



The

Separationist



SHL Spring 2009 Potluck Party 5:00 PM / MAY 17, 2009

Roger's House (see directions page 2)



This has been quite a year for the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, with one of the biggest highlights being the fulfillment of our long-term goal of putting up a billboard on I-26 to increase awareness of our organization. To celebrate this and all of the other successes

and joys in our lives since last May, the SHL is hosting our annual Potluck Party on **May 17**. We will meet at **5:00 p.m.**, at Roger's house (**see directions on page 2**) for a short business meeting followed by a party featuring good food and good company.

This is a chance to get together for a social exchange with folks you never have time to chat with at the regular meetings. SHL members who

seldom or never attend monthly meetings are especially welcome at this friendly gathering.

One important item during the brief business meeting will be elections for SHL board members. It is not too late to nominate someone (or yourself) for consideration. Please send any nominations, including why you think this person would be a good board member, to Jonathan Lamb by May 7th. E-mail: president@lowcountryhumanists.org or phone: 469-0654.

Don't forget to bring food and/or drink along, too. Some of you may wonder what to contribute. As is our custom established years ago by Herb Silverman: "Atheists will bring only food whose ingredients they can see, agnostics are not sure what they will bring or whether there really is food, skeptics will argue whether we really should have a potluck supper at all, pagans will bring wine, anarchists may bring whatever they damn well please, and humanists optimistically believe they will help to complement the meal and make it a wonderful experience for all."

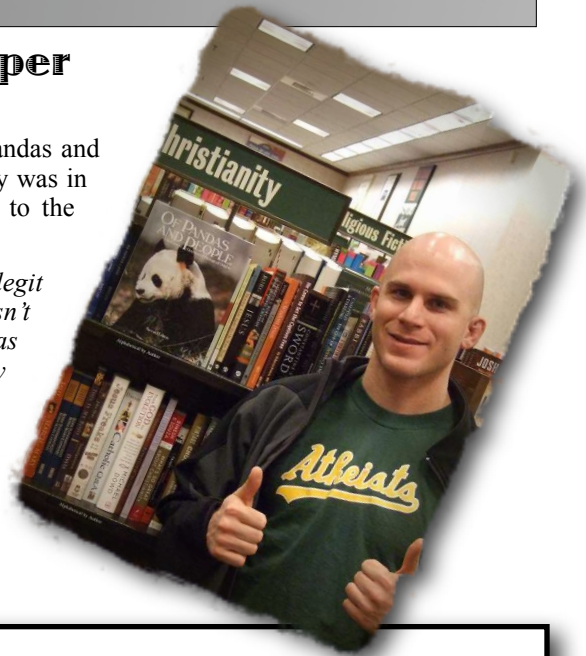
Also in May, the first SHL Family Picnic!
Games, food, fun for kids and grown-ups!
(see page 6 for details)

SHL Member Puts "Pandas" in its Proper Place at Local Bookstore

Thanks and congratulations to Jason Gregory! Noticing that the book "Of Pandas and People" which gained notoriety during the Dover, PA intelligent design controversy was in the science section of the West Ashley Barnes & Noble bookstore, Jason wrote to the company explaining:

I can understand how the book can be misinterpreted to be a legit scientific work to someone who doesn't know the book's history or isn't familiar with the sciences as a whole. I'm hoping that the book was misfiled in good faith and that after proper analysis it can be correctly placed in a different and more appropriate section.

After an exchange of several more communications with the Vice President of Trade Book Buying (all of which Jason assures us were polite and friendly), the bookstore agreed that it was misleading to place this book there and then properly reshelved it in the religion section of the store. (See photo.)



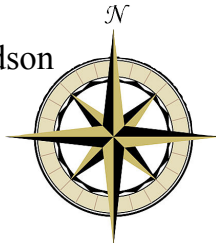
New York Times Piece Profiles SHL

In a piece entitled "More Atheists Shout it from the Rooftops", New York Times reporter Laurie Goodstein writes about the increasing tendency of non-religious people to "come out of the closet". Much of the article focuses on our group and its members. On the morning of Monday April 27th, when the article first appeared, it was listed as number 7 in the 10 "most emailed" stories on the Times' website. Read the article at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/us/27atheist.html>

Directions to May Potluck Party

- The address is 313 West Hudson Avenue on Folly Beach.
- To get there, take Folly Road through James Island.
- When you go over the last bridge and are on Folly Island, take the third right turn onto West Hudson Avenue.
- Roger's house is three blocks down on the left side and his phone number is 224-9360.



Adopt-a-Highway Trash Pick-up Saturday, May 30th, 9 a.m.

The second adopt-a-highway pick-up of the year will be May 30th. Our stretch of adopted highway is on Harborview Road on James Island. We meet at the parking lot of the First Federal Bank (next to Piggly Wiggly) at 8:50 AM. In exchange for our participation the SHL gets a roadside sign that enhances our group's image through community involvement. It's also good exercise! Please join us on Saturday, May 30th. All necessary equipment is provided, but you might be happier if you wore sunscreen, insect repellent and work gloves. If you have any questions, contact Roger Prevost at 224-9360.

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Officers of the SHL

President: Jonathan Lamb
Vice President: Herb Silverman
Treasurer: Frances Hay
Secretary: Sharon Strong

Newsletter Co-Editors

Laura and Alex Kasman

Letting Go By Herb Silverman

(reprinted from *Secular Nation*, April-June 2009)

This article has nothing to do with Julia Sweeney's wonderful one-woman show, "Letting Go of God." Well, almost nothing. Like Julia, I struggled with a letting-go experience, worried about its consequences, and now I wonder why it took so long to let go. In 1994, I was a founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, an AAI affiliate based in Charleston, South Carolina. I became its president, editor of the newsletter, and wrote almost all the articles. I tried to shift some of the responsibility to others, but wasn't very successful. After a few years, I persuaded my wife Sharon to take over as newsletter editor, but the organization remained mostly a family affair. In calling for others to take a more active role, I even wrote an editorial titled "Stop the Dictator!"

I must admit to having been somewhat flattered when people said that nobody else could do the kind of job I was doing. I had mixed emotions when members opined that the organization would fall apart without me. I did encourage new ideas but, looking back, I wasn't very supportive; I would often respond with reasons why the new ideas would not work. Sometimes, I would ask whoever came up with an idea to develop it on his or her own, without any assistance. But more often than not, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry just kept on going as we had always gone.

Over time, we grew in membership and people liked the camaraderie. Gradually, others began assuming some leadership positions. I also was becoming more engaged with national organizations. And since I had a full-time job as a math professor, I was devoting less time to the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. So I worried about doing a half-assed job. Sharon told me it was time for a new president of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, but I resisted because I didn't want to see the organization I had built fall apart. This is known as "Founder's Syndrome." I did ask a couple of capable people if they'd be willing to take over the presidency, but they declined. So I just kept on keeping on.

Finally, in my 13th year as president, I told our board that I would not serve as president beyond June, 2007. The impetus was a year-long mathematics sabbatical leave in Virginia. I had a sabbatical once before, and was replaced by a caretaker president who only agreed to serve if I would resume the position on my return. At that time, I also wound up making long-distance decisions about the organization. This time was different. I was letting go, and would not return as president.

We elected new officers before I left, and I gave minimal advice from afar. The new president had pressing personal priorities, but the new vice president handled most of the business of the president.

They made a number of changes, some I liked and some I didn't. But the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry continued to thrive without me. I am now back in Charleston, and on the board, but not its leader. Last year's vice president is now

the president, and he's doing a fine job. Overall, I think leaving the presidency was good for me and good for the organization. (Note to myself: Always listen to your wife.)

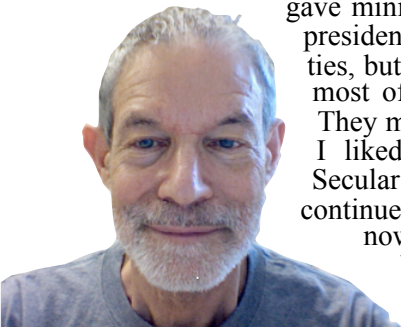
One of the biggest mistakes leaders can make is to believe they are irreplaceable. I've seen many good ones, whether in atheist or other organizations, outstay a welcome. For an organization to flourish, I think a high priority for a leader is to make him or herself replaceable. Atheists, above all, should recognize that organizations must not give too much power to any one individual. We have no "dear leaders" who communicate to us through a supernatural being. We pride ourselves on being independent, and we recognize the fallibility of all.

On the national scene, in 2000 I helped start the Coalition for the Community of Reason (CCR), which consisted of several national, nontheistic orgs. Its purpose was to facilitate cooperation among those organizations. A couple of them joined reluctantly, but were not particularly interested in cooperating. I bristled when some leaders in member organizations referred to the coalition as "Herb's organization." I understood the implication, that it was a fragile alliance without enough ongoing interest unless I remained pushy about keeping it alive. Not surprisingly, it died a natural death.

Yet from the Coalition for the Community of Reason came the Secular Coalition for America in 2002, consisting initially of the most cooperative CCR organizations, and expanding with a well-defined mission. We learned from CCR failures and made sure that Secular Coalition member organizations would be enthusiastic and engaged, with no one individual or organization dominating. Though I've been its president since its inception in 2002, I am proud to say I've become increasingly less important to its success. Were I to die tomorrow, the Secular Coalition would continue to thrive. I've even told my wife Sharon to call for a Secular Coalition fundraiser if I die while she is still alive. (To my friends reading this: Don't worry, I feel great. I'm planning to live forever, and so far, so good.)

Though I've talked about leaders with too much power, there's the opposite danger of members in an organization who do nothing but complain about their leaders. We need to be careful about whether our criticism is constructive or destructive. Some good leaders have left organizations because of too much micro managing. I have no magic bullet about how organizations should best be managed. It's easier, though, if power is divided among competent people and if everyone has a good sense of humor.

Much worse than not volunteering for a position is to volunteer for something you are incapable of or unwilling to do. It also helps if members are working for the same goals, and if they genuinely like each other. One more thing. People are more likely to stay active in an organization when they are having fun. And remember the quote from Harry S Truman: "It's remarkable how much you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit."



Coalitions Create Reunions and Heal Secular Rifts

by Larry Carter Center

Herb Silverman addressed over 300 American Atheists at the national convention on April 10th in Atlanta, GA. As a lifelong American Atheist, I was re-united with many old friends from across the country, many "former American Atheists" now working in the Secular Coalition for America.

They are from states like AL, IL and UT, where Atheists experienced severe political strains and Minnesota Atheists who expanded to Atheist International Alliance. My Iowa friends have returned from the '80's and '90's under one roof again, working together.

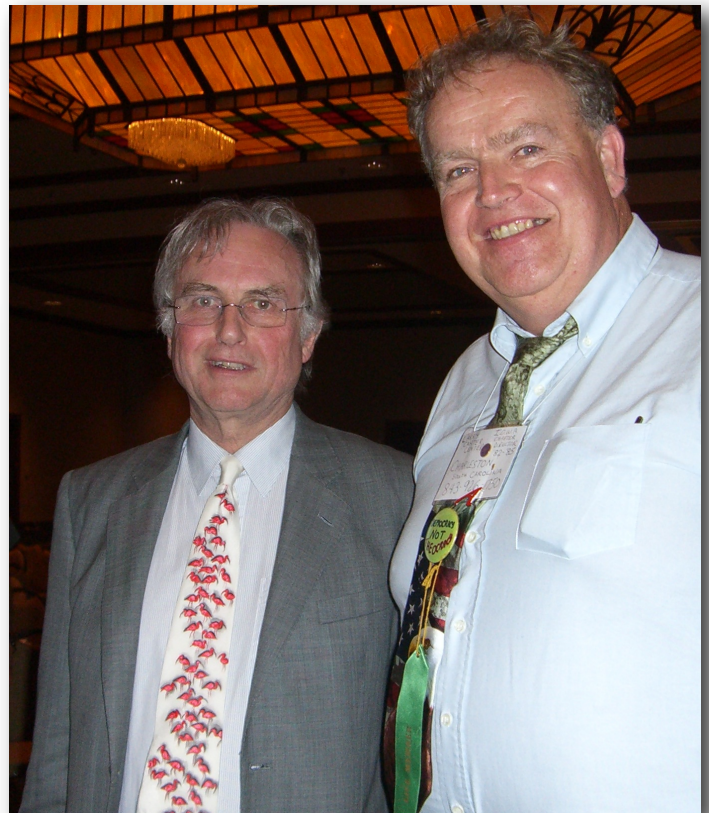
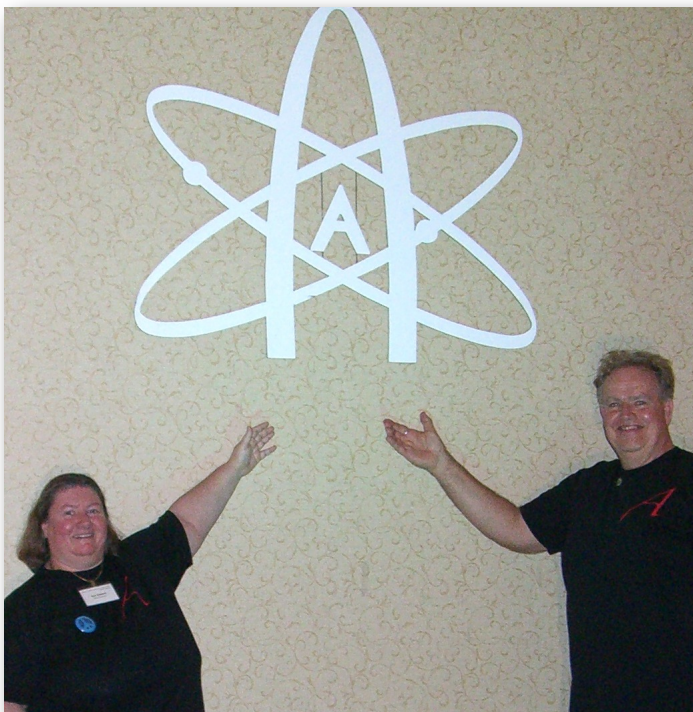
I've long predicted that the internet and the political necessity of re-bonding our movement started long ago by now dead freethought leaders would eventually occur.

Thanks to the leadership of Herb Silverman, personally detailed in his speech, I am an eyewitness to this historic healing and progress for our future success in defeating theocracy and achieving our full civil rights, free from discrimination by religious bigots.

Conventioneers were treated to the fine humor of Professor Dawkins on the Tony Blair Faith Foundation spoofings. Many great speeches by world travelers promoted how critical thinking and freethought are sorely needed and are rising in advocacy and progress across the globe. Book signings by over a dozen authors make this event one which SHL members should not have missed. Some future SHL members were present, and I look forward to introducing them to the rest of you in coming months.

Report from American Atheists Convention by Sue Edward

This was my first time attending an American Atheists conference and I am absolutely thrilled to have had the opportunity to meet so many friendly people and hear such fascinating speakers. I was very impressed by journalist and author Michelle Goldberg's speech about the global war on women's reproductive rights and the fierce opposition from conservatives who see women's submission as key to their own religious identity. I laughed nonstop at Brother Harry Hardwick from Landover Baptist Church as he delivered his sermon and answered bible questions from the audience. I participated in a mass debaptism ceremony. But perhaps the most memorable moment for me was hearing Nate Phelps - son of Fred Phelps of 'God Hates Fags' fame - as he shared his painful story of growing up in an atmosphere of unimaginable abuse with a stunned and silent audience, more than a few near tears, and the overwhelming support shown to him by everyone. I had procrastinated in making the decision to attend the conference, and am certainly glad that I did.



Left: Our intrepid reporters with the American Atheists' logo. Above: Larry with Richard Dawkins (both sporting rather unusual ties).

Progress but not Victory in Texas

by Alex Kasman

On March 27th, the Associated Press issued the following report:

State education leaders forged a compromise Friday on the teaching of evolution in Texas, adopting a new science curriculum that no longer requires educators to teach the weaknesses of all scientific theories. The State Board of Education voted 13-2 to put in place a plan that would instead require teachers to encourage students to scrutinize "all sides" of scientific theories, a move criticized by evolution proponents.

This is at least a partial victory for those who believe science classes should be used for teaching science rather than religion. The previous requirement of teaching "weaknesses" of scientific theories was clearly nothing more than a requirement that the teachers repeat the ridiculous pronouncements of the *Discovery Institute*. That this language has been removed at least indicates an acknowledgement that its previous misuse had rendered this phrase unacceptable. However, as Dan Quinn of the Texas Freedom Network is quoted as saying in various media outlets, "It's as if they slammed the door shut, then ran around the house opening windows."

The new standards calls for classes to "analyze and evaluate" scientific explanations for the complexity of cells and the fossil record. Taken literally, this could only be a good thing, as we would hope that analysis and evaluation would be skills taught in any science course. However, combining this with the fact that the board also determined that their students should not hear that the age of the universe is roughly 14 billion years, it is reasonable to think that these are again nothing more than "code words" inviting teachers to use faith and religious dogma rather than evidence and reason to suggest that students should disbelieve science.

Unfortunately, the situation is even worse than one might think. Since textbook publishers do not want to lose the large Texas market, they are likely to produce books which would meet these new, inadequate standards. As a result, school districts in other states might end up using them as well.

Sadly, we can expect these and other similar problems to continue to plague our public schools so long as those who are in charge of setting the standards are elected officials worried

about getting votes rather than qualified experts in science and education.

This is not a comfortable situation for me. I am a supporter of public education, science and democracy. Here, however, these different goals seem to be in opposition.

Ideally, the voters could demonstrate their own support for science in public education. This is what happened in Dover, PA when the members of the board who had supported their embarrassing move towards the teaching of "intelligent design" were voted off. But, it may not be reasonable to expect such a happy ending in every instance.

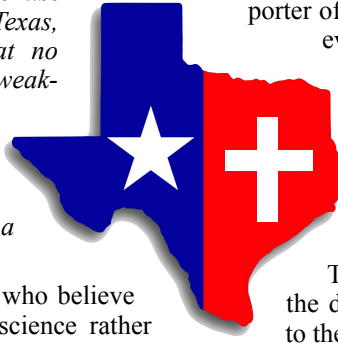
The British Magazine, *New Scientist*, suggests moving the decision-making power regarding curricula all the way to the top of the governmental hierarchy:

President Barack Obama has already called for all states to have the same achievement standards, raising hopes that he might push for federal standards across all US schools. While this might provoke conservative ire, it would put an end to the present situation in which an accident of geography can determine whether a child is taught valid science.

I cannot help but feel that this reflects a misunderstanding of American culture and do not foresee (or even wish for) educational standards to be set at the federal level.

Maybe then the best compromise I can hope for is that proposed by Texas state senator Rodney Ellis and representative Garnet Coleman. They proposed transferring authority for textbooks and curricula to the Texas Education Agency. This would still leave control at the state level and at a level which could be affected by voters, though not so directly as in the present situation.

If that plan does not work, then I would be placed in the unfortunate position of either being satisfied with science classes which do not teach science or seeking to ensure that parents do not have influence over their own children's public school curricula. Still, two positive developments -- the acknowledgement of our local Barnes & Noble that "Of Pandas and People" is not a science book (see page 2) and that Texas educational policy no longer calls for teaching supposed "weaknesses" -- give me cause for optimism.



Humanist Book Group

4PM on May 24th
at Barnes & Noble in West Ashley

At the last Book Group meeting before our "summer break", we will be discussing "*The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*" by Austin Dacey. Sam Moskow will be leading the discussion. All are welcome to attend, whether or not you have read the book. This is our last meeting until September, so we will also be discussing books for next year. Please join us or send suggestions to Matt Dean (lsl@liferingsc.info) who will be taking over running the Book Group from Sharon Strong in the Fall.

SHL Family Picnic on May 9th

**Aimed at Non-religious Families with Children in the Lowcountry
(but open to all who support them)**

Playgrounds, soccer balls, sand boxes, and juice boxes: not the sorts of things you expect to see at a gathering of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. But, then, this is no ordinary SHL event. This is our first ever *Family Picnic!*



We're planning a picnic for non-religious families with kids and all 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 dish or dessert to share. The SHL will provide everything else: drinks (non-alcoholic), plates, napkins, forks, etc. and a grill ready to cook anything you bring to put on it.

We will also be bringing things to play with and planning some activities. Perhaps freeze tag, or a softball game, or just having fun in the playground. Nearby our site there are sprinklers to play in and a nature trail to walk on. What we do depends somewhat on who will be attending.

Just for fun! A chance for non-religious parents raising kids in the lowcountry to get to know each other...and a chance for the kids to be kids!

Directions: Take exit 205-B from I-26 and turn left after about 1.5 miles to enter the park. Unless you have purchased a park pass, you will need to pay a \$1 admission fee for each person. Once inside, follow the signs to Park Center. We have rented tables and a "tent" just beside the center and the lagoon.

What to Bring: Bring a main dish for your family (maybe something to put on the grill that we will have going) and a side dish or dessert to share. If you're thinking about playing in the sprinklers, you might want a towel or change of clothing. Of course, sunscreen and insect repellent are generally useful. We will provide everything else.

For more info, visit:

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

If you have any questions, write to shl@lowcountryhumanists.org. (And, if you can, please write to that address in advance to let us know how many people from your group will be coming and the age of any children you are bringing to help us plan appropriately. Thanks!)

SHL Volunteering Update

Our SHL volunteers participated in two volunteer days in April. On April 11, we returned to Charleston Youth Development Center and finished painting an office that we had started in March. We also completed curtains for most of the bedrooms. The CYDC Newsletter contained a nice write-up on the work SHL has done at CYDC. You can access the newsletter at www.cydc.org. On April 25, nine SHL volunteers participated in Clean Cities Sweep by joining the Cannonborough/Elliottborough Neighborhood Association in a trash pick-up. Volunteer plans for the summer are not finalized so check our website for volunteer news. - Nancy Worley, volunteers@lowcountryhumanists.org.

Doubt

by Daniel O'Neal

Sometimes I'm asked how long I have been an atheist. That realization occurred while in college, but I don't think there was any one point at which I consciously began to doubt the existence of a supernatural being. Rather, doubt seems to have always been there, at least in the background. My early mind-set toward religion was rather passive, not questioning the existence of God, but not affirming it either.

My childhood was probably not unlike that of many other Midwesterners of the Baby Boom generation. I went to parochial school and attended church. My personal guiding principles were more Golden Rule than Ten Commandments. As an adolescent, I never entertained any serious doubts about the existence of God. It just wasn't an issue for me. I don't recall ever being asked if I believed in God, but I imagine now that I might have answered "I guess so".

Years later, while a student at Miami University in Ohio, I began to understand that the God question was fundamental and that I had to confront it. I needed to be all in or all out, I thought, and so I set out to definitively decide what it was that I believed. It was a search that I wanted to approach with an open mind: a search not necessarily for God, but for Truth. Since my studies in economics and foreign languages did not involve religion, I explored the issue on my own outside the classroom. In addition to general books on religion, I also read works by Christian writers such as C.S. Lewis and atheist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Ayn Rand. I also began attending church again, after a lapse of several years. I took bible study classes and even volunteered to answer the phone at the rectory on weekends.

Those weekends provided me the opportunity to have some in-depth theological discussions with the parish priest. My questions were probably typical for a college student in the 1970s. Why was the Church so wealthy and why wasn't it doing more to fight poverty? Why does God allow so much human suffering to exist? Why won't He show Himself? My priest tried his best to explain all this to me, but I could tell that he was not happy with my persistent questioning. I also attended a lecture by the radical Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan. Father Berrigan proved to me that Roman Catholicism was not necessarily incompatible with my own sense of social justice, but

he wasn't able to provide a satisfactory answer to my main questions: How do I know that God exists? Why does faith play such a central role? Where was the evidence?

Eventually, I arrived at the Truth. For me, the Truth is not that there is no God, but that I am an atheist, a person without faith. One cannot disprove the existence of something that does not exist, but logic tells me that there is probably no God. Until I find some evidence, I simply cannot believe in a supernatural being. The matter is just too important to rely on blind faith.

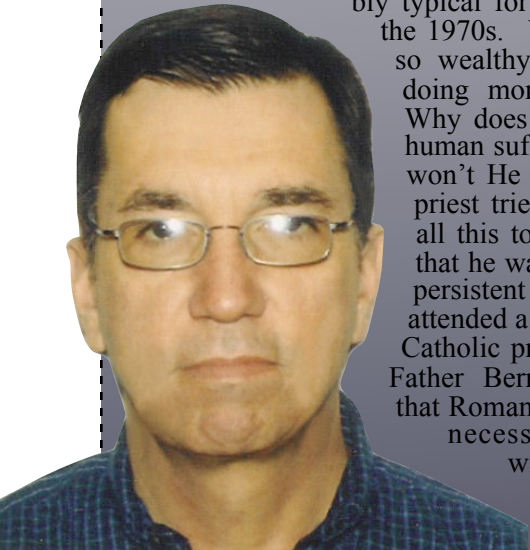
So, now that I had a clear awareness of what I did not believe, I was left wondering what it is that I do believe. And what would be the practical implications of living a godless life. On a philosophical level, I was drawn to existentialism with its emphasis on the human condition and creating meaning within one's own life. And the Golden Rule seemed as suitable for an atheist as for a person of faith, if not more so.

The practical consequences of being an atheist in my chosen career became apparent soon after I received my commission in the Air Force upon graduating from college. As dog tags were being issued to me, I was asked to declare my religion. When I replied that I was an atheist, the puzzled young airman suggested I choose "no religious preference" instead. However, that was not accurate because it wasn't a case of simply not preferring one religion to another, but of rejecting them all. Since "atheist" was not an option for dog tags, I was forced to accept "no religious preference", at least until I figured out that I could have them custom made outside of military channels.

While stationed in Europe some years later, I toured Scotland and stopped at Loch Ness. There, strolling along and enjoying the natural beauty of the Loch, I happened to strike up a conversation with a local monk. Interestingly, he claimed that he had personally seen the monster and could therefore vouch for its existence. I didn't challenge the monk's fantastic claim. If that's what he saw, I thought, it's fine with me. But I hadn't seen it, so I had my doubts. I do know that the monster myth is good for local tourism – in fact, it's the reason I travelled to that particular Loch instead of one of the others.

This article by SHL Member Daniel O'Neal appeared in the April 19, 2009 issue of the Post & Courier. Beginning with the September issue, Daniel will be taking over as the editor of this newsletter!

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The Separationist

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

Editors:

Laura and Alex Kasman

*This is our last issue as
editors of the Separationist.
Thanks to the contributors
and readers for six wonderful
years. We hope you enjoyed
them as much as we did!*

-Alex and Laura

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. 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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