, embracing global capitalism and cooperation among its members, hoping to influence the United States on trade policies.

So what, if anything, does BRICS have to do with freethought? Countries that influence the economies in other parts of the world also tend to influence cultures there, which may include religious beliefs.

Latin America has 42 percent of the world's Catholic population, but the Catholic hierarchy is worried. In Brazil, the most populous country in Latin America, only 65 percent say they are Catholic, down from more than 90 percent in 1970. And lots of these Catholics rarely attend Mass. Some have left the Catholic Church because of competition from evangelical and

charismatic churches. One major problem for the Catholic Church has been a drop in the number of children couples are having. Religion is largely hereditary, where children usually adopt the religion of their parents. Fewer children means fewer baptisms and fewer confirmations as well as fewer candidates to become priests and nuns. Further, women who have fewer children are likely to be more secure and better educated, with less need for a dogmatic religion. But an even bigger threat to the Catholic Church in Latin America might be the growing secularism and indifference to religion. As in Europe and the United States, more and more say they have no religious affiliation. The Brazilian Association of Atheists and Agnostics was founded in 2008.

Despite many problems with Vladimir Putin and Russia, restriction of religious freedom does not appear to be one of them. The Russian Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Association declares all religions equal and prohibits government interference in religion. By law the country is a secular state without a state religion.

I went to India in 1997 to give a series of mathematics talks at universities around the country. While there, I visited the Periyar Self-Respect Center in Madras, run by atheists and humanists. Their primary goals are to eliminate the caste system, improve the status of women, and combat superstition created by religion. They sponsor educational programs and hold free clinics for women's health and family planning. There is now a Freethought Party of India consisting of freethinkers and social reformers, whose platform includes eradication of caste, creed, and state patronization of superstitions and inhumane religious practices. One current problem in India is the struggle between those who want to retain its official secular status against encroachment by Hindus. A controversial new law would fast-track citizenship for religious minorities except for Muslims, with whom the majority Hindus have had a long history of conflict.

China persecutes Christians and Muslims (I guess there aren't enough Jews in China to worry about.). I'm pleased to say that resistance against such persecution has been growing. China will do what I have thought about doing — rewrite the Bible to reflect my views. There are many interesting fables from which to draw valuable lessons. There is also reasonable humanistic advice, which one can accept without the supernatural. Thomas Jefferson set an example when he rewrote the Bible, using a razor to cut out supernatural stories and keep what he considered to be good morality. Jefferson referred to what remained of his bible as "diamonds in a dunghill."

China is planning to rewrite the Bible and Quran to reflect socialist values consistent with the beliefs of the Communist Party. Paragraphs deemed wrong by the censors will be amended or re-translated to prevent extreme thoughts and heretical ideas from eroding the country. I have no problem with such an undertaking, except that the official versions of the Bible and Quran would be banned. While I might actually prefer the rewriting, as I did with the Jefferson Bible, I value religious freedom more.

South Africa is a secular state with freedom of religion enshrined in its Constitution. The newly formed South African Secular Society is a community of atheists who have social events, do good works, and show a positive face for nonbelievers.

As far as what young freethinkers in different countries should do in the 21st century, I think the century doesn't matter. All humans need a sense of community, which is what has helped

churches to survive for so many centuries. I think we should take whatever positive examples we find in churches, and participate in local freethought communities to meet and support like-minded people. If there is none in your area, then think of helping to start one. Also, consider joining one or more national and international freethought groups. Don't be concerned about the name (freethought, atheist, agnostic, humanist, secular humanist, rationalist, etc.). They all disbelieve in the same gods.

You can also search the Internet for freethought groups that meet online. Personally, I prefer human interaction, but I understand that some might prefer the anonymity the Internet affords. I'm certainly pleased to see the decline of religion in most societies, but I hope we can effectively help the rise of non-religion through various freethought groups.

And while we're on the subject of international freethought, I'll mention the 2020 World Humanist Congress on August 6–9 in Miami, Florida. The Congress will be hosted by the American Humanist Association and Humanists International. Humanists, atheist, and skeptic organizations from around the globe will present speakers, seminars, panel discussions, and networking. You can find out more at *humanism2020.org*.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 3 — Coming of Age in an Ever, Ever-Irrational World

2020/01/13

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about science and technology and new generations.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: New generations, if we're thinking in terms of decades into the 2000s — and beyond my own lifetime too, living in current level industrial societies and industrializing societies (even towards more sustainability) will witness declines in religion. This comes with a rise in science, as we see now.

Religion declines in the more advanced economies, the more scientific societies. Technological societies without a scientific backdrop may not see this in the future, as one does not need to question the fundamentals of nature (of the basic claims of the religious or general culture). One can simply acquire technological know-how without questioning supernaturalistic dogma.

These new, fortunate, and tech-savvy generations harbour far more power, far more access to data (and mis-data). Even so, irrationalities abound, will continue, and new ones will pop up. What is the first lesson in coming of age here? What is the modern lesson for a wondrous technological world full of silicon-made wonders?

What is a caveat to this with most of the users of technology disconnected from the linkage between scientific progress and technological progress, and the naturalistic philosophy behind both? Most, the vast majority, of the world believe this world links up with a whole other one, the unseen. Perhaps, also, a listing of ways to detect bunkum are in order, too.

Dr. Herb Silverman: Technology is our present and future, and young people need to embrace it. Being tech-savvy in the workplace is becoming a necessity for job seekers. Schools need to educate students for this reality so they will be able to transition into the work world. Workers presently employed need to be able to master new technology, expect frequent updates and changes to software, and learn how to stay on top of those advances.

For most of human history, technological improvements were achieved by chance, trial and error, or inspiration. The modern scientific enterprise matured in the Enlightenment and concerned itself primarily with fundamental questions of nature. Research and development directed toward immediate technical application arose with the Industrial Revolution and became commonplace

in the twentieth century. Science deals with theories, principals, and laws, while technology deals with products, processes, and designs. Science has helped us gain some knowledge of the universe and make accurate predictions on future outcomes. Technology, on the other hand, has helped to simplify our work by providing us with products that help get better results in less time.

A downside to technology is that digital media can pervade the lives of people, many of whom can't imagine a social life without it. A study at the University of Maryland asked students to give up digital media for 24 hours and then write about their experience. The study concluded that "most college students are not just unwilling, but functionally unable to be without media links to the world." Without digital ties, students felt unconnected even to those who were close by. This sounds to me a lot like addiction. Another problem with social media is that people often filter out opposing points of view, leading to confirmation bias.

Most tech-savvy folks understand that their technology was created through science, but may not be interested in learning the underlying science. That's fine with me. Similarly, people feel safe flying on planes without knowing the science behind air flights. On the other hand, I think every educated person should know the rudiments of science even if they don't directly use science in their field of work. When I was younger, people used to be embarrassed that they didn't know science. These days I sometimes hear intellectuals, even within academe, matter-of-factly say, "I know nothing about science." To me, this is comparable to saying, "I can't read or write."

Even worse than people who are comfortable being ignorant of science are those who say they don't "believe" in science, as if science were merely a belief. Religious fundamentalists don't accept the parts of science that conflict with their holy books, sometimes referring to science as anti-religion. But in searching for truths, science does not try to debunk religious myths, though that may be a consequence of some scientific findings. Much of what we know about the age of the Earth, cosmology, archaeology, biology, and history conflicts with a literal interpretation of the Bible. For too many people, it's much easier to ignore science and prepare for an afterlife, while being comfortably clueless about the workings in this life.

Evolution is one of the most interesting and important basic facts of science. Just about all evolution deniers are religious. Even religious people who accept evolution almost always try to stick their god somewhere into the process, though biologists would never do that. This makes religious people creationists because they believe their god created the Universe and life on Earth. Evolution is a completely natural process with no supernatural inventor needed.

Religious people do accept some science that improves their quality of life, like penicillin, television, microwaves, and so forth. Often they don't know there is basic science behind these conveniences. This includes antibiotics, which is based on evolution. If humanity had continued to apply religious belief without solid physical knowledge, how far would we have gotten? Modern history books describe such a period as the Dark Ages.

The term "elites" arouses a negative feeling in many people, however elite is defined. The United States has a billionaire president who attacks the elites. Scientists are part of that elite in his mind. Their superiority based on education and experience gives them knowledge and expertise

that most people, even a president, don't have. Mention of climate change, vaccines, evolution, or the Big Bang, inclines some people to disbelieve these things and hold scientists suspect.

Science deniers don't want to hear long explanations about greenhouse gases, germ theory, the fossil record, or an expanding universe. They prefer to believe it's all a gigantic hoax.

But I am hopeful for the future. I think we need to train more people as science popularizers, and that scientists should become more adept at written and verbal communication. Some of the best science popularizers have been Isaac Asimov, Stephen J. Gould, Carl Sagan, Bill Nye, and Neil deGrasse Tyson. Through their appealing personalities and convincing evidence, they have shown that it's possible to excite and educate the public about scientific concepts.

I'm a leftist, but I'll close with a few comments I sometimes hear from leftists with whom I disagree.

"The truth is unique to each of us since we decide individually what we consider to be truth. Every human being is unique and will see the world differently. We construct our own realities." No, deciding something is true doesn't make it so. People can say the Earth is flat, but I accept the scientific evidence that it's not.

"To be intellectually honest one cannot prove the non-existence of God any more than the existence. Therefore, there is a certain amount of 'faith' taken in both positions." I don't understand how someone can profess "faith" (belief without evidence) in many things that are shown by science to be demonstrably false. We can't prove or disprove the existence of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, but I would not say there is a certain amount of "faith" taken in both positions. Under certain circumstances, I'm comfortable concluding that an absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

Some on the left with whom I disagree also favor homeopathy, are anti-vaxxers or anti-GMO. Some consider that science and mathematics are anti-feminist and represent patriarchal oppression because they are not subjective or open to interpretation and different ways of thinking. I've also heard complaints that science is not democratic.

Call me undemocratic, too, but I think this is the bottom line: Opinions of the uninformed shouldn't count. Feel free to disagree, but be prepared to show me the evidence.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 4 — Bridges are the Rainbows

2020/01/21

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about technology, religion, natural philosophy, and the future.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The foundation of the Secular Coalition for America remains a landmark apart from the smaller organizations, including the student groups, in the freethought organizational landscape. The Freedom From Religion Foundation, Humanists International, and a few others maintain a large coalition. They have members. They have the followings. Member organizations pay membership fees. These fees get funnelled back into staff and campaigns for further work to improve the situation on the front of secular equality, freedom of thought, and freedom from religion. These are the bridges, the rainbows, to the lucky gold. The untrained enthusiasm of youth can be good in its vigour. It can be bad in its poor directionality towards a singular target for efficacy. Any lessons on channelling the energy of youth? Any notes on the importance of developing the discipline to become effective? Any commentary on going out and doing something — something concrete, specific, and reasonable — rather than wishing-it-were-so, e.g., not praying, not meditating on a wanted targeted objective, not daydreaming (as much), or passing the buck?

Dr. Herb Silverman: All 20 national member organizations of the Secular Coalition for America try to attract young people to join their organizations. Two organizations in particular focus on this: The Secular Student Alliance (SSA) and Camp Quest. SSA is dedicated to atheist, humanist, and other nontheistic students. Its goal is to empower secular students to proudly express their identity, build welcoming communities, promote secular values, and set a course for lifelong activism. Over 300 student organizations belong to the SSA, with more than 1,600 programs in schools that impact over 28,000 students. Camp Quest provides an educational summer adventure that features science, natural wonders, and humanist values. A network of Camp Quest summer camps for children and teens encourages critical thinking, skepticism and fun. Aimed at campers from the atheist, agnostic, and other secular families, Camp Quest is open to campers from all worldview backgrounds.

The Secular Coalition for America advocates for religious freedom as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and works to bring visibility and respect for people without religious beliefs. The Secular Coalition represents its national member organizations and their hundreds of local secular groups. It joins with allies in faith communities, combining the power

of grassroots activism with professional lobbying to make an impact on the laws and policies that govern the separation of religion and government. Please consider signing up with the Secular Coalition for action alerts on pending legislation. You can find all the national nontheistic member organizations of the Secular Coalition for America at <https://secular.org/about/members/>

Young people are encouraged to become active within the Secular Coalition for America, as well as in local, national, and international freethought organizations. Some organizations with paid staff bring in young people as unpaid interns, giving them an opportunity to learn from the inside how an organization works. Such valuable experience can help young people become more active in their local community, and sometimes leads to future paid employment in the secular movement.

I am optimistic about the future because national surveys show that there are more young people without religion than ever before. The secular movement is growing, both formally through secular organizations and informally through “nones,” those who don’t subscribe to any faith. The “nones” are the fastest-growing demographic related to “religion,” especially among young people. According to a recent American Family survey, 35 percent of Americans said they are atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” That number grows to 44 percent for people age 18–29. I hope that those of us who identify as atheists or humanists will not only join secular organizations, but also try to give “nones” who we know a reason to join. A lot of them favour separation of religion and government and would like to help counter the influence of religion in government.

While respecting the work and value of membership organizations and coalitions, many young people are interested in making a difference by doing something good, and not just joining a non-religious group. I’ve seen this at my own local secular humanist organization, where some younger members are not interested in our monthly lectures or book club. They show up only for charitable projects. Recent events have included picking up trash for an “Adopt a Highway” program, contributing food for a community lunch to help homeless people, volunteering at a local food bank, and assisting at a Youth Development Center. Helping others is the very essence of being a humanist. This also includes atheists and humanists who give time and money for charitable work. I hope to see all secular organizations have a charitable component.

One member organization of the Secular Coalition for America devotes itself exclusively to charitable work. The Foundation Beyond Belief is a humanist charity that promotes secular volunteering and responsible financial donations. Guided by the principles of secular humanism, the mission of Foundation Beyond Belief is to unite the humanist community in charitable efforts and advocate for compassionate action throughout the world. It is currently supporting humanist disaster recovery by raising funds for the victims of the Puerto Rico earthquakes. People of all ages may wish to contribute time or money to this worthwhile organization.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 5 — We Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere, No-Time Soon: Supernaturalistic Traditions and Naturalistic Philosophies in the Future

2022/01/25

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism’s History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about community formation in the future, similarities and differences.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Two trends seem apparent. One, as societies develop, they become more oriented to the technical, even mechanical and certainly digital. This affects the analog acceptance of the mystery orientation of traditional — most — religion. In that, as you note, traditional religion declines. Religions that change survive with a small number thriving.

Two, something follows from one. Although, as most of the world continues to develop, most of the young continue on rapid rejections of traditional religion. Another contingent appeared in the 20th century, even earlier, looking for similar patterns of life as traditional religion without some of the now-seen-as-baggage.

For those young humanists, who want some of the patterns of life of traditional religion without the excess cargo, how can they formulate some communities for themselves? Not merely joining those which take on the appearances of traditional religious communities with secular philosophy. What pathways exist for them? What roads have simply been grown over with scientific roots and overgrown with technological trees?

Dr. Herb Silverman: You ask how young humanists can formulate their own communities. Some might want patterns of life of traditional religion without the excess cargo (theism), some are more interested in a community with a secular philosophy that has nothing to do with religion, and some might want a community that actively opposes the excesses of religion. I’ll try to address all these concerns, and begin by describing the two communities I was involved in starting.

When I ran for Governor of South Carolina in 1990 to challenge the unconstitutional provision in our state constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office, I got unsigned hate mail and anonymous phone calls. But I also received letters and calls of support and appreciation. Many had thought they were the only atheists in South Carolina, and most were closeted for fear of social and family disapproval. These isolated atheists needed a supportive community, so with

my list of names I suggested meeting at the local library to see if there was interest in organizing a group. So in 1994 we formed a secular humanist group in Charleston, with a dozen founding members. Because a secular humanist group in the Bible Belt was so unusual at that time, we received considerable media attention. We would hear from people who disliked us and from people who wanted to join us. It was easily worth the trade-off.

In 1998, a student came to my office and asked about starting a group at the College of Charleston, where I was teaching. I was thrilled and agreed to be its faculty advisor. Despite attempts by a few Christian students in the Student Council to oppose giving official club status to the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group, the group prevailed. When they first met, several students talked about friends or roommates who now shunned them because of their nonbelief. These atheist students came to meetings because they needed a supportive community. Gradually attitudes at the College of Charleston changed and students worried far less about becoming unpopular because of openly being atheists. I've heard students say they joined the club because atheist students are pretty cool. They are, but they were also cool in 1998. I'm encouraged by the younger generation's wider acceptance of diversity in our society.

As far as those who like some religious ceremony without the baggage, I was raised as an Orthodox Jew and stopped believing in God shortly after my bar mitzvah at age 13. I still like some of the Hebrew songs I sang as a child, but a line in the Peter, Paul, and Mary song "I Dig Rock and Roll Music" explains why I don't sing them today. The line is "They got a good thing going when the words don't get in the way." The words of my Hebrew songs when translated into English were prayers to God, which definitely got in the way.

My wife Sharon was raised Catholic, went to Catholic schools, and as an adult became an atheist like me. She now wants nothing to do with Catholicism, but around Christmas time she enjoys going to performances of Handel's "Messiah." I kid her by saying, "Tonight you are going to see your Lord and Savior."

Two good sources for starting a freethought organization might be the Secular Student Alliance with its membership of young people, and the British Humanist Association, located in a country where religious belief has been in disfavor for quite a while. I especially like some of the quotes on the British Humanist website, including:

George Orwell: "Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

Thomas Paine: "My country is the world. My religion is to do good."

Stephen Hawking: "Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet."

Voltaire: "Think for yourself and let others enjoy the privilege of doing so too."

Bertrand Russell: If we are to live together and not die together, we must learn a kind of charity and a kind of tolerance that is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet."

Mary Shelley: "Live and be happy, and make others so."

Marie Curie: "Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."

Shappi Kohrsandi: “Doing a good thing is its own reward. It feels good in and of itself, and that’s enough.”

Rosalind Franklin: “Faith in this world is entirely possible without faith in another world.”

Benjamin Franklin: “There never was a good war or a bad peace.”

Terry Pratchett: “In ancient times, cats were worshipped as gods. They have not forgotten this.”

If you are interested in forming your own freethought community, there are many options. The simplest is probably to affiliate with one of the national organizations, which would help you get started locally. There are even atheist churches that you might want to join, or start one locally. There are also nontheistic religions that I’ve joined: Humanist Unitarians, American Ethical Union, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Presumably you are interested in starting a group because there is none in your area, you want to make a difference in your community, you advocate for reason and science, and would like to end discrimination against secular people. You will need a core of committed volunteers interested in joining you to form an organization. One way to find such people is by attending meetings of organizations whose participants are likely to hold similar beliefs. Depending on your interests it might include science meetings, Unitarian churches, Ethical Culture societies, LGBTQ groups, the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood, etc. Find out how these organizations are run and talk to people who might be interested in affiliating with your organization. For those interested, find out if they have friends who might also be interested. You can also post fliers in bookstores, community centers, libraries, and nearby universities.

You should also have an “elevator speech” explaining why you want to start a group and what you hope to accomplish. This could include the importance of interacting with like-minded people because there are so few in the community or learning how to respond individually and as a group to political threats from the religious right who would like to impose their beliefs on all of society.

Once you have an interested community of volunteers, discuss details of the group. This could include how activist the group might be, what kind of social and charitable events you might have, whether you will have outside talks and educational opportunities, and what type of leadership structure you might have. Keep in mind that some of these things will change when you add new members with fresh ideas. Of course, you will eventually want a website, a Facebook presence, Meetup, Twitter, and other forms of technology.

Sometimes religious people claim to speak for the entire community, which marginalizes secular folks. Point out that this is discrimination. It helps to find common ground with religious people in your community, working together to perform good works. The individuals you work with and help are likely to become friends. These religious people will understand that we don’t think there is a purpose OF life, but that we find purposes IN life. They will see that we are not striving for brownie points in an afterlife, but looking to do good in this life.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 6 — Age is Numbers, Youth is Attitude

2020/01/30

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about aging well.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You continue activity in the freethought communities. Not only as a presence to give a reminder of history and to honour successes, but as an active participant in community, someone who others admire.

Age slows us down. It just ticks up, and up, and up, in the numbers. A scythe hovering ever-present with each passing year. But we can maintain a youthful attitude. One of curiosity, discovery, sociability, and affability.

Even as we're bound to get old, what are some tips to keeping a positive disposition while not denying some of the uglier realities of life, of time, of age?

Dr. Herb Silverman: I'm 77 years old, and I retired in 2009 as Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston. I dislike the word "retired," which sounds like I used to be tired and now I'm tired again. I'm not really tired. What retired actually means is that I'm no longer making money for the work I do. Fortunately, I have enough money to satisfy all my needs through a reasonable pension, an investment retirement account (IRA), and Social Security, so I am able to sleep at night without worrying about paying bills. I've never been invested in consumerism or accumulating possessions.

One of the best things about retirement for me is that I can stay busy doing things I love to do. It was easy for me to retire because my passion had turned from mathematics to secular causes. Even before retiring, it's a good idea to volunteer your services to groups or organizations you feel are worth your time. Volunteerism is not just about helping others. It helps the volunteer, too. People are much happier in later life if they have given to others and not thought only about themselves.

Another way to keep a positive disposition is to have a wonderful life partner. For me it is my wife, Sharon. Behind the scenes, Sharon has usually been involved in any successes I have had. She edits just about whatever I write, except for my mathematics papers. It also helps to have a sense of humor and to laugh a lot, which Sharon always does at my jokes.

The “Golden Years” of your life are called Golden because this is the time when you can finally do all the things you wanted to without having to worry about getting time off. You can go out and enjoy yourself. Lifetime learning is also important for everyone. There are often opportunities for retirees to take courses at a nearby university at a very low cost. If you are retired, staying engaged with young people is especially worthwhile. For some retirees, there is a tendency just to hang out with other old farts. It’s possible to grow old without feeling old.

Most of us realize as we get older that we can’t or shouldn’t try to do everything we used to do. Some time ago, I decided to step back from leadership positions I held, partly because I have less energy, but mostly because I knew it was time to make room for younger people with fresh ideas. Before it became time to kick me out, I chose to no longer be president of the Secular Coalition for America, president of our local secular humanist group, board member of the Atheist Alliance, board member of the American Humanist Association, faculty advisor to the College of Charleston Atheist/Humanist Alliance, etc. However, I still fully support all of these organizations as well as other groups.

Old age can also bring unpleasant surprises. Last year at age 76, I suffered a stroke. This was quite a shock to my doctors and me because I had no risk factors (other than a mother who died of a stroke) and I was doing all the right things, eating healthy foods and exercising for about an hour each morning. After my stroke, I received physical therapy for several weeks. I’m pretty much fully recovered (thank no god), except for a slight weakness on my right side and occasional slurring of speech. I felt the best thing for me to do after my stroke was to pick myself up and go on with life as if nothing had happened. In happy aging, there is no room to focus on regrets.

There is no sense worrying about what might happen in the future. I deal with things when they happen, appreciate what I have, and approach each day with a sense of purpose. It certainly helps to have family, friends, and a caring community. When I was young, I wanted to be noticed. As I got older, I wanted to make a difference. I must admit that I am now also interested in establishing a legacy. It’s nice to know that when I die I will be able to leave money to secular organizations and secular causes.

End of life choices should be made explicit, and not just for the elderly because we don’t know when time might be up for us. If I ever reach the point when my mind is gone, I want someone to pull the plug. I told Sharon specifically to pull the plug if I start saying that I believe in God.

Something else I recommend for everyone, which I already did, is to write your autobiography. One of the best ways to learn about yourself is to write about yourself. Also, people should write about things they know, and who is more of an expert about you than you?

Finally, I’ll close with this Mark Twain quote, “ Do not complain about growing old. It is a privilege denied to many.”

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 7 — The Nature of Nature in the Nature of Time

2020/02/05

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about the time of our lives and in life.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does the perception of time change — ahem — over time? When it comes to this particular realization, how does this change the subjective perception of others of a younger cohort in terms of their experience of the passing of time? What seems like the nature of nature in the nature of changing perceptions of time? Why is a life plan important — at some point, eventually — for the integration of one's youthful past with their middle and later years of — in normal circumstances — expected lifespan?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Your questions make me think of “September Song,” which begins, “Oh, it’s a long, long while from May to December, but the days grow short when you reach September.” The song is a metaphor for one year serving as a person’s life span from birth to death. (If you want to hear the song on YouTube, I recommend the Willie Nelson version.)

Our perceptions of time do change as we age. When I was young a day seemed quite long, but now, at 77, when night comes I wonder why the day has seemed so short. I’m happy to still be here and I plan to make each of my remaining days meaningful. I feel that I have so much to do and so little time. I’m fortunate to have a life partner like Sharon, which brings me to more lyrics from the September Song, “Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few. September, November. And these few precious days, I’ll spend with you. These precious days, I’ll spend with you.”

You mention expected lifespan, but that only represents a statistical average. We assume younger people will live many more years than older people, and they should plan accordingly, but one never knows. Some good strategies likely to increase lifespan, whether young or old, include eating healthy, exercising regularly, having close friends, avoiding tobacco, not drinking in excess, reducing stress, regular check-ups, and getting enough sleep. Young people can often get away with ignoring some of these strategies, but it will likely catch up with you later in life and you may regret some of your youthful bad habits.

A life plan is certainly more important for younger people than for older people because it’s a good idea to plan for what is expected to be a long future. Think about what you want to achieve in life and then how to go about accomplishing it. You need to be flexible, because your goals

might change. Regardless, getting a good education is important because it will probably provide skills for whatever career path you choose. Education is also helpful when looking for the kind of work you really enjoy, rather than just taking a job to make money.

Engaging politically when you are young can be more beneficial than when you are old, because many of the issues currently being discussed are more likely to affect the young. Presently, the primary issue is climate change, which is affecting people now and will become more problematic in the future. Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden is a good role model. Other issues in which young people should become active include healthcare, education, religious freedom, immigration, racism, sexism, terrorism, gun safety, and free speech. Oh, and make sure you vote.

If you are young, you should assume you will live for many more years, and plan accordingly. This means doing what you can to prepare for a comfortable retirement. You can think about what hobbies you might want to pursue when you have more leisure time. You also want to have enough money to enjoy a comfortable retirement, which could last a long time if you are healthy and lucky. When I was young, I didn't really think much about saving for retirement. Fortunately, my academic institutions required that some of my salary be set aside to invest in my retirement. That, along with a pension and social security when I retired, helped to eliminate financial worries for me.

Here's something we all need to realize: Life is a sexually transmitted disease with a 100% mortality rate. Yes, we are all going to die someday. We are fragile creatures who have been dying from the moment we were born into a universe that has no purpose. There is no purpose of life, so we all need to find purposes in life. There's no need to delude ourselves into thinking that we will have an afterlife, so we ought to decide what we want to accomplish in this, our one and only, life. Sometimes those choices and their repercussions live longer than we do. We hope to impact future generations in a positive way.

Finally, planning a life is a weighty subject, one worth considering and reconsidering as long as our limited life allows. Also, remember that you need to have fun and enjoy life, and laugh as often as possible.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 8 — Serendipity, Luck, and Love

2020/02/09

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about the love of our lives in life.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Serendipity can make a pit stop. Luck may drop by you. Love can fall into your arms. All three at once, count your blessings — thank heaven! What is the importance of mindfulness and conscientiousness for long-term life satisfaction? What is the importance of the same stuff of character, virtues, for utilizing serendipities, luck, and love in life?

Dr. Herb Silverman: It's never too late to fall in love. For me love came late in life, started with serendipity, and flourished beyond my wildest expectations. You can find Mr. or Ms. Right in the most unexpected places at the most unexpected times. I even have a friend who, at 90, fell in love in an assisted living home.

If you haven't yet found a life partner, and may never, you can still have a happy life. There are many couples who are miserable together, but stay in unhappy marriages. If you find that special someone, I suggest you live together for a while until you feel certain about the relationship. Only then, consider marriage. Better to eventually split than to go through a messy divorce.

I can certainly count my blessings, though no deity is involved. Love came to me in an unusual way, by running for governor of South Carolina in 1990. I ran to challenge the provision in the state constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. During my campaign, I received my one and only invitation to speak at a church — the Unitarian Church in Charleston. After my talk, Sharon Fratepietro came up to me and offered to help in my campaign.

At first, we spoke only about the campaign, but gradually conversations became personal. Our relationship quickly grew beyond friendship. Sharon became my one and only groupie during my campaign. In an irrational moment, she said, "I hope you won't be too disappointed if you lose the election." I laughed, and said, "I'll only be disappointed if our relationship doesn't last a lot longer than my candidacy." We were having a great time campaigning, and beginning to think of staying together forever. I had never thought about anyone that way before. When I lost the election, I told Sharon that I blamed her because she had become my campaign manager (this sounds like something Donald Trump would say, except he would expect people to believe him).

It took eight years for me to overturn the unconstitutional provision in the South Carolina Constitution, climaxed by a state Supreme Court victory. By far the best outcome of my eight-

year political saga was finding Sharon. My cultural and social life had previously been wrapped up around the insulated world of academe. My meeting Sharon was serendipity. I met her at just the right time with just the right cause. I had been looking for something else to do with my life and Sharon became the catalyst.

After living together for ten years, Sharon felt we were getting too old to be boyfriend (58) and girlfriend (62), and suggested that we get married. I gave her my best arguments against marriage: If it ain't broke, don't fix it; marriage is a religious tradition, and I enjoy telling people that we're living in sin; we should boycott heterosexual marriage until gays can marry.

Since Sharon wanted us to get married more than I didn't, I agreed to go ahead and do it. While I never expected to get married, I wouldn't have thought it possible that I would meet my future bride in church. We got married in our home, with a friend (a notary public) presiding, at one minute after midnight on January 1, 2000. Sharon wanted me to dress more formally for the occasion, so she got me a tuxedo T-shirt. Each of us spoke unrehearsed words at the ceremony. I thanked God for his nonexistence, without which I never would have met Sharon.

My first-year anniversary present to Sharon was to tell her, "You know, being married isn't as bad as I thought it would be." She laughed and said, "That's the most romantic thing you ever said to me." And it probably was. I also enjoy referring to Sharon as my starter wife.

Before I met Sharon, I could have made the same claim as Woody Allen's character in the movie *Manhattan*, that I hadn't had a relationship with a woman that lasted longer than the one between Adolph Hitler and Eva Broun. Though I don't believe in souls, I'm comfortable saying Sharon has been my soul mate (and my first love) for the past thirty years.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 9 — Guidance Without Expectation of Reward: or, Thus Saith the Landlord

2020/02/13

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about the transience of things, and ‘having been there and done it.’

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: “Nothing lasts forever,” so said a landlord to me, at an important juncture in life, without a word mouthed by me. He watched, observed, and knew the right thing, compassionate words, to say to me. Pain, loss, despair, kings, queens, a new pair of shoes and underwear, the puppy or kitten, all of our highs and lows are temporary. Those moments of insight provided by someone transient in life, brief, can make all the difference in the world, and lift that same world from your chest. Why is an openness to feedback, input, and guidance from elders important in maintaining a more well-rounded worldview and character?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Young people won’t always agree with what elders have to say, but I’ve learned it is important for young people to listen to elders. Why? Because sometimes they’re right.

When I was young, I more-often-than-not ignored parental advice, feeling I knew better what was good for me than my parents knew. But I did listen like a dutiful son should, and I would explain why I disagreed.

I didn’t always make the right choice, but I think I did on many important decisions. Had I followed parental advice, I would have stayed in my hometown of Philadelphia, settled down and married some nice Jewish girl there, as did most of my relatives. Instead, I preferred following the advice of an elder who was not my relative, Henry David Thoreau: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.”

The music I heard took me away from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Syracuse, New York for graduate school, then to Massachusetts, and finally to Charleston, South Carolina where I became Professor of Mathematics at the College of Charleston and married a nice gentile girl. By that time, my mother was relieved that I found someone willing to marry me, even if the bride wasn’t Jewish.

Along my path, there were many elders in my life who were able to offer good advice, and there's a reason why: Elders can often say "been there, done that" and recall the consequences, while younger people have to imagine the outcome as they make decisions. Given the advantage of time lived, an elder usually learns to put past progress and failures in perspective, leading to greater peace of mind. This applies to both personal situations and the political world. The truism by George Santayana, "Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it," is applicable to both the personal and the political. Speaking of political, many of you (including me) are disgusted by the behavior and the lies of Donald Trump and can't imagine a worse American president. Nevertheless, I can remember a worse time in America.

The Vietnam War, which for the United States lasted from 1964 to 1975, tore America apart and led to the deaths of over 58,000 American troops, 1.3 million Vietnamese troops, and approximately 2 million Vietnamese civilians. In a way, I was party to the beginning. I heard President Lyndon Johnson speak at Syracuse University on August 5, 1964 when he cited an incident on the previous day in a place I had never heard of, the Gulf of Tonkin. I had no idea I was watching history being made, and a very bad history. Two days later Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing force against Communists in Southeast Asia. Not only was the Vietnam War to become a disaster, but also the Tonkin incident had been manufactured. I now think President Johnson, despite his gains on civil rights, should have been impeached for lying us into a disastrous war.

So keep in mind that as bad as something may seem today, there were probably worse times. Something I didn't do when I was young, but do now, is read the obituaries in the newspaper. Too often I see that a friend or acquaintance has died, usually someone who was younger than I am. While I'm sad when I read of those deaths, I appreciate being alive and able to contribute in a positive way. Staying alive is certainly better than the alternative, and both young and old should take the time to appreciate being alive.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 10 — Nature’s on a Roll, or a Rigamarole, or Somethin’: Plural Processes, Dynamic Dynamos, and Good Enough

2020/02/19

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism’s History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about nature and humans as part of nature, and the relation to life.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Nature appears to have a minimum effort to come to certain paths for life. A lot of compromises come with this. Illness, ‘early’ death, malformations, natural abortions by the female body, cognitive ticks, physical and mental limitations, etc., that’s evolution’s compromise with the world. Coming to terms with the world, the real and natural world, will happen sooner or later, on the promenade of life, people have to step out and dance, eventually. What else is life for, exactly, but to dance — so to speak? Do you see the coming to terms with the world and make compromises with one’s surrounding important for living a fulfilling life?

Dr. Herb Silverman: You certainly express well why it makes no sense to believe in an all-powerful, omnibenevolent god who created a world with the kind of malformations you describe. We are the products of evolution. We were born of risen apes, not fallen angels. Apes had to kill to survive, and human apes have done a lot of killing and committed many atrocities. Yet the issue for me is not how low humans have sunk, but how high humans have risen. Steven Pinker provides evidence for our rise in his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Lately we have seen advances in human rights, in part because many people have rejected or re-interpreted some features of biblically-based morality.

Life itself is a once-in-eternity chance to experience the universe like no other living creature can. We accept that animals do not think they have a reason to exist and yet, just because we have a more advanced brain, we seek purposes or reasons to exist. We are the fortunate result of billions of years of evolution that happened to form what we call life.

But I wouldn’t refer to “evolution’s compromise with the world.” Despite the limitations that are placed on us by evolution (we can’t fly or live forever), we can, as you say, “step out and dance.” So better to enjoy life, no matter what, because life can always get worse for you. Each of us will dance differently as we strive to lead fulfilling lives. I think compromises with our surroundings consist of what we can do to improve our environment. We need to find ways to stop or reverse the damage from climate change if we care about what will happen to future generations long

after we are dead. It is said that we should think globally and act locally. At the moment, thinking globally about the environment overwhelms me, so I concentrate on acting locally.

Jacobsen: Following from the previous question, nature seems like a plural process. Everything going on at once. Same with our lives, hence the random events running around the house and then pooping on our carpets. Some stains never leave, entirely. How can you take on the blips in life in stride rather than saying, “I tried”?

Silverman: You mention random events, but we are here right now by some stroke of evolutionary luck. We’ve evolved to be able to think critically and dismiss Bronze Age ideas from tribesmen who attributed floods, eclipses, and plagues to punishments from a magical higher power. Rather than focusing on the “poop” in our lives, we should focus on what we’ve accomplished so far, and come up with a plan for what we can accomplish in the future. We all need to be lifelong learners.

I saw a disheartening statistic that 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after they graduate. That reminded me of a clever sign in front of a local library in my hometown of Charleston, South Carolina: “Dinosaurs didn’t read books, and now they are extinct.” If you finish your formal education without understanding your deepest strengths and interests, you have some work to do. Become the author of your life before you go extinct.

Jacobsen: In the midst of life, we can see most of us as good enough. We get along with one another and in our daily lives. Others come as dynamic dynamos, truly incredible souls. The rest — the big mass — of us as rather ordinary, stingy and crummy offshoots. The dynamos get, generally speaking, the best of what life offers due to fortune of Mother Nature’s blessings and the rewards of culture in response to the demands of said talents and special abilities. Even though, the rest of us are the good enough, the trend line of evolution. How can we get the most out of the little we’re given? Even if the time is a brief flicker, we get a life. For those dealing much with the end of life, the good stuff of life seems to come up more, ironically.

Silverman: The conditions into which people are born are due to simple dumb luck. I’m fortunate to have started life without any “blueprint errors,” so I wasn’t encumbered with any special physical or mental limitations. I know that life can be terrible for lots of people with major disabilities. Some families learn how to deal with it well, and others not so well. Attitude is almost everything along with good medical help, and a strong support system is often essential. Though I didn’t have a “silver spoon” growing up, I had a comfortable upbringing. I was also privileged to have been born in a country where I can live safely and prosperously, unlike many people in other countries who risk their lives to escape because of extreme poverty or grave danger to their lives.

In my retirement years, I’m beginning to reflect on how unnatural an act retirement is. It doesn’t exist anywhere else in nature. Have you ever heard of a retired coyote or a retired lion? A hundred years ago, humans didn’t even have a concept of retirement. Some of us are fortunate enough to be able to enjoy retirement, while continuing to try to make a positive difference in our community and on causes we care deeply about.

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

Silverman: Thank you for the opportunity to spout off.

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 11 — Morrow's Fantasia: My Tomorrow's 'Tomorrow'

2020/02/26

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about Lenny Bruce and Paul Krassner.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: My friend and colleague, Paul Krassner, died last year. He published *The Realist* with luminaries including George Carlin and Lenny Bruce in it. In honour of his life and work, I will comment on Bruce and then Krassner for individuals who may not know them, as I believe in the renewal of their core legacies for the current crop of the young:

Getting caught in what should be, as Lenny Bruce articulated, is a terrible, terrible lie given to the people long ago, there only is what is, and the rest is a fantasy. This seems true to me. How can the false selves and idealized selves of youth lead a young person astray, by their own inability or outright dismissal to take heed of the real and act on it?

Dr. Herb Silverman: I have fond memories of Lenny Bruce, whom I worked with on February 11, 1961, at Town Hall in Philadelphia. I never actually met Lenny, but I sold soft drinks before his performance and during intermissions. I made about six dollars that night, and Lenny made considerably more.

I started my selling career in 1958, when I was 16, and continued until I graduated from Temple University in 1963. I mostly worked my way through college by selling refreshments at sporting events, and occasionally at Town Hall. Other performers I “worked” with at Town Hall include Pete Seeger, Ray Charles, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul & Mary.

Lenny Bruce's performance was special for me. I didn't even know who he was at the time, but I was pleasantly shocked to hear an adult, let alone a performer, use the word “fuck.” Youth today certainly aren't surprised to hear the F-word in ordinary conversation, but the 1950s and early 1960s were a different world. Lenny Bruce's battles against censorship, including jail time, are now mostly won, but he was a pioneer whom I am proud to have “worked” with.

In his performance, Lenny said, “There are no dirty words, only dirty minds.” He also criticized religion, the first time I heard such criticism from a performer. He said, “If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.”

As you indicate, Lenny Bruce said this about lying, “Let me tell you the truth: The truth is what is. And what *should* be is a fantasy, a terrible, terrible lie that someone gave the people long ago.” Along those same lines, Lenny also said, “If you believe there is a God, a God that made your body, and yet you think that you can do anything with that body that’s dirty, then the fault lies with the manufacturer.”

In particular, young people can be led astray by believing lies they are told about God and religion. (Here I use the word “lie” loosely, meaning “untruth,” because people might not actually be lying if they accept as true their fantasies about God.) Of course, there are many ways to be led astray by lies, not just through religion. It’s important to be skeptical of claims, and you should look for evidence to back up those claims. This is especially true of claims made by politicians. It’s essential to learn how to think critically, which should be taught in school starting with kindergarten.

Jacobsen: When I asked Krassner in an interview with him, “What advice do you have for youth?” He replied, “Try not to take yourself as seriously as your causes.” I still miss him. When a young person isn’t tuned into themselves, able to feel, able to label the feelings, able to assert themselves and deal with the real world in a proactive, friendly, and realistic fashion, they’re significantly handicapping their fulfillment in life and trajectory. The getting to where they want to go and the feeling of how they want to feel getting missed. When connected with oneself, you can connect to others fully and authentically — organically. Why is non-seriousness about oneself and seriousness about one’s causes important as a life principle?

Silverman: Scott, you are very fortunate to have been a friend and colleague of Paul Krassner. I never met Krassner, but I have admired him since I was a child and read his pieces in *Mad* magazine. In *Mad*, and later in *The Realist*, I learned to appreciate political (and religious) satire.

When Paul Krassner advised youth, “Try not to take yourself as seriously as your causes,” I think he was speaking not just about youth, but about everybody — including himself. Krassner coined the term “Yippies,” a politically-active countercultural youth group of hippies. It was an offshoot of the free speech and anti-war movements in the late 1960s. The Yippies were known for street theater and politically-themed pranks, and had been called “Groucho Marxists.”

After Larry Flint announced in 1978 that he was resigning as publisher of *Hustler*, the porn magazine, because he had become a born-again Christian, Flint said that Paul Krassner should replace him. Krassner told *People Magazine*, “I know it’s bizarre, but if God told him to hire me, I ain’t going to argue about it, even if I’m a born-again agnostic.” Krassner became publisher of *Hustler* for six months, until Larry Flint came back to his senses as an atheist.

I think Paul Krassner summed up his philosophy nicely when he said, “We know we are all sentenced to death. People cannot become prisoners of guilts and fears. They should cling to each moment and take what enjoyment they can.” For Krassner, joy was not merely hedonistic pleasures, but remaining active in causes dear to him while keeping a sense of humor.

Jacobsen: What advice do you have for youth?

Silverman: It is difficult to come up with advice that doesn’t incorporate the advice above from Lenny Bruce and Paul Krassner. But one way the three of us are different is that I don’t do drugs

as they did, though I certainly favor legalizing marijuana and other drugs. Using drugs may be imprudent, but it makes no sense to arrest people for being imprudent, incarcerating them, and then giving us taxpayers the bill to keep them locked up. Unfortunately, Lenny Bruce died from a morphine overdose. One thing that Lenny, Paul, and I do have in common is that we are all Jews who don't believe in any gods. Perhaps that ties in with the importance of having a sense of humor.

So, my advice for youth is to keep a sense of humor while remaining active in causes you care about. Unless you can have fun when working on a cause, you may quickly tire of it. Yes, you need to work hard. But you need to find ways to enjoy your work, and your life.

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

Silverman: Thank you.

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 12 — By ‘Soul,’ We Mean Psyche: The Complete Human Being

2020/03/03

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism’s History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about the soul, the psyche, and the mind.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The term soul seems ill-defined. Its original term, *psyche*, appears more precise. The complete makeup of a human being. Let’s talk about the naturalistic soul, the psyche, what do we know and not know at present if you had recent conversations with or readings by relevant experts in a variety of relevant fields? If not, I’ll take personal opinions too.

Dr. Herb Silverman: I’m uncomfortable using the word “soul” for the same reason I’m uncomfortable praising the Confederate flag. That flag to me is a symbol of white supremacy and slavery. But to many of my fellow South Carolinians the Confederate flag represents heritage, not hate. I think it represents both heritage *and* hate. And some heritage is hateful or worse, including what the Confederate flag and swastika represent to most of the world.

I usually hear the word “soul” when people distinguish between our material mortal body and what they call our immaterial immortal soul. Some who fear death and want to escape its inevitability invent things like a heaven and a soul. These humans try to distinguish themselves from other animals and living things, saying that we are the only ones with souls.

There are some real uses of the word “soul” that I like, including soul music, which arose from the black experience in America. I don’t like soul food like chitterlings and ham hocks. Soul food is a genre created by southern black Americans, and I know many people find it tasty.

Soul (nephesh) was originally a Hebrew concept and a synonym for a living breathing creature. In this case, when the creature stops breathing, the soul is dead. In the Hebrew Bible, a person does not have a soul, but *is* a soul. This notion is closer to a naturalistic soul, or psyche. I prefer to use the word “mind” instead of soul or psyche, but I am comfortable with the word psyche. Our minds try to make sense of the natural world in which we live. There is no purpose in nature, but our minds come up with purposes in our own lives. Science has shown that all life is interconnected by small particles and phenomena playing off one another in subtle ways. I think natural laws are the rules that govern the structure and behaviour of our natural universe, and our continuously changing universe is a product of these laws. To quote Carl Sagan, “The Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.”

Jacobsen: Before someone grows up, becomes choate, there's a lot of work by others and oneself to get there. Then the lifelong adult job, even while degenerating, is a wee bit easier, until the end — barring catastrophic issues or accidents. With the psyche defined, what can a young person do to keep improving towards socially and/or personally defined betterment — some abstract moving target connected to some values? That which one wants to be more like without being crazy or unhealthily obsessive about it.

Silverman: You are correct that as a 77-year-old (senior) adult I am in the process of degenerating, which is a lot better than being in a state where degeneration has ceased. My adult "job" of retirement is easy because nothing is expected of me and I can do what I enjoy doing. Helping those who are less fortunate is sometimes viewed as an unnecessary kindness at my age, though I have always viewed such actions as necessary, regardless of age.

Of course, an unretired adult with responsibilities will find life more difficult than I do, but it should be at least as rewarding. We are all degenerating, but young adults are less likely to notice. It's nice to have a life plan that is fulfilling, with enough flexibility to modify those plans should they not be working out as expected or if you find different interests. To keep you grounded, it helps to be close to family members and/or have a life partner you can trust to tell you when something is wrong. We all need a sense of community. Think about what you can do to make a difference, and how to accomplish it while enjoying your life.

Part of the psyche of humans is bringing joy to ourselves as we bring joy to others. I think doing good is part of evolution and nature, especially human nature, and helps us fulfill our needs. I can't state it better than Robert Ingersoll, known as the Great Agnostic: "Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so."

Jacobsen: As a role model, how did you model this throughout your life, and not?

Silverman: I wouldn't call myself a role model, but I'll describe some of the important choices I've made in my life. I always wanted to do something where I could make a difference. I became a mathematics professor, and in that role I later heard from a number of students how I made a difference in their lives. I also did mathematical research, but only made a small difference with a few people in my narrow research field. However, as at most colleges and universities, professional advancement for me was tied more to research than to teaching.

Quite by accident, I learned in 1990 that our South Carolina Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office. I made a difference by challenging this provision through running for public office as the "candidate without a prayer," which led to a 1997 state supreme court victory that now allows atheists in South Carolina to hold public office.

While running for public office, I learned about atheist and humanist organizations that were all doing their own thing and not cooperating with like-minded organizations. I saw an opportunity to make a difference in 2002 by founding the Secular Coalition for America, which lobbies in Washington on behalf of atheists and humanists. It also facilitates cooperation among its 19 national member organizations.

Jacobsen: Why do supernatural definitions of a psyche not make sense in the light of scientific skepticism?

Silverman: Science gives us important information about the natural world. There is no evidence in science or anywhere else for the existence of the supernatural. In fact, science has shown us that a lot of supernatural beliefs based on so-called holy books are false, including the age of the universe and worldwide floods. As far as our behaviour about supernaturalism, I'll again quote Robert Ingersoll: "The hands that help are better far than the lips that pray."

Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: Thank you.

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 13 — Sifting Sense and Nonsense: B.S. Detector, the Baloney Detection Kit

2020/03/06

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about critical thinking.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: People lie. That's obvious. The interesting thing is what they lie about in life. Big lies can persist and overtake large hunks of a population. Carl Sagan and others developed something of a B.S. kit or some mental tools, considerations, for detecting nonsense posed as sense. What are some basic tools of critical thinking? Some first pass filters.

Herb Silverman: When making decisions, we should be careful about putting too much trust in our feelings or our observations. A recent study looked at judges who decided which criminals to let out on parole and which to imprison, and then fed relevant information about the criminals into a computer. The computer could not see whether the criminal showed remorse, acted reformed, whether the family showed up for support, or countless other observations the judge made. Based on the paroled subjects' subsequent recidivism rates, it turned out that the computer did a better job than the judges.

We tend to think people are being honest if they give a firm handshake, look us in the eye, and sound authoritative. But con men and con women know this, and have perfected such skills. There are also shy people who look down when they talk, have a limp handshake, and seem nervous. They are probably honest, despite how we might read or misread their visual cues.

When trying to decide whether someone is lying or giving us fake news, keep in mind the phrase made popular by Carl Sagan, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Before that, the 18th century mathematician Laplace said, "The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportional to its strangeness." Also, David Hume in 1748 wrote, "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence," and "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."

These phrases are central to the scientific method, and a key to critical thinking, rational thought, and skepticism. If someone told me he had a letter from George Washington that said, "Send more troops," that might sound plausible, but if he told me the letter from George Washington said, "Buy Amazon stock in 1995," I would ignore him unless he had extraordinary evidence.

Many people believe or pretend to believe ideas for which there is no evidence, and repeat details beyond the possibilities of knowledge. This happens almost all the time in religion.

Some basic tools in critical thinking include constructing and understanding a reasoned argument, and recognizing a fallacious or fraudulent argument. The question is not whether we like the conclusion, but whether the conclusion follows from the premise or starting point and whether the premise is true. Don't get too attached to a conclusion you like, where you may only look at evidence that supports your conclusion and reject or ignore contrary evidence. This is known as confirmation bias.

If possible, see if you can find independent confirmation of "facts." Don't rely exclusively on what so-called "authorities" say. See if you can find good reasons to reject an idea. If you can't, it is more likely to be true. Don't assume, without evidence, that if one event followed another, the first event must have caused the second. Remember *Occam's Razor*: When faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well, choose the simpler hypothesis, and you're more likely to choose right.

Jacobsen: James Randi compared charlatans to whack-a-mole. Of those who get exposed, they just pop up again, and again, and again and again and again, in other circumstances and similar guises with the same 'powers,' i.e., Uri Geller. Is this going to be a perpetual project of critical thinking and exposure of bad actors?

Silverman: Yes, we can't prevent bad actors from continuing to be bad actors. We must continually try to expose them, but people will continue to believe charlatans. As P. T. Barnum said, "There's a sucker born every minute."

Jacobsen: Finally, have you ever seen any charlatans or frauds ever learn from their bad ways and correct course?

Silverman: What I've learned is that some followers of charlatans get upset when the charlatan is exposed because they want to continue to believe the charlatan. I'll give some personal examples.

I do yoga for flexibility, and once went to a yoga retreat where some of the leaders also performed activities far beyond what I had expected. One leader claimed to regress several participants to their past lives. Most had impressive backgrounds as former kings, queens, and warriors. When the professional regressor told us we all had many past lives, I asked him how that could be when more people are born each year than die. He was unfazed, saying matter-of-factly, "You didn't take into account life on other planets." He was right, I hadn't. I think a better explanation (though still imaginary) would have been, "You didn't consider other species. Some of you were once mosquitoes or cockroaches." At least we know there are other life forms on this planet, but those at the retreat likely preferred thinking of themselves as former royalty than as former garden pests.

After the session, I talked to a couple of the regressed, trying to discover if they had been plants (in the ringer sense, not in the past-life sense). They all said they believed their past life experiences were real.

Another leader was an aura specialist, a clairvoyant who drew inferences about a person's emotional state based on his or her supposed aura color. She would put a person on stage and say something like, "He has a blue aura. Can you see it?" After several such demonstrations, many at the retreat became confident about their aura-reading abilities. Then I said to the clairvoyant, "To test how good we've become, why don't we write down the aura color we see *before* you tell us what you see?" The clairvoyant must not have been psychic, because she didn't see my question coming and felt insulted by it. Some of the others were also upset with my proposed "test" for the professional clairvoyant, in which she refused to participate.

Years later, I had a similar experience in South Carolina at a group reading organized by "internationally-renowned channeler" Darlen-De, who claimed to be an intermediary for a dead guy who would answer questions about the future. The deceased was like your typical fortune teller, only dead. Darlen-De went around the room soliciting questions. She would repeat each question, be silent for a minute, and then answer in a funny voice attributed to the dead guy. People seemed happy with the answers.

When my turn came, I said, "I've been worried about Calvin. He doesn't apply himself. Will he go to college?" The dead guy answered, "Don't worry. He'll go to college, but perhaps not the school you like." I then asked, "Do you know which college my cat Calvin will attend?" This time Darlen-De didn't ask the dead guy, though I expect "obedience school" would have been an appropriate answer. Again, the wrath of the participants was directed toward the exposer rather than the exposed. Apparently, people enjoy being gullible as long as their gullibility isn't pointed out to them so blatantly.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 14 — A Rational Life Includes Non-Rational Parts

2020/03/12

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about the rationality of a life lived with the non-rational.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We've talked about rationality and such. You've commented on personal experience with love, and more. Love is a non-rational part of life, but love happens, nonetheless. A profound, significant, and, sometimes, incomprehensible and inexplicable component of human life. What do you make of making room, in life, for the non-rational? As Chris Hedges clarifies, he does not mean the irrational, but the non-rational forces of life.

Herb Silverman: For most of my professional life as a mathematician I made good use of the irrational. I speak, of course, about irrational numbers (not expressible as the quotient of two integers) like the square root of 2 and pi. Irrational numbers were discovered in Greece in the 5th century BCE, and challenged the Greek belief in a rational universe controlled by mathematical harmonies. Such numbers seemed to these Greeks so illogical and unreasonable that they called them irrational. So, sometimes things may seem irrational because we don't understand them.

Outside the world of mathematics, the main difference between rational thinking and non-rational or irrational thinking is that rational thinking is based on logic and reason, while non-rational and irrational thinking are usually based on neither. In rational decision making, choices are made through reason and facts.

The way I distinguish between non-rational and irrational thinking is that non-rational thinking relies more on intuitive judgments, and can sometimes be thought to make common sense, while irrational thinking goes counter to logic, and relies more on emotions without considering the consequences of decisions. In rational thinking we use our brain, and in irrational thinking we listen to our heart or gut. I prefer to think with my brain, not my gut.

That doesn't necessarily mean that irrational thinking is always wrong. People have won lotteries by choosing numbers based on a dream, or a birthday. A person who thinks rationally tries to use all the information available to make an informed decision, putting aside emotions. But often there are unknown factors or features that the rational person didn't account for.

It can be argued that humans did not evolve to become rational creatures. We make good use of the non-rational, like love, beauty, art, poetry, music, and grief. I can give good reasons for why I love my wife, though I can't show that these reasons are rational. As far as we know, these non-rational decisions have nothing to do with science, and are not empirically measurable. However, it's possible that brain research might someday show there is no such thing as free will, and that I didn't really *choose* to marry Sharon.

Jacobsen: Are there any borderline issues between the non-rational and the irrational?

Silverman: When it comes to religion, atheists usually object to irrational beliefs, not necessarily to non-rational beliefs. But how do we decide which is which?

For instance, there is no empirical evidence for the existence or nonexistence of God, so can we say that that both beliefs are non-rational (as opposed to irrational)? People will answer differently, which shows that non-rational and irrational are not well-defined terms. Depending on the definition of "God," I might be willing to call the belief non-rational (for instance, a creator of the universe who set natural laws in motion, and then retired, died, or moved on to bigger or better things). I don't believe this, but I'm willing to consider such a deistic belief non-rational. The same with people who define God as love, or who take statements in so-called holy books metaphorically. On the other hand, I would call irrational any belief in the literal God of the Bible or the Quran, because we can find so much scientific evidence that falsifies claims in these "holy" books. (Young earth creationists would criticize me for having "faith" in science.)

I also consider all claims to miracles, including resurrections, as irrational beliefs, though I can't disprove them. Then again, I also can't disprove the existence of a Flying Spaghetti Monster, though everyone would consider such a belief irrational.

Is it fair to call irrational what Christians, Muslims, and UFO abductees believe, because such beliefs are devoid of the kind of evidence we would expect to find for those beliefs? I would say yes, but the majority of the world would disagree with me.

Jacobsen: What can we do to ensure others, who did not have the sanction of the general public, have the same rights and privileges afforded to love and join with whomever they see fit for their lives, especially as societies become freer, opener, and more prosperous?

Silverman: I hope that societies continue to become freer and more open. There was a time in my country and elsewhere when I might not have been allowed to marry because I insisted on a non-religious (humanist) ceremony. Unfortunately, even today, such a marriage is not permissible in some countries. There was also a time that it would have been illegal for Sharon and me to live in sin. I'm pleased to see in my lifetime that gays and lesbians are finally allowed to marry in many countries, and that homosexuality is rarely against the law, except in Muslim countries.

Such restrictions have usually been religion-based. The less religious societies become, the more freedom, privileges, and prosperity individuals will have.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 15 — All Things Bright and Wonderful, and Unknown: What Do We Know, Really?

2020/03/15

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about what you know, what you can't know, and what you can't ever know.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Of all possible mathematical knowledge, what do we really know? You were a distinguished professor in the past. We have written a text on this.

Herb Silverman: Here is what we know about mathematics. Mathematicians start with axioms (assumptions) and see what conclusion may logically be deduced (proved) from these axioms. The nineteenth-century mathematician Leopold Kronecker once said, “God created the integers, all else is the work of man.” I interpret this statement to be more about the axiomatic approach than about theology. Mathematicians often begin with axioms that seem “self-evident,” because they are more likely to lead to real-world truths, including scientific discoveries and accurate predictions of physical phenomena. But if at least one axiom is false, then the conclusion may not be scientifically applicable.

Unlike in applied mathematicians, theoretical mathematicians are not so concerned with whether their axioms are true. Axioms in some branches are contradictory to axioms in others. In non-Euclidean geometry, we replace Euclid’s parallel axiom with a different axiom. The axioms in Euclidean geometry have led to discoveries on planet Earth; results from the axioms in non-Euclidean geometry were applied many years later by Einstein for his general theory of relativity, when he showed we live in a non-Euclidean four-dimensional universe, consisting of three-dimensional space and one-dimensional time.

There is a lot we don’t know, and never will know. Just about any problem solved in mathematics seems to raise additional questions that we would like to solve. So I expect there are infinitely many questions that we would like answers to, which won’t be found in a finite amount of time. There might even be infinitely many possible theories, not all of which humans can ponder. With or without machines, even now the majority of scientific discoveries are barely comprehensible (or incomprehensible) to most human beings.

Speaking of infinity, which is a theoretical construct created by humans, the number “infinity” does not exist in reality (as a real number). My math students sometimes falsely treated infinity as a real number, and such misuse often got them into trouble.

The concept of infinity is useful to help solve many math problems involving limits in calculus. For instance, we know there are infinitely many positive integers because the integer $n+1$ is larger than n for any integer n . What happens to the sequence $\{1/n\}$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$? The sequence gets arbitrarily close to 0, and we say that the limit of the sequence is 0.

Here's a limit example for an infinite series: $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + 1/16 + \dots = 1$.

Also, we can't draw a "perfect" circle, we can just imagine one. Imagine a polygon with an ever-increasing number of equal sides. As the number of sides approaches infinity, the polygon will become a circle as the limit of an infinite number of infinitesimally small sides. No matter how accurate a computer's rendering of a circle might be, it will only be an imperfect approximation.

Mathematics has played a major role in bringing about innovations. Many mathematical theories and models of real-world problems have helped scientists and engineers grapple with seemingly impossible tasks. The eighteenth-century mathematician Gauss said, "Mathematics is the queen of sciences." He said this because mathematics is essential in the study of all scientific fields. Galileo referred to mathematics as the language in which the natural physical world is written. When scientific statements are translated into mathematical statements, including about the structure of the universe, we apply mathematics to solve scientific problems.

Jacobsen: How much do we not know? Even with this, what can we say for certain about particular categories of things, as simply falsehoods?

Silverman: We often get into trouble when we apply mathematical concepts to God. Most religious people believe in an infinite God with infinite power who has lived for an infinite time. Just as finite humans created infinity, so finite humans created God and gave him infinite attributes. God had to be presumed infinite, because a finite god would be limited. However, we can show mathematically that there can't be a largest infinity. The German mathematician Georg Cantor showed that every subset of an infinite set has a higher cardinality (more elements). In other words, there are infinitely many infinities. So, any infinite god could theoretically be replaced by a more powerful infinite god.

Infinity, like gods, is not sensible (known through the senses). Just as infinity does not exist in reality, it does help solve some math problems. Lots of humans believe in a (nonexistent) god who helps them solve human problems.

Mathematicians, unlike most theologians, recognize that their axioms are just made up. So, a perfectly valid and logical proof may have nothing to do with reality if the axioms are not true. Most ancient religions are also loosely based on axioms. Their most common axiom is "God exists," which is not as self-evident as it appeared to be in a pre-scientific world. A "God axiom" might give comfort to some, but it lacks predictive value.

Besides their practical uses, numbers have cultural significance throughout the world. For example, in Western society, the number 13 is regarded as unlucky. Some people also believe in *numerology*, which attributes a divine or mystical significance to numbers. One such example, espoused by many Christian fundamentalists, is fear of the number 666, which they refer to as the Mark of the Beast. Numerology is also associated with the paranormal and astrology. Of

course, numerology is a pseudoscience, a superstition that uses numbers to give their subject a veneer of scientific authority

Jacobsen: Where does this bring humility into the equation?

Silverman: Kurt Gödel, a mathematician/logician, made a rather disturbing groundbreaking discovery in mathematics. Gödel showed that with just about any set of axioms there must be at least one true but unprovable statement. In other words, not all true statements in mathematics have formal proofs. Furthermore, we have no way of knowing in advance whether a statement is really hard to prove (or disprove), or whether it is impossible. For instance, mathematician Andrew Wiles proved Fermat's Last Theorem 358 years after Fermat proposed it in 1637. The proof was difficult but provable. We don't know if questions about the beginning of our universe and multiverses are really hard to answer completely or are logically unanswerable. Or maybe the human mind is not bright enough to figure it out.

Gödel's incompleteness theorem suggests to many that a Theory of Everything (an all-encompassing, coherent, theoretical framework of physics that fully explains and links together all physical aspects of the universe) is unattainable. In fact, Gödel's theorem seems to imply that theoretical mathematics is inexhaustible. No matter how many problems we solve, there will always be other problems that can't be solved within the existing rules.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 16 — Take Some Time: Virtues and Virtuous Habits

2020/03/18

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about habits, virtue, and happiness.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Virtue seems mostly like a habit. Then we call long trends in behaviour in someone a character trait. It seems like this to me. So, virtue starts with the habituation of ethical conduct.

There are consequences to a certain behaviour. Good results become consequentially good, tautologically. Bad results become consequentially bad, but come from antecedent behaviour, inescapably.

The possible good and bad have a range of known and unknown consequences. So, I am noting some virtue ethics and consequentialism mixed together here, where limits get placed on personal responsibility based on cognitive-predictive limits. What virtues should be encouraged/ vices should be discouraged every day?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Let's first describe what we mean by "virtue." To me, virtue is behavior that shows high moral standards, which means good behavior. Humans have evolved to be social animals with patterns of behavior to live harmoniously and productively together. Without cooperative behavior, humans would not have survived. Ideas of right and wrong that we call morality arise from human nature. We all have the ability to think in moral terms, except perhaps for psychopaths.

Of course, being moral or good means different thing to different folks. Some religious people would say that to act morally is to act in obedience to God's commandments. Many Christians view virtue as having faith, hope, and charity, described in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Islamic virtue requires submission to Allah. Muhammad said, "Virtue is good manner, and sin is that which creates doubt."

As a secular humanist, I certainly don't tie any virtues to god beliefs. I think that ethical values are derived from human needs and interests, tested and refined by experience. Morality should be based on how our actions affect others. Our deeds are more important than our creeds, and dogmas should never override compassion for others.

So how do we make moral decisions? One criterion is to look at what works well and has withstood the test of time. Just about all religions and philosophies have grounded morality in some version of the Golden Rule. But that's a guideline open to interpretation, not an absolute. Even if we believe in absolutes, we're forced to make human judgments on how to interpret them. For instance, we agree that murder is wrong. But what do we do about euthanasia, suicide, abortion, war, capital punishment, stem-cell research? Different religions, and even people within the same religion, often disagree.

So how do we decide? In tough decisions, I believe we should be guided by the consequences of our actions to individuals, our families, our community, and our world. Morality may arise from human nature, but it is shaped by our experiences and culture. Morality helps humans construct a livable society with human rights for all. It requires flexibility because the circumstances under which we live continue to change and we discover what works better.

I would say virtue includes searching for truth and obtaining knowledge through rational thought. Belief should be proportional to the evidence. As William Clifford, a nineteenth century mathematician and philosopher said, "It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

Morality should also include creating happiness and fulfillment. As Robert Ingersoll, the Great Agnostic, said, "Reason, Observation and Experience, the Holy Trinity of Science, have taught us that happiness is the only good; that the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so." And Bertrand Russell said, "A good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge."

Jacobsen: Why is youth important for the inculcation of virtue?

Silverman: To quote Aristotle, "Give me a child until he is 7 and I will show you the man." The Jesuits have slightly modified Aristotle's statement, "Give us a child till he's seven and we'll have him for life." Unfortunately, this is often true. Fortunately, many people (myself included) cast away their childhood (and childish) religious beliefs. Nevertheless, people are influenced a lot by their upbringing, so it's important to instill, teach, and inspire virtue in youth.

Jacobsen: Is it just easier to get virtue inculcated earlier than not? Or is it never too late?

Silverman: Virtue and vice are not an either/or for humans. Throughout our lives, we sometimes act with virtue and sometimes we fall short. We should always learn from our mistakes and observations, and try to improve. For instance, in these uncertain times of the coronavirus pandemic, we all need to step up to the challenge. Are we thinking only about our own families, or are we also concerned about others? Some people look for ways to profit in the crisis. Others are stocking up on enough toilet paper and other household goods to last until Christmas. The virtuous thing for us to do, at any age, is to reach out to others and see how we can help them.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 17 — Family: The United Nations and Conservatism

2020/03/22

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about family.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Conservatives take the family as the fundamental unit of societies, the building block. It becomes a divine mandate in many theologies and religious social commentaries.

The United Nations is fundamentally allied with this vision in its foundational and associated documents with the description of the family as the fundamental group unit in the society.

An almost unacknowledged unifying vision between a nationalist and a globalist vision of the world. So, why is family fundamental? They both seem right from different views of the world.

Dr. Herb Silverman: A family is usually viewed as people connected by blood, adoption, or marriage. The question then becomes how we should treat family members. Surprisingly, I like what Jesus said about blood relatives, though with some objections and a different perspective.

This is from Mark 3:32–35: A crowd was sitting around Jesus and said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And Jesus replied, “Who are my mother and brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and my mother.”

Of course, I disagree with defining family in terms of faith. On the other hand, there is something to be said about counting friends we choose after we are born as more important than people we are related to through no personal decisions. I would say that family is fundamental if we include those we are close to, whether or not we are related to them.

Nevertheless, even if we are not close to blood relatives, I think we owe them respect and help when they are in need. I have no siblings and wasn't particularly close to my parents, but I know they made many sacrifices for me and I appreciate that they tried to raise me as best they could. I also tried to make things comfortable for them when they became too old and sick to care for themselves.

Jesus challenges our notions of family loyalty when he says, according to Luke 14:26, “Whoever does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and

even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Perhaps this is why when Jesus’ family heard what he was doing, they said, “He is out of his mind.” (Mark 3:21). In John 7:5, we learn that even Jesus’ brothers didn’t believe him.

Christians continually bemoan the breakdown of “family values” in our culture. Do they only count as family members those who worship Jesus the same way that they do?

I don’t think Christians can take much solace in the Hebrew Bible, where many men had more than one wife. In fact, according to 1 Kings 11:3, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Perhaps Solomon’s brain was not his most noteworthy organ.

When it comes to nationalist and globalist views of family, I include extended families, who go beyond the nuclear family of father, mother, and their children. It can include aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins, all living in the same household. In a lot of cultures, the extended family is the basic family unit.

Many families move in with one another for financial and emotional support, especially when children are involved. Demographic and cultural shifts, such as the increasing number of immigrants and the rising average age of young-adult marriages, along with difficulties in finding jobs paying a living wage, have also created a need for extended families. Approximately 49 million Americans live in homes containing three or more generations.

Jacobsen: Most people want a family. Most will create one. What are some good principles for getting from point A to point Z?

Silverman: You can create family by first establishing close and fulfilling relationships. Sometimes these relationships are formed when you get involved with activities you enjoy. This is a good way to meet people with whom you have things in common. When it comes to coupling (as in dating), it’s important to make sure the other half of your couple is a friend (and contraceptives have been considered). You should be honest, not just about your feelings for the person, but also about your perceived weaknesses and fears.

When the relationship grows closer, you might consider living together. By now you should have discussed boundaries, what you feel is permitted and what is not. Is it an exclusive sexual relationship? If it appears that this loving relationship might become permanent, you may want to consider marriage. But first discuss what you both want out of marriage. Financial arrangements? Kids? If so, how many and how should they be raised? Such plans might change, but it’s still a good idea to discuss such things in advance.

Though couples usually marry with the best of intentions, about half of marriages end in divorce. I recommend couples-counselling before considering divorce, especially if kids are involved. I definitely don’t recommend following Mark 10:9, “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” This means, according to the Catholic Church, that a woman should stay in her marriage even if her husband abuses her. There is a Catholic out, known as annulment, in which the Church can declare that the marriage was never really valid. It can be expensive to get such an annulment.

My wife is an adulterer in the eyes of the Catholic Church. She is married to a second man (me), even though she received a civil divorce from the first many years ago. The Catholic Church does not recognize or permit a second marriage like hers when the first took place in a Catholic Church. I enthusiastically endorse my wife's two divorces: one legally from her first husband, and one metaphorically from the Catholic Church.

Jacobsen: How do you keep a family life, or simply a family without children, fresh, vibrant, and stimulating rather than dull, a deteriorator, and stultifying?

Silverman: You sometimes hear that in a marriage, two become one. I disagree. I think it's important for two to remain two. While each has his or her interests, it's good for couples to also have lots in common, things that they enjoy doing together. Often one of the partners develops an interest that the other partner has. It's also nice to share new adventures.

If you don't get along with a family member, perhaps a relative, that's fine as long as you don't resent it and hold a grudge. Such feelings not only make the relationship worse, but they can also hurt your body and your mind.

To keep a marriage from stultifying, it helps to have a sense of humor. Most mornings my wife says to me, "It's so nice to wake up next to you." She laughs when I respond, "I'm sorry I can't experience that pleasure." Despite the cliché, I don't know what it means to be "beside myself."

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 18 — Plato’s Demon and Platonic Friends: or, A Mathematician Who Can Reason and Friends With (Other) Benefits

2020/03/05

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism’s History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about friendship.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We talked some sessions ago about the death of Paul Krassner. A cultural elephant in the countercultural room, or, more properly, the plural alternative cultures room. Friends come from many different areas. What makes a friendship?

Dr. Herb Silverman: There are all kinds of friends. I recently met someone I had never seen before, and she informed me that she was a friend of mine — a Facebook friend. When I first got on Facebook I agreed to be friends with anyone who requested it, and now I think I have too many such “friends.” I’m also friends with some charities I support, as in “Friends of the Library.”

I am not a Quaker (the Society of Friends), though among religions I think it is one of the best because of its emphasis on peace, social justice, and finding the light within. Surprisingly, there is also a group called Nontheistic Quakers (nontheistic Friends).

A more traditional notion of friends would be people not related to you whom you know well, and whose company you enjoy. This might include professional colleagues, fellow supporters in a cause, or someone you are intimate with. Friends are the family you choose.

No matter how down you are, good friends should be able to make you laugh. I think the best kind of friend is someone you love and who loves you, someone you respect and who respects you, someone you trust and who trusts you, someone with whom you can be honest and who is honest with you, and someone you are loyal to and who is loyal to you. (We are fortunate in life if we have two such friends.) My wife, Sharon, is my best friend.

Jacobsen: What makes a friendship last?

Silverman: A friendship lasts as long as you continue to enjoy one another’s company. You should be able to be yourself, give support when needed, empathize, express your feelings, forgive, and make mistakes without fear of judgment.

Sometimes friends drift apart (becoming former friends) because their interests change. Last year I attended my 55th high school reunion. Some of my former friends might become friends again if we stayed in touch, but our lives and interests have moved on, so there are no such plans. On the other hand, I continue to communicate with a former colleague who left the College of Charleston 40 years ago and moved to another state. We remain good friends with many similar interests and activities, and go out of our way occasionally to get together. To make a friendship endure often requires hard work. If you value the friendship, you should learn about your friend's new interests and see if you can turn them into interests of yours as well. It likely will include your friend's spouse and children.

Jacobsen: Why are long-term friends important to maintain for emotional health and a sense of connection with other human beings, and to think about others besides oneself, i.e., to have social responsibility and consideration?

Silverman: Life is a continuous journey. It helps to have long-term friends who know a lot about your past, so you don't have to explain it to them. As we age, family responsibilities and occupational pressures lessen, and so friendships become more important. Friendship in adulthood provides companionship and affection, as well as emotional support, and contributes positively to mental well-being and improved physical health.

Among the elderly, friendships are especially important. Should close relatives die, friends can provide links to the larger community, mitigate depression and loneliness, and compensate for potential losses in social support previously given by family members. Older people also feel more useful when they can do something for the community. Research has shown that older adults report the highest level of happiness and general well-being when they have close ties to friends. This satisfaction is associated with an increased ability to accomplish activities of daily living.

The number of friends in old age usually declines, often because of their death. I've gotten used to checking the daily obituary section in my local paper. Sometimes I learn that friends younger than I am (77), have died. This makes me more appreciative of my friends who remain.

Friends are important at any age, but especially for the elderly who might not be able to get out as often. Interaction with friends provides a continued social life. So, if you are young, think about staying in touch with elderly people you know. They will appreciate your attention more than you might have realized.

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 19 — Archimedean Pivot: To Take a Stand and to Move the Earth

2020/03/30

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about taking a stand.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In life, our wills, characters, and true stances will be tested. This seems like an inevitability. I've had several myself. Many cost me, dearly. Some, I'm still paying the costs in different ways.

Nonetheless, I don't regret them, taking the stands. I doubt I ever will. You need to take a stand. It may cost you. No one does anything alone, though. However, you can make a change and an influence as an example for others.

So, instead of avoidance of the issue, we best deal with them headfirst. What are the meanings of trials and tests in life, in hindsight?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Regarding trials and tests in life, here's a paragraph from the preface of my book, *Candidate Without A Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt*: "When I was a graduate student in the 1960s, I occasionally took breaks from mathematics to writing what I thought were clever stories. Then my roommate showed me a quote from Henry David Thoreau, 'How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.' So, prodded by Thoreau, I stopped my creative writing and focused on completing my Ph.D. in mathematics. Now more than forty years later, I've written about a few of the times I stood up to live, about the times I couldn't or wouldn't, and about the times I stood up and should have remained seated."

Life consists of trials and tests, and we need to learn from them. Before committing to an action, we should think about whether it will make a difference and to whom. For most of my life, I was a mathematics professor. I think I made a positive difference with some students, and though my research was respectable, it was not significant enough to make much difference to the mathematical community, nor did it have an impact on people outside the world of mathematics.

Circumstances of my adult life in the Bible Belt turned me from apathetic atheist (as most atheists are) to passionate atheist. It became my "calling," because I saw how I might make a significant difference in our culture. I became an accidental atheist activist when I discovered in

1990 that our South Carolina state constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office, and I challenged that provision by running for governor as “the candidate without a prayer.” In 1997 I won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, striking down the unconstitutional provision and giving atheists the right to hold public office in South Carolina.

This victory established me as an atheist activist, and I worked to increase the visibility and respectability of atheist viewpoints and to separate religion from government. I’m more interested in “converting” people from apathy to activism than from theism to atheism. I never regretted taking such unpopular stands in a state with so many religious people. As a tenured math professor, my job was secure. I also made many new friends, and I enjoy controversy if it comes from adopting positions on important causes.

I don’t think that gaining respectability for atheists is the world’s most important issue. It’s not even the most noteworthy civil rights struggle. If I had a magic wand, and believed in its efficacy, probably I’d first wave it to end world hunger. But there’s not much I can do about that, so my activity in this area doesn’t go much beyond working on small community projects and contributing to worthwhile organizations.

Jacobsen: What were examples from life for you?

Silverman: I became chair of the College of Charleston Faculty Research Committee in 1978. After spending many hours deciding how best to award funds set aside for summer research grants, I received a call from the president of the college. He told me he was cutting our research budget in half and wanted me not to tell grant applicants. As chair of the committee, I felt it my duty to be honest with the applicants and faculty, and I explained to them why some deserving recipients would not be receiving grants.

The faculty appreciated what I said, but President Stern definitely did not. I didn’t have to wait long to find out the extent of his displeasure. When a committee recommended me for the Distinguished Research Award, President Stern reluctantly presented me with the award at the spring graduation ceremony, along with the \$500 that went with it (meaningful in 1978, when my annual salary was under \$20,000).

As it turned out, I was fortunate that the amount in 1978 was only \$500, instead of the \$1,000 it became a couple of years later. President Stern also cut my recommended salary raise that year by \$500 because of my research award, something he had never done with past recipients. My \$500 research award was a one-time occurrence, but I lost that additional \$500 per year for the next 30 years, along with percentage raises based on it. So, my award cost me over \$25,000.

Was it worth taking such a stand? My conscience says, absolutely! Fortunately for me, President Stern retired the year before I came up for tenure, which I received through the new president.

Another example of my activism at the College of Charleston, a public institution, occurred at its Counseling Center, where one counsellor’s “specialty” was Christian counselling. When a non-Christian student informed me that the counsellor advised him to overcome his difficulties by giving his life to Jesus, I spoke to the counsellor. She did not deny the accusation. In fact, she named two students and asked if it was one of them who lodged the complaint. It wasn’t! Her response was so inappropriate at so many levels that I went directly to her boss and told him

about our exchange. The counsellor was quietly let go and the Counseling Center never again hired someone with that specialty

Jacobsen: If a youth ‘fails’ a test, inasmuch as one can fail at trials and tribulations of life testing endurance, what should be the main points of reflection for them?

Silverman: I would say that failure is not the opposite of success; it’s part of success. We can expect many failures along the path to finally succeeding. When attempting something new, don’t be afraid of appearing to be different from others if you think you are doing the right thing. If unable to accomplish a task, instead of saying “I can’t do it,” think about adding “yet.” And slow progress is better than no progress. Finally, remember the words of American president Theodore Roosevelt, “Knowing what’s right doesn’t mean much unless you do what’s right.”

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

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 20 — Newton's Sight Came From the Hind: A Send-Off

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Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019), and [Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy](#) (2020).

Here we talk about legacy and doing the good.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Legacies don't come from one person, usually. They come from a collective mass of unknowns and the forgotten, where one person or representation gets the collective credit.

But the vast majority of our benefit comes from the dead even before them. I can understand the ancestor worship, the praying for the dead, and the making divine of ordinary human beings who persisted and had some talents.

I can see this as a source of reverence. Those we never knew gave us a bit of a better shot, bit by bit, then died. What do you owe to freethought pioneers?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Isaac Newton in 1675 said, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Newton produced a mathematical understanding of motion, making the workings of the cosmos intelligible without any reference to supernatural belief. Yet he misguidedly said, "This most elegant system of the sun, planets, and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being."

Religious or not, scientists like Newton and Galileo contributed an enormous amount to the freethought movement before the Enlightenment. As Galileo learned, scientists often diverge from scripture at their peril. Scientific contributions have spread disbelief throughout the world because scientific arguments are settled through experimentation and evidence, not through authority or unproved claims of miracles found in so-called holy books. Scientists may not directly attack religious creeds, but they have undermined religious foundations. Nobody anymore believes that the earth is the center of the universe or that a deity made stars as an afterthought after creating the sun and the moon.

I'll even give a freethought shout-out to the anonymous biblical writer of Ecclesiastes who said that we all die, humans and animals alike, and that is it. From dust we came, and to dust we shall return. Pete Seeger included words from Ecclesiastes in his song, "Turn! Turn! Turn!"

Another shout-out goes to Socrates, who posed the Euthyphro Dilemma in 399 BCE, “Is something good because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is good?” This question still puzzles many theists today. Socrates was sentenced to death and forced to drink poison hemlock for corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and for not believing in the gods of the state. Socrates’s willingness to stand up against religious tradition turned him into an early freethought martyr.

Hypatia became a freethought martyr in the fifth century, one of the first women to study and teach mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. Hypatia said, “All formal dogmatic religions are fallacious and must never be accepted by self-respecting persons as final,” and “To teach superstitions as truth is a most terrible thing.” A mob of Christian zealots in Alexandria, Egypt dragged Hypatia into a church where they stripped her and beat her to death. They then tore her body apart and burned it. There wasn’t much religious tolerance shown to Hypatia.

Moving to more modern times, who can omit Charles Darwin as a freethought pioneer? When he began his scientific research, he was a church member. Shortly before he died, Darwin acknowledged having become an atheist. He was not inclined to engage in controversy. He wrote down what he had learned, and left it to others to accept or reject. Darwin’s theory of Evolution was shown by others that it was not “just” a theory, but an established fact, which led thinking people to understand that the whole biblical story of creation is a myth.

Robert Ingersoll was a great orator who advocated for freethought and humanism. He was active in politics and served as Illinois Attorney General in 1867. Illinois Republicans tried to persuade him to become a candidate for governor on the condition that he conceal his agnosticism during the campaign. Ingersoll refused, saying he would not let anyone limit his freedom of speech. He was also considered a radical for supporting woman’s suffrage.

Freethinker Thomas Paine is my favourite American founder. In his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, Paine provided convincing moral and political arguments for independence from Great Britain. Nonetheless, Paine hasn’t received the credit he deserves, primarily because of his irreverent book *The Age of Reason*. In it, he says, “I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my church.” And furthermore, “Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is no more derogatory, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself than this thing called Christianity.” Many contemporary politicians sympathized with the views of Paine, but didn’t openly support him for fear of the Religious Right of their day.

Finally, I’ll bring in a pioneer freethinker who was alive in my lifetime — Bertrand Russell. When I was 16, I found at my local library his book, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, the first book I ever saw about being an atheist. Russell transformed the lives of many in my generation. It was gratifying to see articulate arguments that confirmed and gave voice to our doubts about the existence of any deities. I think Bertrand Russell also influenced me to become a mathematician.

Jacobsen: What newer generations owe to more recent freethought pioneers?

Silverman: There are lots of recent freethought role models, many with outstanding books. They include Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Susan Jacoby, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Dan Barker, Steven Pinker, Rebecca Goldstein, Rob Boston, Andrew Seidel, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Greta Christina, A. C. Grayling, Wendy Kaminer, Greg Epstein, Salman Rushdie, Julia Sweeney, George Carlin, Bill Maher, and many more. And I'm sure that you, the reader, can come up with additional freethought pioneers. There was a time when it wasn't safe or comfortable to reveal that you are a freethinker. Our pioneers have made it easier to do so today.

Jacobsen: Is this effort at immortalization in memories of the living all that important at the end of the day? Or is simply doing good and maintaining what good has been built more important at the end of the day?

Silverman: It's worth knowing about freethought pioneers, who can serve as role models, but I don't think it is necessary to immortalize them. After all, they are not immortal. We should learn from them and try to make their good works remain influential in our lives.

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

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Author Biography



Scott Douglas Jacobsen is a Canadian author, interviewer, and publisher, and a board member and executive on numerous boards whose contributions to secularism, humanism, and human-rights discourse are distinguished by their rigour and accessibility. He established In-Sight Publishing in 2014 to produce freely available or low-cost e-books and periodicals under a Creative Commons license, thereby ensuring broad dissemination while safeguarding intellectual property.

As editor-in-chief of *In-Sight: Interviews* (ISSN 2369-6885), launched in 2012, Jacobsen curates and presents meticulously prepared, long-form dialogues with a wide range of interlocutors. These

interviews include scientists and philosophers, activists and public intellectuals, addressing themes such as secular ethics, freedom of expression, evidence-based policymaking, and the global defence of human rights. His work appears regularly in peer-recognized outlets, including *The Good Men Project*, *International Policy Digest* (ISSN: 2332-9416), *The Humanist* (Print: ISSN 0018-7399; Online: ISSN 2163-3576), Basic Income Earth Network (UK Registered Charity 1177066), *A Further Inquiry*, Canadian Humanist Publications (CA Registered Charity 118833284 RR 0001), *Uncommon Ground Media* (UK Registration 11836548), The New Enlightenment Project, *News Intervention*, *Canadian Atheist*, Trusted Clothes (CN: 9562184; BN: 791402928RC0001), among dozens of others.

Jacobsen engages globally and interdisciplinarily with issues of social justice, belief plurality, and economic equity. Jacobsen has held the Tobis Fellowship in Research at the University of California, Irvine, on multiple occasions, contributing to empirical and normative studies on ethics and public discourse. He maintains active membership in numerous professional media organizations, fostering adherence to editorial standards and facilitating ongoing intellectual exchange.

His editorial leadership and commitment to open-access formats have generated a substantial, publicly accessible archive—known as the Jacobsen Bank—that documents contemporary secular and humanist thought. Based in British Columbia, he continues to expand the reach of his platforms, amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting evidence-based dialogue across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

