



The

Separationist



“Health Care: A Privilege or a Right?” a talk by Nancy Worley and an Open Discussion 4 PM Sunday April 19th, at Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street

At our April meeting, SHL Volunteer Coordinator Nancy Worley will discuss the findings of her recent investigation into the issues surrounding universal health care, followed by a moderated group discussion on the same topic.

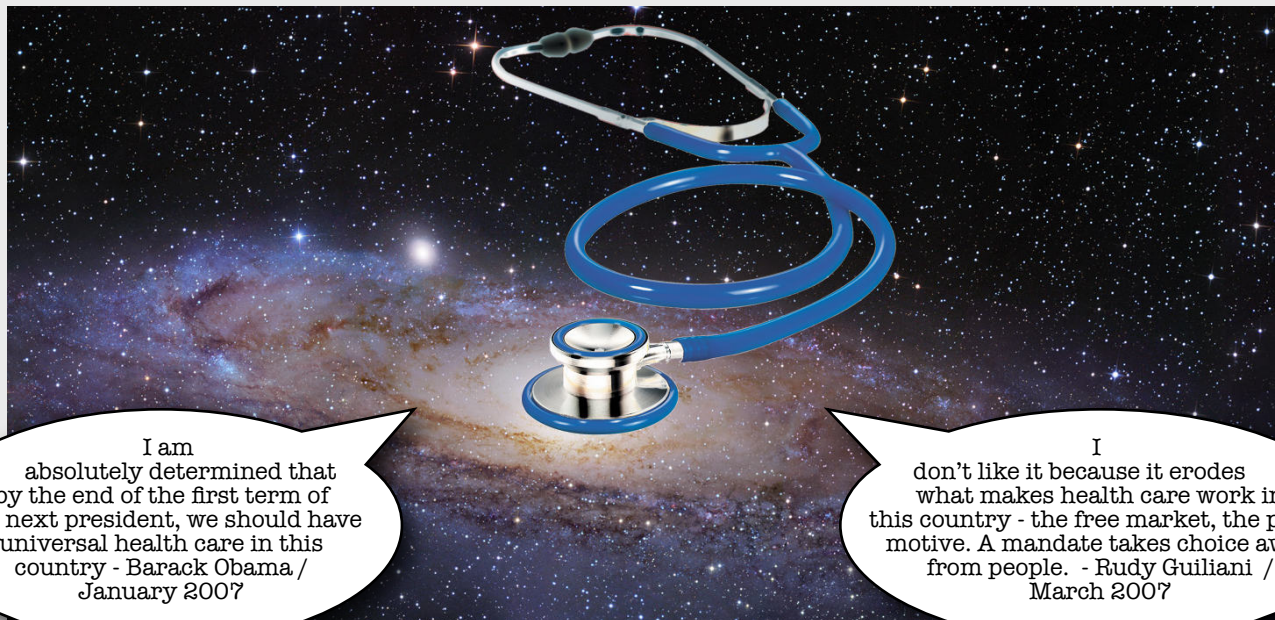
Nancy is active with the Health Care Committee of a community group called *Grassroots Call to Action*. Her committee recently researched the present state of health care in terms of cost, access, and quality, and the ways in which universal health coverage would improve the present situation.

After she presents the facts and introduces some of the difficult ethical questions that arise, we will change gears and have an open forum at which SHL members and others in attendance can discuss and debate the issues.

As usual, the meeting will be held at 4PM on the third Sunday of the month at Gage Hall next to the Unitarian Church on Archdale Street. The meeting is free and open to the public and will feature light refreshments.

Nancy Worley is a retired Associate Professor of Nursing at MUSC. She has a BS and Master's degree in Nursing and a Ph.D in City and Regional Planning with a concentration in Health Planning- all from the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of several dozen journal articles and book chapters. She has written a book on Mental Health in the Community and has been an invited speaker at national and international conferences on mental health.

Thoughts on Universal Health Care from the Left and the Right:



I am absolutely determined that by the end of the first term of the next president, we should have universal health care in this country - Barack Obama / January 2007

I don't like it because it erodes what makes health care work in this country - the free market, the profit motive. A mandate takes choice away from people. - Rudy Giuliani / March 2007

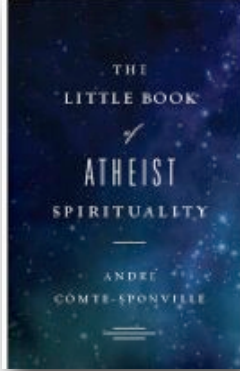
Humanist Book Group

**4PM on April 26
at Barnes & Noble in West Ashley**

A recent book by the contemporary French philosopher and former Sorbonne professor Andre Comte-Sponville bears the intriguing title of "The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality." But isn't "atheist spirituality" an oxymoron? Some people would certainly think so and urge us to leave spirituality to those who believe in spirits.

But the author would beg to differ: "Atheists have as much spirit as anyone else," he claims, so "why would they be less interested in spiritual life?" He defines the "spirit" as "a thing that thinks" and adds, "Little does it matter whether the thing in question is the brain, as I believe it to be, or an immaterial substance, as was Descartes's conviction." He goes on to explore his style of atheism in a mild-mannered tone that feels very different from the alarming assertions we've been reading in books by "New Atheists" like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Instead, the author looks for wisdom from the likes of Spinoza and Buddha. If religion and spirituality are really two different things, perhaps a godless spirituality is indeed feasible.

Retired Unitarian Universalist minister Jacqueline Collins will facilitate a discussion of this book at our usual meeting: the fourth Sunday of the month (April 26) at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble bookstore (1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd.), from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m. Please join us, even if you haven't had a chance to read the book!



Letter sent to Charleston City Paper

SHL President Jonathan Lamb sent the following letter to the City Paper in response to a posting on their website from user "RichB". Although they printed that post's insulting remarks about the SHL in their newspaper, they have not yet printed Jonathan's response:

Responding to the letter in the March 11 issue asking "if [the Secular Humanists] pass the collection plate around at the believe in nothing services," I first want to point out that just because we do not believe in anything supernatural does not mean we believe in nothing. We believe that if we want the world to be a better place, we have to do something about it ourselves since no supernatural being is going to do it for us. Regarding whether we pass around the collection plate, the answer is yes. But rather than the money we raise supporting the salary of a minister and church staff, one-hundred percent of the funds support local causes. Every two months we raise money through our group for a local non-profit in need of assistance. In the last two years we have raised several thousand dollars for local groups. Organizations we have supported include: Windwood Farm, Lowcountry Orphan Relief, Race for the Cure, My Sister's House, Operation Home, and Planned Parenthood. Additionally, we organize volunteer activities every month. We have assisted with several work days at Windwood Farm children's shelter, worked with the Food Bank, helped at Lowcountry Orphan Relief, and we are involved in an ongoing project of upgrading the facilities at the Carolina Youth Development Center.

Aside from the work we do through our organization, most of our members are very philanthropic in their personal lives. Several of us regularly volunteer with local organizations such as the Charleston County Adult Drug Court, SC Aquarium, women's health clinic, and Food Bank. We are also generous financial donors to a wide variety of local and national organizations.

Jonathan Lamb
Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Silverman a Regular in Washington Post "On Faith" Forum

Each week, a panel of experts answer religion related questions in the Washington Post's "On Faith" forum at

<http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/>.

Beginning later this month, SHL Vice-President Herb Silverman will be featured as a regular panelist alongside contributors including Deepak Chopra, Richard Dawkins, John Shelby Spong, Chuck Colson, Susan Jacoby and Rick Warren.

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Newsletter Co-Editors

Laura and Alex Kasman

Evolution and Edible Fruit

an essay by Alex Kasman

Among the e-mail messages we received after our billboard went up was one from a person who was trying to offer evidence that the world was created by an intelligent and benevolent supernatural being. One of his arguments, which I had not specifically heard before, had to do with the existence of edible fruit. In particular, he suggested that fruit was healthy and delicious and -- so far as he knew -- never poisonous. And, he asked how this could be possible without an "intelligent designer".

This is an interesting question, and so I gave it some thought.

The first thing to point out is that there are poisonous fruits. For instance, the holly berry and mistletoe (both associated with Christmas, for some reason) have poison berries. The mayapple, castor bean, Jerusalem cherry and deadly nightshade (a close relative of the tomato) are all also poisonous. There are even plants which have poisonous parts even though we eat other parts. The fruit that grows around an almond is poisonous, as are the seeds of peaches and apples.

However, that is not the really interesting part of the question. The interesting thing is to think about why there are so many fruits (a whole aisle of them at the supermarket!) that we can eat. It would at least give me pause for thought if I could not think of any natural explanation for their abundance.

The fact is, I can think of three natural explanations for the prevalence of edible fruit in the world today, and they seem to be in very good agreement with all of the evidence.

First, we should note that some things are poisonous to some creatures but not to others. For instance, as we all know, cocoa is poisonous to dogs, but not to humans. Now, suppose that in the early history of humanity the only fruits around were ones that were poisonous for them to eat. There would be strong evolutionary pressure then for them to develop an immunity to the poison. In other words, if most of the humans could not eat the fruit but a small handful with a mutation could, then that small group would be able to survive better since they had a great deal more to eat and very soon they would be in the majority.

The second naturalistic explanation for edible fruit involves the fruit changing so that animals can eat it. One has to wonder why fruit exists at all. According to the

fossil record, there were many millions of years of plants without flowers or fruit. What advantages do the fruits offer the plants? They can protect and fertilize the seeds, but they offer another advantage that plants otherwise lack: mobility. If a plant can spread its seeds far away,

that will increase its chances of successfully reproducing and spreading. However, as you may have noticed, plants don't walk. One of the ways they have evolved to spread seeds is to make them light enough to blow away (like dandelions), but another is to have them ingested by an animal and then spread through its feces. Think of it this way, if there were two identical plants that each had fruits with seeds in them, but one was poisonous and the other wasn't, what would happen? The plant with the poison fruit might have some offspring growing right near it (competing for resources), but the one with the edible fruit will have its seeds carried far away by animals and (forgive me) fertilized by their feces. Here is a relevant quote from Wikipedia:

Seed dispersal via ingestion by animals, or endozoochory, is the dispersal mechanism for most tree species. Endozoochory is generally a coevolved mutualistic relationship in which a plant surrounds seeds with an

edible, nutritious fruit as a reward to frugivorous animals that consume it. Birds and mammals are the most important seed dispersers, but a wide variety of other animals, including turtles and fish, can transport viable seeds. The exact percentage of tree species dispersed by endozoochory varies between habitats, but can range to over 90% in some tropical rainforests. Seed dispersal by animals in tropical rainforests has received much attention, and this interaction is considered an important force shaping the ecology and evolution of vertebrate and tree populations. In the tropics, large animal seed dispersers (such as tapirs, chimpanzees and hornbills) may disperse large seeds with few other seed dispersal agents. The extinction of these large frugivores from poaching and habitat loss may have negative effects on the tree populations that depend on them for seed dispersal.



The explanations offered so far above do not depend on any sort of intelligence or understanding. If there was an island with a variety of creatures and plants on it, if some of those plants had fruits edible to some of the creatures, the creatures who could not eat the plants and the plants which did not have edible fruit would both be at a disadvantage. So, after a while there would be lots of creatures who can eat fruit and fruit that is edible to creatures even if neither the creatures nor the plants understand what is happening. This is a key aspect of evolution which is not generally appreciated by its critics: the end result of natural selection can look like "intelligent design" without the need for any intelligence.

The third of my naturalistic explanations for the prevalence of edible fruit, however, does depend on intelligence...just not supernatural intelligence. The fact is that we humans are largely responsible for the variety of edible fruits in the world. Consider, for example, the apple tree. You can see lots of different varieties of apples in the grocery store (red delicious, pink lady, gala, granny smith, etc.) but these did not all exist somewhere in nature or the Garden of Eden. We bred them. I don't think that creating new breeds is something controversial to creationists...is it? Take a look at the American Kennel Club. They make no secret of the fact that we have created the different breeds of dogs by selection. In fact, the same is true of fruits. Consider the following quote from www.botanical.com:

The Crab-tree or Wild Apple (Pyrus malus), is native to Britain and is the wild ancestor of all the cultivated varieties of apple trees.

In other words, if it wasn't for us, then there would only be the small, extremely tart "crab apple" growing in Britain. The fact that there are bigger and sweeter varieties growing all around the world is due to our efforts.

So, to summarize, I really think that it would be surprising if there were not a lot of edible fruit in the world. Between the evolutionary pressure on creatures to develop tolerance to the toxins in the plants that grow around them, the advantage to plants in producing edible fruits, and the efforts of thousands of years of human farmers in selecting and propagating the seeds of any plants that do make edible fruits, it would take a supernatural power to prevent them from existing rather than to explain why they do.



SAVE THE DATE: SHL Family Picnic on May 9th

We're planning a picnic for non-religious families with kids (and all those who support them). We'll meet 11AM-3PM on Saturday May 9th in North Charleston's Wannamaker Park. Each family will bring their own main dish and a side or dessert to share. We'll provide drinks, dishes, etc. and arrange for activities and games. For more info, see the May issue of the *Separationist* or visit:

<http://lowcountryhumanists.org/picnic2009.html>

April Volunteer Opportunities by Nancy Worley

April 11- Volunteers are needed at the **Carolina Youth Development Center** to finish painting an office and sew and hang curtains. If you want to sew curtains, the material will be supplied but bring a portable sewing machine if possible. We will meet at the PAL cottage at 9:30 AM. The cottage is located at 5055 Lackawanna Blvd. in North Charleston.

April 25 is the **Clean City Sweep**. Details were not available at press time but check the website at lowcountryhumanists.org for updates.

Ongoing – The Teachers' Supply Closet is a non-profit organization dedicated to supplying teachers in low income schools with the supplies they need in order to provide the best classroom experience possible. SHL members can participate by bringing needed supplies to SHL meetings. A box will be available to drop in supplies which will then be taken to organization headquarters. The top five items needed are:

- ★baby wipes,
- ★hand sanitizers,
- ★24 crayon packs,
- ★composition notebooks
- ★glue sticks.

For more information about volunteer opportunities, visit our website, speak to me at a monthly SHL meeting (I am usually at the t-shirt table), or write to me at volunteers@lowcountryhumanists.org.

Charles Darwin 1809 – 1882 R.I.P.

by Laura Kasman

This editorial reflects the opinions of the author. These views are not necessarily shared by the board or members of the SHL. We would be very happy to publish a contrary view written by other members. Please write to newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org.

If you didn't notice that this year, 2009, was the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, you live a sheltered life. In February, every popular science magazine featured Darwin on its cover. Newspapers printed special sections, new biographies were published, hundreds of groups held Darwin Days and Darwin Weeks, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation put up billboards bearing his picture against a stained glass background reading "Praise Darwin: Evolve beyond belief." I know this effort was for the most part, by people who embrace evolution. You might find it strange then, that I believe that all the attention lavished on Charles Darwin, excellent scientist that he was, is damaging to science and to the secular cause.

The use of Darwin or "Darwinism" as a synonym for evolution suggests to many people that it is an idea of one man which has remained unquestioned and untested since the 19th century. Harkening back to Darwin makes it easier to ignore the millions of person-years of work (by no means an exaggeration) by tens of thousands of scientists who have painstakingly collected and published geologic, fossil, mathematical, and molecular evidence supporting, expanding, and explaining how life forms evolve on this planet. Referring to evolutionary biology as "Darwinism" is a common tactic used by creationists for this very reason. In addition, the word Darwinism is linked in many people's minds with so-called Social Darwinism, eugenics and Hitler. While this is unfair, the unfairness is beside the point. We can't untaint the word by continuing to use it any more than the General Assembly of South Carolina could make the confederate flag an innocent symbol of southern gal-

lantry and states rights by continuing to fly it. The word "Darwinism" is tainted, and we shouldn't play into creationists' hands by using it or suggesting that people who understand and accept the evidence for evolution do so as part of a cult of personality surrounding Charles Darwin. Religious groups would like "Darwinism" to be defined as a religion so they can demand equal time for their religion in science class. "Praise Darwin" as the FFRF recently posted on billboards very much plays into this idea. Instead, it is important to emphasize that the stage was set for "The Origin of Species" by other scientists and thinkers, and the ideas it proposed have since been tested and expanded with further work by many, many others, just as with all scientific discoveries. Questioning the existence of evolution should seem like questioning the existence of gravity, because, in fact, it is.

As for rallying around evolution as a secular cause célèbre please also consider this. The central fact of evolution, that natural selection gives rise to new species, is a fact but it is a cold one. Evolution is a very useful thing to know about and understand, but in practice, the reality is that nature is very cruel. The vast majority of organisms born, hatched, or sprouted on this planet have died very young. That's how evolution works. I'm sure you would agree that a billboard saying "Hurray for Natural Selection" has many unpleasant implications that we wouldn't want to have associated with atheism or secular humanism. If we want to "praise" or celebrate something, let's celebrate the scientific method. It's harder because we can't attach one face to it, but that's reality.

Parking Tips for SHL Meetings

Some visitors have reported having difficulty finding a place to park near Gage Hall for our monthly meetings. In fact, it can be difficult, if one does not know where to look.

The map on the left shows the location of Gage Hall with the little bubble labeled "A". Some free parking is available right behind the building if you follow the narrow, one-way street labeled "Jacob's Alley". (Don't worry about the signs back there. You *can* park in the spots on the left on Sundays as long as you are attending an event at the Unitarian Church or Gage Hall.) Other free parking is available at the two other locations labeled with "P"s. (up on Archdale and down on Queen). Then, pay parking is also available in the two lots labeled with dollar signs (on St. Philip just before Beaufain and further up on Archdale Street.)



The Separationist

**Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry**

Editors:

Laura and Alex Kasman

Join the SHL:

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of freethinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the Charleston, SC area. The SHL is affiliated with American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Atheist Alliance International, Council for Secular Humanism, and the SC Progressive Network.

Annual tax-exempt membership fees are \$24 (individual) or \$36 (couple or family); additional donations are always welcome. Members receive this newsletter and can participate in our activities. For more information consult our Web-page at:

<http://www.lowcountryhumanists.org>

Contribute

Please contact the editors with any questions or comments about this publication. Contributions of short articles, news items, letters-to-the-editor or other information of interest to SHL members are always appreciated. Write to us at

newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org

or use the contact information at the bottom of page 2.

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