

Thanksgiving

On a recent Thanksgiving weekend, on an invigorating, changeable day, my brother-in-law Tony and I were mushrooming on a remote back road, in the upper Mauricie area of Quebec. The environment and the activity had us talking about our relationship to the earth. Friends since our early teens, we enjoy each other's company and we like to talk.

Born in a small town in Sicily, Tony has been in the Montreal area since he was thirteen years old. Recently and for the first time, now in his sixties, he returned to Santa Lucia, his hometown. Everywhere he saw the evidence of a profound change. Only the older generation still speak Sicilian. The local language and culture have largely given way to a broader, more standardized Italian culture and language. The town he left had been largely self-sufficient, a small local economy wherein produce, products and services were raised, made and offered locally. The butcher sold the meat of locally raised animals; the market sold locally grown fruits and vegetables; locally baked breads, buns and cakes were sold by the baker. Everyone's shoes were made by the local cobbler, clothes, by the seamstress and tailor. Local tradesmen built houses from indigenous materials which were then furnished with locally made furniture and decorated with locally crafted ornaments. The town priest, notary and teachers were hometown boys and girls who had gone no further afield than was required for their education.

Now most of the produce and products that stock the shelves of the markets and shops come from all over the world. They're the same items one would find on the shelves of stores in

Rome or Milan. Shoes, clothes, furniture and furnishings all come from other parts of Italy or the world. Few remember and fewer share local stories, fables and legends. Television brings in programming from the big centres and the local movie theatre shows and the video rental place rents DVD's of dubbed American films. In a word, little distinguishes the way life is lived in this landscape from the way life is lived in the vastly different landscapes of Rome or Milan. Has anything been gained by these dramatic and relatively rapid changes? What has been lost and why does it matter?

More and a wider range of products are now available to the town's population. Shopping is easier and more practical. Many articles are cheaper than they might otherwise be. The younger generation particularly probably feel themselves part of a larger Italian community and in touch with the "culture" of the broader world. Some probably feel themselves free from the tyranny of the priests and religious superstitions of their parents. But do they feel their connection to the earth, to the soil, in the way their parents probably did, through everyday contact with local products and produce, with local farmers and food artisans? Do they have the same sense of origin and community and responsibility for each other their parents probably shared through pseudo-historic narratives and valued relationships and associations? I suspect they don't. I also suspect more has been lost than gained.

What has happened in Santa Lucia has happened or is happening in communities all over the world, including countless communities right here in Canada. The imperatives of com-



Photo by Yves Saint-Pierre

munications technologies and global markets thrive at the expense of individuals' sense of belonging and attachment to the earth.

Obviously one cannot hope to go back to a former condition that existed in the context of far different technological, socio-political and economic realities. Yet one essential reality remains unchanged. Our dependence on Earth hasn't changed. The responsibility each of us bears with regard to that relationship hasn't changed. While we cannot return to a former condition, our very survival might depend on our ability to restore to our communities some of what has been lost.

In the vital struggle to find a way to mitigate the effects of global warming, pollution and resource depletion, there are broadly two camps, those who opt for techno fixes and those who support a return to values and practices closer to and inspired by

those of indigenous peoples and peasants. On one side stand Monsanto and Cargill and lesser players in the globalized agribusiness. There too stands USAID with its policy of supporting only techno fixes, and our own Conservative government, as far as one can discern its policies, given the lack of transparency of the Harper government.

This is the world of huge monocultures, ever more powerful and complex pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers and genetically modified seed stocks. On the other side stands the global indigenous and peasant movements of which La Via Campesina is a good example. This coalition of one-hundred-forty-eight indigenous and peasant groups from sixty-nine countries around the world stands for the preservation of land, water, seeds

and biodiversity, food sovereignty and sustainable agricultural production based on small and

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medium-sized producers. Navdanaya, based in India but an inspiration and resource to the world, is another such organization. Founded by brilliant, passionate and tireless former nuclear physicist, Dr. Vandana Shiva, this organization exists to protect biodiversity, defend farmers' rights and promote organic farming. It should be obvious where I stand. I believe each of us must stand somewhere on the issue. One thing seems to me a simple matter of fact: the healthy survival of peoples in every region of every country rests on the health of soil and water, on biodiversity and on continued production of locally developed and adapted seed stocks. It is up to each of us to determine what way into the future is more likely to ensure that. I obviously come down on the side of small, local farms and healthy farming practices. That's why I support La Via Campesina and Navdnaya.

Locally, for me, it begins with getting to know the dedicated growers and food artisans in my area. There are foods grown, raised in every province and region and there are small and organic farm associations and food artisan associations in every region. It is my responsibility to find them, buy my food from them and join my efforts to theirs for the preservation of the earth. The work they/we are about, preserving the health of the soil, water and air that nourish us is the most important work there is because if we fail here, we fail utterly.

But I also recognize, regrettably, that organic produce remain too expensive for most families. It seems agribusiness practices have

a place in ensuring that supermarket shelves are stocked with produce that is affordable for the majority of families. On the international scene, I have no doubt the same may be true of ensuring that certain populations have access to affordable food who otherwise would not. I acknowledge that there is no absolutely ideal situation and that no one has a monopoly on the answer nor even a right to claim the moral high ground. My instincts, my limited knowledge of farming practices and my observation of the dynamics of economics incline me to believe that, in the medium and longer term, the emphasis on food sovereignty, biodiversity and organic farming practices supported by the indigenous and peasant movements point a healthier and more sustainable way to the future.

Walking on earth with an old friend in wildly changing autumn weather, that's good. So is picking fragrant wild mushrooms, various boletes, clustered coral, umbrella polipor. Later, in the cabin, we clean and prepare them, pan them up, salt and pepper, a handful of minced garlic and parsley when they're almost done. Then, my wife, Joanna, sister, Christiane, brother-in-law and old friend, Tony, we savour our modest harvest with dinner. I wish I could give you a taste! That evening in the cabin, warmed by wood fire, delicious food, loving company as, outside, the night calms, clears and cools to frosty cold, I feel, sometimes, we can come so close...

—*Yves Saint-Pierre*

Letters

Limits: to Growth, and to Stereotyping

I commend the eight signatories of Canadians for Limits to Growth for their Manifesto. I also commend the editorial board for publishing it (HP 173, Summer 2010), since discus-

sion of both overpopulation and limits to economic growth are presently taboo in most circles. Well done! I protest Elka Enola's poem: How Do I Know? on the inside front cover. A talented writer stereotypes two classes of people, whose labels

"Muslim" and "Christian" often relate more to racial or ethnic origin than to religion. This is hate literature. The world's Muslims and Christians are no doubt imperfect as individuals, but most of them wish to live in peace, and are neither terrorists

nor child molesters. Muslims have many legitimate grievances against the exploitive Western world, yet even so they were not the inventors of modern terrorism. As a child I experienced stereotyping myself. And how do I know that my evidently godless neighbour is not a murderer-in-waiting? This poem is a gratuitous insult aimed at classes of people who should be presumed innocent of evil intent unless there is evidence to the contrary. Not well done!
–Stan Rosenbaum
Ottawa, ON

Stan Rosenbaum is justified in asking “And how do I know that my evidently godless neighbour is not a murderer-in-waiting?” The poem does not ask that question since atheists do not claim to be morally superior as a result of their godlessness. We tend to think that the concept of a god is not related to one’s ethical behaviour.

Christianity, Islam and other religions, however, do claim moral superiority. Hence the query “Can we be good without God?”

I can’t speak for Mr Rosenbaum, but I am constantly bombarded with statements and pronouncements in the press, on TV & in emails of the moral superiority of religionists. It is to that community of thought that this poem is directed.

These two specific religions were singled out because, at the time of writing the poem, they were much in the news since both Christians and Moslems had recently killed civilians with explosives. It was the contrast of

the ethical claims of those specific religions with the actual behaviour of some of their adherents that resulted in my poem.
–Elka Ruth Enola
Oakville, ON

*

Spot on – both your resignations from the ‘Canadian Association of the Club of Rome’ and your new manifesto.

I read the Club of Rome report of 1972 as a young man, and have lived to see its vindication – and then some.

I blogged in the guise of environmental advocate on the BBC World News weblog of Richard Black for a year and a half – daily and intensely, from December 24, 2008 through July 4, 2010, backing up what I had to say with a collection of original scientific journal articles on the state of the environment which continues to grow.

Often did I refer to the ‘Limits to Growth’ idea, to the relatively new ‘Planetary Boundaries’ geophysical concept, and to Herman Daly’s ‘Full World Economics’ initiative. The Dark Mountain Project is interesting, especially in light of Joseph Tainter’s “The Collapse of Complex Societies” and Ronald Wright’s books.

The 1936 classic *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration* of Dr. Weston A. Price may in the end offer physical reasons why western society is so ‘out of it.’ Quite literally, we have forgotten how to eat well.

Following Copenhagen there was fallout – Lord Stearn’s re-

course to ‘reviving the spirit of Rio’, ‘The Hartwell Paper’, and most importantly I think, by far, the ‘People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth’ in Bolivia, amplifying Christopher Stone’s 1972 “Should Trees Have Standing” and Joel Baken’s “The Corporation.”

Power will not be willingly given up in the world I know.

Only a fool would claim clear insight into our collective future, but one thing seems fairly sure: We are doing something drastically wrong, and should therefore try something else.

At forty-seven, I left the western Canadian oilpatch to climb mountains for seven years – as a full-time devotion (1997-2004). I can only say I became a part of Nature in this experience, and following my heart worked, as I met and married Julia, a climber and kindred spirit, and our son Michael Nathaniel is now almost six years old, having climbed his first mountain when just six days old with Momma and Poppa.

I believe what is missing today is face to face contact and direct action by concerned citizens – in short – the hero’s quest. Blogging and the Internet are not enough, nor are words directed to Parliament.

Bolivia’s People’s Conference is perhaps the way forward. Evo Morales is a true leader in the heroic mold, and if he is not assassinated, our collective future may well owe much to this man who is already a near mythic figure. Naïve? Of course – naïve means natural.

–*Michael Desautels, B.Sc.,
Calgary, AB*

*

Canada's Dirty Little Secret

Richard Young's story, Canada's Dirty Little Secret, Summer, 2010, exposes the absurdity of the parallel systems of public education in Ontario, one Catholic and the other secular. As Young points out, it is not only the extra cost of two overlapping systems but, more seriously, the discriminatory features of the Catholic system. When the time comes to stop this violation of common sense, there are precedents for guidance. Newfoundland and Quebec followed the fairly simple route of parallel resolutions in the provincial assemblies and federal parliament establishing a single public system of education. In the case of Newfoundland, there was a consensus in favour of ridding the province of a sectarian system where several religious sects each conducted its own schools. Quebec citizens, expressing an upsurge of secularism, wanted to end the social dichotomy of Catholic and Protestant systems each with its anglophone and francophone sections. The Quebec solution was to establish parallel systems based on language (French and English). Thus each of these provinces had different but plausible reasons for change. Parallel political resolutions, provincial and federal, effectively changed the administrative arrangements whilst leaving the provinces in full control of public educa-

tion as laid down in the British North American Act of 1967. Ontario presents a more complex problem : a large Catholic minority with sufficient political clout to deter any political party from risking extinction at the next election by even mentioning structural change . What to do? Engage in public discussion until the glacier begins to melt.

–*Peter H. Hennessy
Kingston, ON*

I was distressed to see the cover art on the Summer 2010 issue of Humanist Perspectives. The tabloid-like headline is deceptive and the supposed 'sexual' reference to the coyly smiling school girl are surely not in keeping with Humanist values.

Richard Young's article was an excellent summation of our problem with funding religious schools, but hardly news-breaking as the problem has existed since 1867. Until a political party is willing to confront the Roman Catholic Church, I fear there is small prospect for change in Ontario.

–*W. W. Walton
North Bay, ON*

Mr. Walton,
Thank you for this. We would have been disappointed if we hadn't received at least one letter expressing some outrage over the cover.

–*Yves*

*

End of life care

I was pleased to see that you intend to explore an unbeliever's approach to "end of life" in a future issue of Humanist Perspectives. As one who has just passed his seventieth birthday, the first of my family's males in living memory to do so, I attempt to reconcile myself with my impending demise. There is no way around it but, as a long-time atheist, I expect that my funeral will see me "all dressed up with nowhere to go."

As a member of the only species which seems to be aware of our personal deaths, I find it difficult to imagine that one day my personality will cease to exist, snuffed like a candle. The only thing more unimaginable is that I might survive death as some form of entity.

I am surrounded by those who rest assured they are destined to spend a post-human eternity in some special place, with their precious awareness intact. The delusion must be comforting to them.

Should I not fall dead in my tracks, I do not want to see myself shuffled off to a euphemism in my final years as my body and mind fail. I have seen several female members of my family expire in such circumstances. It was not pretty.

One of the greatest moral issues of our time is how we intend to deal with people in their fading final days. To what extent do we go in providing heroic life-saving interventions to keep a spark of life alive in those who have no hope of resuming rewarding lives? Could

we go beyond passive non-intervention to relieve the sufferings of those without hope?

I do want to see Humanist Perspectives explore this issue before I pass along and it becomes a moot issue to this expired piece of history.
–*James Loughery*
Prince George, BC

*

Accommodationism

The article “The Poverty of Accommodationism” by David Rand in the Summer issue, 2010 Humanist Perspectives set up religion as a “straw person” which he then slew. I, however, had some problems with his views as I will articulate below.

Religion especially as described later as “the near universality of religion in diverse human societies” ignores many traditional religious beliefs. Some people had many beliefs in gods and goddesses, beliefs in souls, and many other things, some supernatural and some real. Hence religion meaning supernatural, faith-based ideas ignores the many other beliefs people hold or held. Some, for example, suggest that the power of the mind allow walking on hot stones. Such an attribute may be linked to religion but scientists often have an alternative explanation. Narrowing our definition of religion to that in the article makes later references to “religion in diverse societies” inaccurate.

Also, I take issue that respect requires one to also adopt that individual’s beliefs. Dar-

win, for example, respected his wife’s beliefs without adopting her belief in god or ‘God’. His statement that he did not believe in ‘God’ included the part that he saw no reason to disabuse others of their beliefs. Hence accommodationism appeared possible for him. Darwin called himself an agnostic, meaning he did not know about God. As a good scientist he had to admit to ‘not knowing’ about the existence of God. I also call myself an agnostic since I believe a-theists or atheists are as uncertain as theists as to whether a God exists. For me both theists and atheist don’t know about a God. Hence agnosticism may be the only wise alternative.

Darwin did not deal with the origin of life, since that was outside of his scientific view. He wisely avoided this area of unscientificness leaving it for believers and nonbelievers to speculate about the origin of life.

Raising the Santa Claus issue without speaking of the age of the believers is another error. A belief in Santa Claus for some children, perhaps, under six years of age, may be helpful to them and perhaps separates them from adult believers.

The main shortcoming of the article is in the narrow definition of religion. For me spirituality is a key area. True, some religions have included spirituality as part of their beliefs, but that usually excludes appreciation of music, beautiful sunsets or numerous other wonders in the world. I can appreciate spirituality without endorsing any organized religion. Perhaps clarifying a

meaning for religion and the age of such belief would remove some of the concern about the poverty of accommodationism.

–*Barry M. Hammond*
Winnipeg, MB

*

Dear Yves,

First off – I loved the cheeky cover of the Summer *HP*. It shows an edgy sense of humour.

Regarding the Spring issue, however, I am less enamoured with the Editorial titled ‘Asimov’s Next Revolution’. You admit you are not an economist and you proceed to write opinions that basically prove the point. Where to start?

One tenet of Government spending is that it is good to take on debt during economic downturns, and then to pay the debt off when the economy recovers. The Government acts as an economic buffer in effect.

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank keep track of the borrowing habits of governments around the world as part of its mandate. But neither of these bodies ‘drives’ fiscal policy. They are lending bodies and before they can lend countries money they require certain assurances they will get the money back. Your local bank does the same thing before giving you a loan.

You also wrote this phrase: “...should be obvious to anyone paying the least bit of attention.” Please... enough said.

A little history. Capital has always driven and controlled every area of human activity. In

agricultural societies the main capital is land. Whoever controls the land is in charge. In Medieval Europe the Church owned about 1/3 of the total land.

The imperative that drives capital ownership is profit. The same sort of profit you take, Yves, when you receive interest on your bank account or bonds or stock, or when you receive dividends from shares you own. Everyone wants profit from what capital they have managed to accumulate. This is not an aberration, it is human nature. It has gone on since we first began accumulating possessions—that is, capital.

As for your analysis of money? Again, money is not a symbol or illusion. Money is a tool for the exchange of goods and services and is worth what it can buy. The money in your pocket buys you food and shelter and, if you have enough of it, a subscription to *Humanist Perspectives*. It also buys bottled clean water, farmland, and trips to the sun in the winter.

It is a bit simplistic to say that because a Looney cannot be directly breathed, drunk or eaten its value is an illusion.

Nevertheless, I share your hope for a bright future.

But then you advocate the kind of dramatic and vociferous demonstrations such as we had here in Toronto during the G20. I must disapprove.

In democratic societies governments reflect the governed. Maybe not perfectly, but on the whole. Most people in Canada are still happy consumers. There is a growing awareness that we

should lessen our footprint, but if you look around little of that has transmuted in the lifestyles of the average citizen. Most people resist sorting garbage, shopping less, driving less, using less energy. The biggest proponent of these changes is the government.

Look around at the rapacious greed of our fellow humans. It's the way we've evolved. As go the lemmings and the Eastern Islanders so go we. Or maybe not.

We may yet have a bright future as our capital is used to fund new research and technologies that may forestall our demise.

—David Reeve
Toronto, ON

Mr. Reeve,

Thank you for your letter. Unfortunately, you seem to misconstrue my words on several points. Rather than respond point by point, I simply invite readers interested in being reminded of what I really said to consult the editorial in HP 172 on our website: www.HumanistPerspectives.org

—Yves Saint-Pierre

*

The Poverty of Accommodationism

The article by David Rand, *The Poverty of Accommodationism*, published in the Summer 2010 issue, falls short of your usual high standards of informed debate. I agree with Rand's point that respect for an individual does not include respect for the beliefs of the individual and if he had stuck to religious beliefs, his points

would be sound. But he doesn't; he includes a medical practice, homeopathy, about which he obviously knows nothing.

I thought there was something smelly in the sentence: "Now consider a number of hypotheses—such as astrology, Christianity, the historicity of Jesus, homeopathy, Islam, Judaism, racism, Santa Claus, etc..." Later he displays his ignorance in the sentences, "Just as homeopathy and magnetotherapy are false medical disciplines..." and "It would be the height of incompetence to employ homeopathy as a treatment for serious medical conditions..." David Rand should provide some evidence for these sweeping, inaccurate opinions and not state them as though they are a given.

Many countries employ homeopathy as their main medical practice; India and Western European countries for example, and have done for 200 years. Unlike the US where the main cause of death is now listed as medical practice, these countries enjoy unpoisoned health care. It would take too many words in a letter to explain the principles of homeopathy to the uninformed but there is an excellent beginning article on: www.naturalnews.com/029419_homeopathic_medicine_evidence.html

Perhaps Rand could do some research before uttering such idiotic generalisations in the future.

—Jennifer L. Craig
Nelson, BC

Ms. Craig,

I am neither an expert in homeopathy, nor ignorant of

it. I am familiar with the following points (and in my article I assumed that most readers would be as well, which is why I did not bother to explain):

[1] Homeopathy was founded at a time when mainstream medicine was rather crude. Since then, mainstream medicine has progressed by leaps and bounds in the direction of being science-based. Homeopathy, on the other hand, continues to stagnate dogmatically at the stage of magical thinking.

[2] Efficacy of homeopathy beyond the placebo effect has never been conclusively proven.

[3] If homeopathy were proven valid, it would completely revolutionize chemistry and physics, because it would require water to “remem-

ber” what it no longer contains after multiple dilutions.

In my article on accommodationism, I started by stating that anyone who thinks that religion and science can be reconciled has not done their homework. I could also have said the same about homeopathy and science. I suppose one could argue that believing in water memory is marginally less irrational than believing that a virgin can give birth to a god. But not by much.
—David Rand

*

Who’s a Hero...

Excellent piece about the hockey fervour (I’d put the recent flag fervour in the same category – everyone’s putting

up the Canadian flag on their property where I live), but I was saddened to see your closing comments and wonder when did a passionate expression of a reasoned opinion become a “rant”, and thus something to apologize for (and dismiss).

—Peg Tittle
Sundridge, ON

DIALOGUE IS THE HEART of *HP*. It is gratifying to be able to publish so many fine letters. Keep them coming. Please remember to **include your full postal address** so we can send you a free copy of the issue. Electronic mail is preferable since postal mail sometimes takes a while to make it from our Ottawa POB into my hands.
—Yves Saint-Pierre

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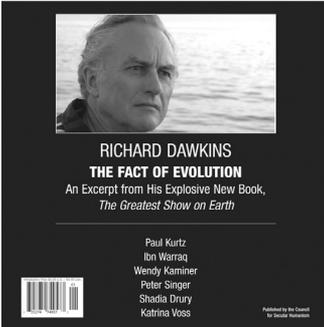
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