

Asimov's Next Revolution

I remember, back in 1979, in the context of Einstein's one-hundredth anniversary, the famous, brilliant scientist and prolific science writer, Isaac Asimov, long-time vice-president of Mensa International and, incidentally, president of the American Humanist Association, was being interviewed on the radio. To be honest, the only thing I remember about that interview, because it really struck me, is the last question: "Einstein's work revolutionized the world of physics. In what area of human endeavour do you think the next revolution will occur?" He gave a one word answer and the interview was over. He said: "Economics".

Later, in the Thatcher, Reagan, Mulroney period, I observed a significant and widespread change in the socio/political/economic agenda. Fiscal responsibility and paying down the national debt became a priority. Now it had never been a campaign issue, nor was it part of the mandate given to Mulroney by the people he served. Shortly thereafter I came to realize that this thrust was driven by the unelected, privileged men at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, not

by the tax-paying electorate of the countries in which it was applied. And when Mulroney rammed through the F.T.A., in spite of wide-spread and very vocal opposition and in direct violation of a pre-election promise not to do so, I began to understand. And later, when I saw that education and health care and the prison system were on the agenda of the N.A.F.T.A talks, it became clearer. What better way to make the private option attractive than to starve these state funded services of public monies, and what better way to do that than to suck all available monies into debt repayment and the balancing of accounts. All of this went under the guise of fiscal responsibility and all of it was being driven by the I.M.F. and the W.B.

I don't want to stray too far out of my comfort zone. I am not an economist. But I don't think anyone can quarrel with what has been said so far. I recall these events simply to establish how I became aware of what, by now, should be absolutely obvious to anyone paying the least bit of attention. The real power in the world today is the power of capital. It drives and con-

trols every area of human activity in much the same way the Medieval Church did in Europe, and with much the same disdain for the plight of the common man. It lies behind the foreign and domestic policies of practically every government in the world. And it is driven by one imperative alone, to increase the immediate profits of the small minority of extremely rich men in the interest of whom the entire economic edifice of the world now operates. This is neither paranoia nor conspiracy theory. Look around you carefully. Read some of the position and policy papers of the W.B., the I.M.F., the W.T.O. the O.E.C.D. available on line. Consider what lies behind the verbiage and the pretence. It doesn't take a genius.

Let me come back to an obvious point I've evoked in these pages before. Life on earth arises from and is sustained by potable water, breathable air, arable soil and beneficent sunshine. Those are the source and sustenance of all life on earth, nothing less and nothing else. It seems to follow, then, that the only real wealth humankind or an individual human can enjoy is sufficient breathable air, arable

soil and potable water. From this perspective, money, which can be neither breathed, drunk nor eaten, is largely a symbol of an illusion. It is a measure of nothing but itself and has nothing to do with real wealth. Indeed, the relentless pursuit of money, inasmuch as it has a deleterious effect on the earth's biosphere, is destructive of the only wealth there is.

I have no idea what Asimov was thinking when he made that remark in 1979. But what seems absolutely obvious to me is that until global economics are made to rest first and foremost on one standard, on the sustainable health of earth's soil, water and air, we have got it mostly wrong. And I know, as well, that the nature of power and the power of capital are such that a radical change over to that standard will not occur without a revolution on a massive scale. Our best hope is that it occur rapidly and peacefully as a result of a global change of consciousness. There are encouraging advances on that front daily. But I fear that such a huge change is unlikely to occur peacefully at the speed that most environmental science warns us is needed to avert disaster. I fear it may occur only in the wake of catastrophes and conflicts of unimaginable proportions. For the sake of our children and grand-children,

it is incumbent on us to do everything in our power to avoid that.

And we do have leverage.

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It lies in this: while, de facto, sovereign states and their representatives retain only risible vestiges of power, they remain essential as masks for the real power. They can not be exposed as being devoid of all sovereignty without discrediting the real organs of power. In order to keep operating effectively, the organizations mentioned above must appear to be respectful of international law, benevolent and measured in their attitudes and actions. For these reasons we can and must apply pressure and the pressure we apply may have an effect. Think of Seattle. I feel viscerally and strongly that the only significant responsibility endemic to us humans is respectful stewardship of the earth we tend for our children. Such respectful stewardship can not be driven by the capitalist imperative. The time to take action is now. The young

and energetic would do well to look into and to join the most effective and creditable group in their area opposed to capitalist-driven globalization. Dramatic and vociferous demonstrations have an impact. That is a proven fact. And all of us can use the "pen". And we should. The Prime Minister and the Minister of the Environment are employed and paid by you and they work for you (or must appear to). Demand accountability.

At Copenhagen Canada was persistently obstructionist. Demand to know on what science this position was based. These people were acting on your behalf; it is your right to know.

While I advocate action, I confess I often feel hopeless. The rapacious greed that fuels the progress of capitalism is supported by the most powerful institutions and the most powerful military in the world. But the courageous philosophers, scientists and artists of the Renaissance struggled against what was, at the time, equally entrenched opposition. Yet within a relatively short period they were able to shake off the shackles of a universally oppressive church. And philosophy and science were once again able to flourish. It took the sustained courage of countless independent and responsible people guided by the light of free thought and hu-

man self-respect. Those forces are needed again, more now than ever before. The health of earth and the future of humankind are at stake. Nothing less.

My hopelessness is also alleviated by placing things in perspective, particularly our absurd arrogance. This tiny planet of ours had been circling that star in the far reaches of that galaxy in the unimaginably vast universe for billions of years before evolution spawned our bizarre species. And for well over ninety percent of the short time we have been here we were hunter/gatherers with no concept of money. And I would further like to remind the financier, in his tower, and the general, in his war room, that ever since we evolved we have breathed, eaten, drunk, defecated and fornicated in much the same way. We have danced, laughed, suffered, cried and most of us have died and all of us will. And each of us was born of a mother whose mother is Earth. So, gentlemen, screw you and hello.

By the measures evoked in the previous paragraph, my life is absurdly insignificant, but its insignificance is matched only by its consequence. It is my one chance to be an integrated earthling. In that bond with earth, at once individual, collective and universal, is the only sacredness I can sense and recognize. Like religion, capi-

talist economics tends to trivialize when it doesn't vilify the sacredness of my humanity, the

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sacredness of life. So, yes, let me echo the prescient Asimov and say vehemently, the next revolution...“economics”.

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In this issue, we offer something of a mixed bag. Mehra Furminger explores the complexities of forging an identity for a mixed race Canadian woman. Susan Frome looks into the influence of Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle on Emerson and Thoreau. Dr. Khalid Sohail considers Darwin from the perspective of his conflict with his beloved wife over the issue of religious faith. Morgan Duchesney, long time martial arts practitioner, looks into the humanistic benefits of martial arts discipline and practice. Goldwin Emerson who offered us a reflective piece on science and morality in the last issue continues his exploration of the question, this time addressing the roots of morality.

We also introduce the Featured Letter. Not quite a feature

article but more than a regular letter, the Featured Letter provides an additional forum for reader responses to issues raised in the magazine, or simply for opinion on issues of interest to our readers. We are pleased to introduce this new feature with an interesting letter from new reader Chuck Shamata. Many of you will have recognized in Chuck Shamata the name of one of Canada's finest and most beloved actors of stage, television and film. Also a producer and screen writer, Chuck Shamata reveals himself as a thoughtful and entertaining writer on the subject of humanism.

We also include an external document. In the interest of keeping our readers updated on happenings in the non-theist world as they come to our attention, we include the manifesto of a new atheist group. David Rand, a founding member and signatory provides an introduction. The environmental theme raised in this editorial is picked up again in Dan A. Morrison's very amusing satirical piece, *Lawn Care*. It's not easy to get a laugh from environmental issues these days.

I hope you find much here to inform, enlighten and entertain you. As usual, we look forward to your responses and suggestions.

—Yves Saint-Pierre

Letters to the Editor

Dear Yves,

Perhaps it's unusual for an ex-editor to write a letter-to-the-editor to his successor, but I have three reasons that I consider important enough to put fingers to the keyboard.

My first reason, and the one I most enjoy, is to congratulate you on the most recent issue of *HP* (#171). It's only the second issue you have edited and already you've established yourself as an editor of distinction. The entire issue is a delight, starting with your thoughtful editorial about some fundamental Humanist principles in the context of the contemporary world and its violent conflicts. This you follow with Rina Fraticelli's lucid account of "the macabre lynching" of Louie Sam, in which Canada played a shameful role. Then comes "The Right to Die" by Sandra Lucas who raises the sensitive issue of euthanasia in the light

of the Dutch experience. This is a subject that needs urgently to be addressed by our politicians to find a way between each individual's right to die with dignity and the protection of mentally handicapped people. I won't comment on "A Poet's Voice" since I selected the poems, except to say that Kim Goldberg (unfortunately

misnamed "Karen" on the cover) is a powerful voice on the West Coast who offers poetic insights into aspect of our lives today. This discussion is appropriately succeeded by Goldwin J. Emerson's appeal for basing our moral conduct more firmly on a scientific approach to the world, a plea that cannot be issued vigorously enough at a time when many are at a loss as to the roots of a universal ethic. The issue concludes with two pieces about the Benny Farm that provide some concrete guidance to a greener future, an issue which

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may well decide the future of our species. In sum, *HP* #171 is a rich performance that addresses very important issues with reason and compassion—and that's what Humanism is all about.

Which leads me to the second reason for this letter. In a letter-to-the-editor published in your last issue (#170), Paul

Zollmann accuses me and four other contributors of an "uncalled-for attack on Israel" in the last issue of *HP* which I edited (#169) and claims this "attack ... was heavily biased and laced with many errors of fact—nothing humanist about it." Unfortunately, Mr. Zollmann neglects to share with us what these biases and "errors of fact" were, thus making any rational debate impossible. Admittedly, the critique of the policies and practices of the Israeli government was one-sided, but it was based on carefully researched facts, many of

which were cited in my editorial and in the various articles. Moreover, I made every effort to find a writer to put the Israeli side of the situation, and none was forthcoming. A Zionist friend let me down at the last minute. And I strenuously disagree with Mr. Zollmann's claim that there is "nothing

humanist about" protesting violations of human rights and brutalities committed against innocent civilians. In fact, if humanism is to mean anything, it has to be a movement to create a world of peace and social justice in which all human beings can live in liberty and in freedom. Responding to arguments with which one doesn't

agree by cancelling the subscription, i.e. by refusing to listen to and engage, by reasoned argument based on evidence, the voice with which one disagrees— that, Mr. Zollmann, is not the way of humanism.

The final reason for this letter is one of grief. Dr. Pat Duffy Hutcheon died from cancer on February 4, 2010, at the age of 83 in Vancouver. She was a woman of extraordinary intellectual achievements. Author of several books and innumerable articles, she was an articulate humanist and a

relentless fighter for women's rights and for social justice. Life was not a bed of roses for her. She started out in rural Alberta, lived through the depression in the prairies, became a teacher and, struggling against male prejudice, eventually rose to the position of a university professor. In between she suffered a failed marriage, gave birth to a son, and married a second time much more happily. Over the years she established herself as an eminent scholar in education and sociology, managing to obtain a Ph.D. late at the age of 63. She

has told a part of her story in the book: *Lonely Trail: the Life of a Freethinker* (Aurora Humanist Books, Ottawa, 2009) from which she emerges as a woman of exceptional courage and intellect. I met her at a Humanist breakfast in Vancouver a couple of years ago and was impressed that such a fragile frame could support such a momentous mind. She will be sorely missed by her family and friends as well as by humanists in Canada and elsewhere.

—Henry Beissel, Ottawa, ON

Featured Letter

It was winter, Very cold. I'd just watched my grandfather shovel coal into a huge, blazing furnace. The heat was fearsome—I could feel it from across the room. "That's exactly what Hell is like", went through my mind. Our parish priest had asked my second grade class to imagine the pain I'd feel if my flesh was being seared for all eternity. It wasn't hard to imagine. I was staring up at the ceiling, looking at the nearly naked people who walked on clouds among penetrating rays of sunlight that signaled God's approval. What wasn't to like about that? It was a heavenly, if faded, image of contentment and tranquility.

But there were other images that loomed nearby—the unhappy faces of angry, bearded men with slashing, stabbing swords, and the wailing, anguished faces of women who feared death, or worse. And blood. Lots of blood.

I was in one of the pews of a big, old, downtown church in the Cabbagetown district of Toronto, circa 1947. It was long before parts of that run-down, "poor part of town" was partially razed and replaced with the "project" housing known as Regent Park and even longer before much of the remaining Cabbagetown area became the gentrified, upscale neighbourhood it is today. I was

staring at the ceiling because I was a bored, antsy six year-old. Maybe I thought the ceiling was sort of like a window to Heaven. That made sense. It was up—which is where people pointed when they talked about Heaven. I may have thought that the savage men, wailing women and blood were the result of what happened when people didn't get into heaven and didn't want to move on to the next destination. Heaven may not have looked all that exciting, but when you considered the alternative eternity of burning flesh, it did seem worth causing a ruckus about.

When my eyes returned to Earth, I saw an old lady pray-

ing a few spaces down the pew. The church was nearly empty. The old lady didn't notice. She was focused. I knew the old lady would go to Heaven when she died. I could see she'd paid her fare in advance.

My grandfather, who was on his knees beside me, made frequent prayer stops during his rounds as church caretaker and, after school, I'd followed him around. The old lady on her knees, was not unlike many other parish men and women, even fairly typical of the worn, "good Catholics" whose faith helped them survive the terrible Great Depression, and who abounded in that church, at that time. My grandfather was one of them. I remember the woman's veined, bony, calloused hands as she clutched her Rosary—fingers marking off each "Hail Mary" that her lips were silently reciting. Her taut face seemed skull-like, without being frightening—more like overworked and undernourished. The certainty in her eyes was obvious, even to a child. She looked straight ahead toward the altar without a doubt that God was there, listening to her prayers. I remember envying her certainty that God was right there, giving her re-

quests consideration. I didn't know how to believe, though I understood it to be of profound importance. I think I relied on the assumption that

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it was a natural development of growing up, that one day I would simply believe.

It never happened. The Catholic Church revealed itself to be venal and hypocritical, and I felt betrayed. I suspect many readers of this magazine came to ask the same questions I subsequently asked about God and faith and religion. I guess none of us found satisfactory answers. By the time I figured out, among many other things, that religion was an invaluable socio-political tool for callously manipulating masses of people through fear, superstition, hypocrisy, false assurances and the stifling of reason, it seemed clear that God was a necessary human invention used for power and control. I used to wonder if that knowledge was good or bad information in terms of getting through

life with a modicum of happiness. What about the old lady who believed without doubt? She believed in her God. She didn't ask the hard questions.

She didn't need or want to. I saw that, in a sense, she, and other believers, were and are in a "win-win" situation. Every hardship is sustainable because she knows God is guiding her path. When her prayers are "answered", her faith

is fortified. When her prayers go "unanswered", she's satisfied that all prayers can't be answered because God has a "Greater Plan", and works in "Mysterious Ways"—and if, when she dies, there's no afterlife waiting for her, is she going to complain?

Are you or I any better off because we don't expect an afterlife to be there for us? The old lady—and you and I—will be dead. What difference will our former beliefs make when we no longer have thoughts?

So, if hope of a pleasant afterlife happened to be the sum of all religion was responsible for, who could object? We'd say believe whatever you want if it does the rest of us no harm. But it does do so much harm. Granted, all should not be tarred with same brush—the Salvation Army does wonderful hu-

manitarian work, as do many other religious groups, but on balance, religion may be the greatest sustained blight the human race has ever known. More human suffering has been caused in God's name than in any other way. Millennia of hate and inhumanity have turned brother against brother, father against son, in wars that have shed rivers of blood. Religion has justified severing limbs, gouging out eyes, slavery. It's buried people alive, burned them alive. It's condoned sexual abuse of women and children. Religion has had people drowned, sacrificed, stoned to death, tortured to death. It's preached hate and prejudice, ordered lynchings, exploited the poor and powerless. Savage cruelty, hypocrisy, greed, inhumanity: thy name is God.

Surely it must be clear by now! All of human history to this point has shown that our Gods are not our friends. If God existed, he'd destroy religion! Wouldn't it be a relief to see all trace of them suddenly disappear. And yet, I retain a soft spot for the Jesus I came to admire as a child. Not the "Son Of God" Jesus, but the Jesus of the humanist ethos who recommended turning the other cheek; the one who threw the money changers out of the temple; the guy with the message of love, forgiveness and

The Golden Rule. His message was—and sadly, still is—more revolutionary than Che Guevara's. Imagine if that Jesus turned up at The Vatican today and tried again to evict the moneychangers—they'd crucify him.

Of course, in later years, I learned that the paintings on the church's ceiling were not intended to depict Heaven, but were illustrations of Biblical incidents. However, that knowledge didn't solve the puzzle as much as exacerbate it. In fact, it created a whole new puzzle because the illustrations were from Old Testament stories, when God was mean, vengeful, cruel and scared the shit out of me! Jesus's teachings were something else of course. Jesus was really cool—tough, but fair, smart, compassionate and forgiving. And he was also God ... Wait a minute! The first God acted like a dick, but the second God was cool?

An ongoing investigation into the puzzle (when cleared of "smoke" and "spin") went roughly like this:

Me: So they're two different Gods, then?

Answer: No. They're the same God! They're one God.

Me: But I hate the first God. He scares me. I want to skip him and take number two.

Answer: Sorry, they come as a package.

Me: But why?! That doesn't make sense—they're completely different.

Answer: Wrong. They're the same God.

Me: But there's two of them, and they...

Answer: ...Actually, three.

Me: What? Three?! Who's the third one?

Answer: The Holy Ghost.

Me: I don't believe in ghosts.

Answer: You have to. It's part of the package.

Me: What's he like.

Answer: Hard to say. He's a mystery.

Me: What's he look like?

Answer: A flame.

Me: Sorry. I find all of this hard to believe.

Answer: If you don't believe it you'll go to Hell and your skin will be on fire forever.

Me: That's not fair.

Answer: We think it is.

Maybe you just don't understand how to believe yet. I believe. Give it some time and you'll see that religious leaders are much wiser than others and if you really try to see the answers, they will come. Just have faith.

But I don't have faith. Is having questions instead of faith part of what Humanism is?

—*Chuck Shamata, Toronto, ON*