

FIG Leaves

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October 2001

October Meeting

Traveler in the Dark, by Marsha Norman

This play has been described as "a moving, richly imaginative work, which probes into questions of human responsibility and guilt, and the continuing conflict between the scientific and the spiritual / religious." Its author, Marsha Norman, wrote the affecting "night, Mother," which won a Pulitzer Prize.

The Story: A brilliant surgeon and cancer researcher, Sam basks in the aura of success and adulation which his career has brought him. But suddenly his world is shattered when his longtime nurse and confidant, Mavis, dies on the operating table because he failed to detect the seriousness of her condition in time. Gathering up his neglected wife and possessively loved son, he returns to the home of his aging father, a revivalist preacher with whom he has long been at odds. Guilty about his relationship with Mavis, his childhood sweetheart whose love he never returned, and jealous of his father's affection for her, Sam finds that the older man is unable, or unwilling to assuage the guilt which torments him. In essence the play becomes an eloquent, deeply felt debate about the conflict between science and religion -- Sam's growing doubts about the values he has lived by, and his father's flinty unwillingness to relax his own strongly held beliefs.

Readers: Sam -- Bob Allen

Glory -- Carolyn Ruth Hunt

Everett -- Peter Freeman

Stephen -- (age 12) CCM Prep School Student

Other than the boy in the role of Stephen, these readers have had extensive experience in acting. Stage directions will be read by Bob Riehemann.

This reading is presented with permission so that we may enjoy it and discuss it afterwards. It was organized by FIG member Carolyn Ruth Hunt, who has an MA in Oral Interpretation from Northwestern University. She has done extensive acting and directing in college, community, and professional theater.

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October Meeting

Tuesday, October 23, 7:00
Vernon Manor Inn

November Potluck

Tuesday, November 13, 6:30

Congratulations from Tom Flynn

Dear Philip,

Please convey my heartfelt congratulations to everyone in FIG on the occasion of its tenth anniversary. Unbelievable!

I've always felt a special affinity for FIG. Perhaps it's appropriate for me to review the reasons why.

1) I went to college in Cincinnati. I owe a great debt to the Jesuits at Xavier University, without whom I might

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COMFORT FOOD

The immediate violence and shock of the events of 9/11 may be slowly receding in time, but a long process of adaptation to the profound changes wrought by these events is just beginning. We are forced to accept and make sense of massive amounts of new information and alter the basic images of how we see our nation and its place in the world. Some of us have to reshape our lives around a personal loss, sudden and overwhelming. For others, the loss is the presumption of safety and continuity; that things will go on as before, calmly and predictably. Disaster will occur, but not here, not to me. Facing increased security precautions not only inconveniences us, but steadfastly reminds us that there is an enemy out there that wants to hurt us, and that our determination to protect ourselves has been breached by forces more resolute and clever than we could have imagined.

Anxiety, fear, doubt: usually we can keep these feelings at bay, but it becomes harder to reassure ourselves and our loved ones that all is OK. So what resources do we have waiting in the wings for just such an occasion as this? I'm listening for the cavalry but even with my ear to the ground I don't hear the hoofbeats of rescue. What I do hear are the constant exhortations to face our human limits and relinquish our faith in our own powers to connect with a persona who is all powerful, and who, if we act right, will take much better care of us than we can do on our own. You know who I mean, I'm sure: the Almighty, the Heavenly Father, the one who has a different name in every culture but who pretty much does the same job in lots of languages. Finally a creative concept that addresses every consumer need. I can easily see why God has become so popular. Whoever designed the marketing plan understood people very well. If something is missing, supply it in abundance. When people feel vulnerable, offer all-powerful; when we ask questions, soothe the worry and shut down the debate with all-knowing oracles. Add ritual, secrecy and the promise of eternal life and you've got a winner!

Definitely hard to compete with, further complicated by the reluctance on the part of the godly to graciously consider that what fills the bill so beautifully may be just a cleverly sculpted response to danger that over time has been re-shaped by grasping human hands from the evanescence of myth into the rigid face of religious doctrine. It's hard to give up this promise of all-embracing comfort, but likewise it is difficult to live with self-deception. So

what's left for us: science, rational thought, deductive logic, just the facts? Reason may work fine most of the time, but for me can fall short when the chips are down. But maybe that's the secret. The ability to live with fear and uncertainty is our strength and preserves the very possibility, the opportunity to face life honestly, courageously and to go forth with the best we have to offer. I think that's a comforting thought.

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not be the atheist I am today.

2) I was with Tim Madigan and Paul Kurtz at the founding event (back when they still built cars in Norwood).

3) I have so many close friends in FIG.

4) So much of the best and most creative local group activism in the country has come out of FIG.

Over the last ten years, FIG has served as one of our proudest examples of how local groups can serve their members' needs -- and how they can make real, national-level contributions to secular humanism. Here's to ten more years of FIG, and that's just for starters!

Secularly yours,

Tom Flynn
Editor, FREE INQUIRY Magazine
Published by the Council for Secular Humanism
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Amherst NY 14226-0664

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Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 16, October 2001: "Heart disease and the myth of individual responsibility"

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site. If you are interested in receiving the html code, please send an email (pigliucci@utk.edu).

When I say “heart attack” what are your first thoughts in terms of causes? A good bet is that you will consider cholesterol levels, and immediately after that, diet. After a bit more thought, you might want to add stress induced by a job with too much pressure and responsibility, and finally—just maybe—you will consider the possibility of a genetic predisposition. These are all the causes we hear from the media are associated with heart disease, and indubitably there is a lot of research to back these claims up.

However, and most astoundingly, research available since the 1960s and repeated several times since, also shows that all the above factors are actually *minor* causes of heart disease. The best single predictor of heart problems is indeed stress, but of an entirely different and still widely ignored type: the stress that comes not from doing too much or being under self-imposed pressure, but from being ordered around with little or no control over your destiny.

A study conducted among 17,000 British civil servants (and before that on a million employees of Bell Telephones in the 1960s) clearly shows that the status of a person’s job is the most reliable predictor of heart attack, more than obesity, smoking or high blood pressure (though these count as well, so don’t rush to get that triple cheeseburger just yet). High cholesterol is also a risk factor, but only in people that are genetically predisposed to it. It seems that your heart is by and large at the mercy of the size of your pay check.

The studies linking the pecking order on the job with heart problems found that what happens is that being ordered around diminishes your sense of

control over your life, which causes stress mediated by the release of the hormone cortisol. High levels of cortisol not only create problems for your coronary arteries, but depress your immune response, so that you are also more likely to fall prey to an infection—which is not helped by the fact that the rise in cortisol is accompanied by a decrease in serotonin, meaning that you don’t sleep very well and you never feel rested.

Privatization can do that to you too. A follow up study on British civil servants explored how they were coping with the new 1990s concept of no job security. Suddenly, these people could lose their jobs for reasons that had nothing to do with their performance and all to do with the capricious oscillations of the market economy. Predictably, the employees in question felt no control over their source of livelihood, which caused stress and eventually illness—all of which had little to do with diet, drinking and smoking.

Researchers have been able to explode another myth related to heart attacks: the idea that it is a disease of the rich, suffered by CEOs because of the high pressure they experience on their job for prolonged periods of time and the associated responsibilities of such a situation. Well, if you are a CEO and are planning on using that as an excuse to raise your bonus this year, forget it. While there are exceptions, the heart attack rate in this category is actually much lower than the population at large, presumably because these people are actually very much in control of what they are doing, since they are everybody else’s boss (and even when they “fail” they get to retire with a few extra million dollars in their bank accounts). This category becomes at risk—rather ironically—only *after* retirement, possibly because their new “relaxed” life style is actually associated with very little control. Taking it easy for someone used to issue orders and be in charge can be fatal, literally.

Human beings are primates, and evolutionary theory teaches us to expect something similar in our inter-specific cousins. Sure enough, studies on baboons have shown an increase in stress level and production of cortisol in males that join a new troop, because when they do so they find themselves at the bottom of the pecking order, with little control over availability of food and mates. The same is true for monkeys studied in zoos, where researchers found a nice inverse relationship between pecking order and

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the furring up of arteries. Next time you see a monkey or ape, remember to empathize with their working conditions.

Amazingly, you can even demonstrate the effect experimentally on humans by dividing people into two groups, giving them the same tasks, but ordering around one group and empowering the other with self decision making. The latter group experiences lower levels of stress hormones, blood pressure and heart rate.

What are we to learn from all this? For one thing it is interesting that we are experiencing a continuous pressure in modern society to “take responsibility,” follow a healthy life style, control our diet, watch closely what sorts of habits and addictions we develop, or else. While this is all good advice in general, why don't we ever hear that the single most important factor affecting our health is the lack of control over our lives that modern society forces upon us? I am no neo-luddite (see my August 2001 column), but shouldn't we question the social order at the least to the extent that it makes us unhappy and possibly kills us?

I am not of course suggesting that we are experiencing a “great media conspiracy” to blame us instead of the system. The danger is a lot more subtle than that since the facts are out there for anybody to check, if they only bother to. What started me on this was reading a summary of what I have discussed in the widely available volume by Matt Ridley, *Genome*.

Then again, no newspapers, TV news, or talk show picks up on this sort of information, disseminates it to the public, and raises awareness. The reason is probably that questioning the system and lifting the blame from the individual goes directly against an entrenched aspect of the American psyche, it challenges the basic assumption of individualism and “opportunity” for everybody that this country is all about. Well, at least once in your life it is healthy to question even the most fundamental assumptions. Go for it, it might hurt less than you think.

Further reading:

Genome, by Matt Ridley, a chapter of which inspired this essay.

Web links:

Health Central, (<http://www.healthcentral.com/home/home.cfm>) to learn more about your health and fitness, though mostly from the standard viewpoint of “society ain't to blame.”

American Heart Association's “Heart and Stroke A-Z Guide.” (http://www.americanheart.org/Heart_and_Stroke_A_Z_Guide/)

The Job Stress Help page: who knows, you might find something useful here... (<http://www.jobstresshelp.com/>)

Next Month: "Beer and circus in American education - Pars destruens"

10th Anniversary Dinner

The FIG tenth anniversary dinner on September 23rd was a great success, with more than 35 people in attendance. Prior to the buffet dinner George Maurer presented a brief history of the Free Inquiry Group. George noted that some of the faces have changed over the years, yet the attendance at monthly meetings has remained about the same.

After dinner the group was regaled by Tim Madigan, reprising his role from the first FIG meeting. Tim warmed up the audience with stories of his many travels, including the infamous ‘Baptist Beer Incident’ at Camp Quest.

Due to the events of September 11, Tim postponed his planned presentation and instead discussed ‘The True Believer’, written by Eric

Hoffer in 1951. Hoffer recognized that strong commitment to a cause makes some people lose their ability for rational thought.

Tim then described the philosophy of pragmatism and its relationship to humanism. He wondered if humanists could be true believers, or if the philosophy itself is antithetical to such singlemindedness.

Following Tim's presentation, Gary Weiss read the text of Richard Dawkins' article regarding the terrorist attacks. Dawkins compared the hijackers to pigeons that are trained to guide a missile to a specific target.

Dawkins noted that humanists are often too polite to mention the fact that religion causes people to devalue their own lives. Religions are thus like loaded guns left in the street, and we should not be surprised when they are used.



FIG Leaflets

As a warm-up act, on Friday nights some Hasidim chant the highly charged erotic verses from the Bible's *Song of Songs*, of which probably the most well-known line is: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

Stephen G. Bloom, *Postville* pp. 170-171

Attack on the World Trade Center:

Citizens of the world at last, we can now imagine Beirut or Belfast. A friend who was moving from his native London to New York once told me that the difference between the resigned pragmatism of the British and the arrogant optimism of the Americans was the difference between getting bombed during the blitz and buying war bonds.

Anna Quindlen in *Newsweek* (8 Oct. 2001) p. 64

Professor Edward Said offered a blunt summation of America's shortcomings. "To most people in the Islamic and Arab worlds the official United States is synonymous with arrogant power, known mainly for its sanctimoniously munificent support not only of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes and its inattentiveness even to the possibility of dialogue with secular movements and people who have real grievances."

"Anti-Americanism in this context is not based on a hatred of modernity or technology envy," he continued. Rather, "it is based on a narrative of concrete interventions, specific depredations and, in the cases of the Iraqi people's suffering under U.S.-imposed sanctions and U.S. support for the 34-year-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, cruel and inhumane policies administered with a stony coldness."

Edward Said quoted in the
New York Times, 29 September 2001

Ever wonder why the steamy love poetry of the *Song of Songs* is in the Bible:

Hasidic Jews *require* sex on the Sabbath. Lubavitcher rabbis counsel that sex is integral to a couple's devotion to each other, as well as to the Lord, but they also stipulate that the man has a specific obligation to do whatever his wife requires so that she achieves orgasm. The founder of Hasidism, Ba'al Shem Tov, who died in 1760, believed that physical desire increased a man's love for the Torah and God, and that intercourse with one's wife was an instrument of uniting with God. Among Orthodox Jews, intercourse on Friday nights is commonly referred to as "doing the *mitzvah*," and the conjugal union is one more of the scores of required rituals to be performed on the Sabbath.

In the traditional Islamic world, as among other monotheist communities of the time, such skeptics and materialists tended to be fairly discreet. Their place was in the closet.

The modern world has been a very different sort of place. People of this kind not only came out of the closet, in a real sense they took over. If we think in terms of a range from hard belief to hard unbelief, the bulk of the population in the modern West has probably been located towards the middle; but the cutting edge of the culture has lain significantly closer to unbelief. The result has been a climate which, despite genuine tolerance and professed respect, is inhospitable to true believers. It has made their certainties appear as intellectual naivete, their zeal as ill-bred fanaticism.

Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (p. 42-43)

Of science and skeptics

Of course there is an important difference. What the creationist believes about the world is generally false, whereas what Helena (a Darwinian scientist) believes is generally true. But I still find the similarities between them cast an interesting light on the way that scientific disputes are taking on much of the venom, as well as the importance, that theological disputes had in the days when theology was believed by educated people to deal with important features of the world. Now the emotional satisfaction of a particular religious world view can just as well be supplied by science.

Andrew Brown, *The Darwin Wars*, 1999, p.149

Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect."

—letter to William Brandfort, Jr., April 1, 1774
2000 Years of Disbelief, James A. Haught

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the Quotes.

BOOK REVIEWS

True North: Exploring the Great Canadian North by Bush Plane

by George Erickson

(Toronto: Thomas Allen Pub. 2000)

This is a story of travel in the Canadian Arctic, in Nunavut, in the Northwest Territories, in Yukon and Alaska. It is an exciting and informative tale. Erickson has called it his "stealth book" which he uses to introduce us to sciences of flight, of navigation, of nature's flora and fauna, and to reject Christian religion and its miserable record of missionary activities and unethical commercial practices among Indians and Inuit.

Erickson is not only passionate about flying, and the science that makes it possible, he is also a true unbeliever. He is a past vice-president of the American Humanist Association, and intends to donate the profits from this book to various free thought organizations and to the National Center for Science Education.

Erickson set out from his home in northern Minnesota in a yellow Piper Super Cub single engine seaplane, built in the nineteen forties. He flies to Churchill on Hudson Bay, on to the Arctic Ocean, then west to Alaska and back to the Mackenzie River. He returns home then via Great Bear Lake, Great Slave Lake and Lake Athabaska. Erickson is an experienced pilot who has taken many journeys into the far north, where there are few roads, but every lake is an airport

for a small seaplane. Every stream and inlet is a fisherman's paradise, and catching a trout or char for lunch is a matter of minutes.

Because he is an old north woods hand he reminisces about the last time when he landed, what the place was like, and how it has grown, or declined. We learn a lot about the region. Aside from his own experience, Erickson is very familiar with the history of the land and peoples. He recounts events in the history of the Hudson Bay Company, which was founded in 1670 and is known as "Here Before Christ." Yet more than any other institution it explored, opened, settled and exploited the region.

Many of the settlements in the north owe their origin to mining activity. We meet gold, silver, uranium, copper, and diamond mining stories. Towns were founded on a strike, mushroomed to large size

as prospectors, workers, and sharp characters poured in. Only to decline and dim with time, some to become real ghost towns in the bush.

A truly engaged person, Erickson has much respect for the Inuit. He tells us about their history and present life. The eastern half of northern Canada has become the Nunavut Territory with an Inuit legislature and administration, and a constitution similar to other Canadian territories. At 772,000 square miles Nunavut is larger than Alaska or Quebec.

A discussion about navigation leads Erickson into describing the growth of ancient astronomy and how it was killed by the Christian dark ages to be revived by Copernicus and Galileo. An examination of horsetails, evolutionarily ancient plants leads him into a consideration of Darwin and what he learned on a different journey aboard the Beagle. He quotes Darwin's autobiographical confession about his religious beliefs: "it never struck me how illogical it was to say that I believed in what I did not understand and what was in fact unintelligible" and "the Old Testament, from its manifestly false history of the world ... was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos, or the beliefs of the barbarian." (P. 203) Flying along a fault scarp brings to mind the story of Alfred Wegener and the beginning of plate tectonics research. Every stop suggests new ideas.

This is an enjoyable travel story. It avoids the many qualities of heroic bragging. Rather the author emphasizes the insistent need for care, precision, and experience. The northern woods do not suffer fools gladly. Plane wrecks, graves, and lost limbs testify how easy it is to come to harm. But there is a strong quality of everyman in this book, a feeling that I could do this journey given the time, money, and strong enough desire.

Wolf Roder

Who's Who in Hell: A Handbook and International Directory for Humanists, Freethinkers, Naturalists, Rationalists, and Non-Theists

compiled by Warren Allen Smith
(New York: Barricade Books, 2000)

They are all here, from Jeppe Aakjaer, a Danish non-theist, to Randall Zwing, better known as The

BOOK REVIEWS

(Continued from page 6)

Amazing Randi, 1238 pages of biographical and factual entries for the denizens of hell. Persons known for their independence from supernatural nonsense are not the only entries. Add extensive descriptions of subject matter, organizations and publications of interest to unbelievers. Further, some people are entered in distinct type for what they have said or written of interest, although they themselves may not have been free thinkers. Print size distinguishes between major entries and items of only peripheral interest. In this way the author manages the problems of identifying matters of unbelief versus issues of a merely secular nature.

How do we assess a specialized encyclopedia? One way is to compare entries with a standard source. A look at the listing for Philip Freneau (1752-1832) in the *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia* provides an entire thumbnail sketch of the Revolutionary era poet. This includes his middle name, which is missing in Hell. But *Encarta* lacks the information that he was an unbeliever, or at least a deist who accepted the need for a prime mover but not the Christian God. *Who's Who in Hell* gives us not only that information, but cites a six stanza poem to illustrate the case. Entries in this work differ from standard sources in information, in size, and in emphasis, making it clear that *Hell* fills a specialized need. Many standard biographical sources simply do not inform the reader if the entry represents a free thinker, an unbeliever, a Unitarian, or a deist. This one does, or, where there is doubt, at least discusses the issue.

So who do we find in this compilation? Many very famous and well known people. Our first four presidents along with many Enlightenment thinkers definitely did not believe in the standard Christian Deity. There is a long list of Nobel Laureates in *Hell*, peace winners: Angell and Nansen: literature: Shaw, Camus, and Hemingway: science, Weinberg, Curie, and Pauling, among many others. Many other scientists, artists, writers, and philosophers have made the cut. Mark Twain (p. 220) truly had it accurately: "Heaven for the climate, hell for the company." We would also meet some rather unwholesome types. Revolutionary thinker Karl Marx, a converted Jew was an atheist; and some would claim he invented his own religion. Also present Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili generally known as Stalin. Not, however, Adolph Hitler, who despite many believers' claims to the contrary remained a Catholic

to the end of his life. Also missing are Idi Amin, because he was a Muslim, and Pol Pot, who probably should be in the real Hell.

Any author who characterizes persons by their degree of unbelief or doubt about god faces enormous problems. In the first place he has to have some definition of god and religion to identify those who deny them. In the second, persons may say and write many different things over a long life, as well as change their beliefs or attitudes over time. Finally, many important persons had reasons to keep their doubts to themselves. Thus, some biographers have denied that Darwin or Mark Twain were agnostics. Some persons were quite critical of religion, without however denying god or stating clearly were they stood. Not many modern American politicians will admit to unbelief. The English novelist Kingsley Amis is listed as having written some devastating criticisms of Christianity, without ever being involved in freethought. A similar argument applies to the Nobel laureate in literature Selma Lagerlöf.

Smith struggles with these problems, and many will be the criticisms leveled at him, but it is not useful to dwell at length on errors. The book must be regarded as a valiant pioneering effort, which will improve with revision. Where else could you find the case for John Lennon's atheism, Doris Lessing's progress from religion to Marxism to unbelief, or that Joe Levee "is one of the more forward-looking secular humanists" (p. 664).

Wolf Roder

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