

## Editor's Preface

For a year and a half in the congregation I serve in Hobart, Indiana, members have gathered monthly for a Science Cafe featuring a presentation by an area scientist or amateur enthusiast, about their research or particular passion. We've heard about astronomy, invasive species, high-energy physics, atmospheric science, insect adaptation, woodpecker behavioral patterns, earthquake forensics and duneland ecology, in 45-minute multi-media lectures followed by lively Q&A. Faculty and researchers from five area universities and a handful of governmental and non-profit agencies have donated an evening each, and church members have created a coffee house atmosphere with refreshments and occasional musical entertainment.

The program is one of over 200 such throughout the country, held mostly in coffee shops, bookstores, taverns, private homes and restaurants, dedicated to the idea that science education is both needed, and fun. First Unitarian Church of Hobart promotes this program on the basis that "scientific discovery and the social and technological changes that it brings are major impacts upon our lives. The scientific method of pursuing truth (evidence based, theory driven, experimentally tested, peer reviewed and constantly open to revision as the evidence changes) is one of the main ways in which UUs come to understand our world; our UUA Principles statement commits us to the 'free and responsible search for truth and meaning,' and the UUA Sources statement reminds us that we draw from Humanist teachings, a duty to heed 'the results of science.' "

To me, this is central to humanism's role in the UU universe: to say that the story of humanity as told by science is at the heart of the liberal religious enterprise, that our knowledge of the world as revealed by scientific methodology is at the heart of liberal religious teaching, and that scientific inquiry is at the heart of our liberal religious ethics. Those who have agreed to be published in this issue of the Journal have come at these propositions from a wide range of starting points, employing history, preaching, reflection, speculative psychology and touches of poetry.

Two of our writers (Epperson and Springberry) recommend *A Short history of Nearly Everything*, in which Bill Bryson, according to Publisher's Weekly, "... sets out to put his irrepressible stamp on all things under the sun ..... this is a book about life, the universe and everything, from the Big Bang to the ascendancy of Homo sapiens. 'This is a book about how it happened,' the author writes. 'In particular how we went from there being nothing at all to there being something, and then how a little of that something turned into us, and also what happened in between and since.'

David Epperson's nod to Bryson also includes the suggestion that science writing in general "inspire(s) a profound sense of wonder. Albert Einstein," he tells us, "wrote about his 'rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law... The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious...'" In this he's echoed by Kit Ketcham and her co-sermonizers, David Cauffman and Malcolm Ferrier, who together suggest that Science (at least that hard science which relies on experimental verification) ought to be regarded as a UU Source in its own right, apart from its mention under "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed ... the results of science..." But while Ketcham et al, preaching to Washington State UUs, draw on autobiography and present day UU issues to suggest that science is primarily a modern liberal religious focus, Epperson's 2009

Confluence Lecture for the Canadian Unitarian Council claims it is the long standing fascination with "transcending mystery," celebrated in our first source, and traceable to the Unitarian Transcendentalists, that inclines us to empirical wonder today.

Tracy Springberry suggests that in those times when she does not know what to do, or when she does not know how to do what she knows she should do, science is one of those things in which she places her *faith*, along with personal experience and cultural wisdom. More specifically for Springberry, it is other folks, basing their actions and their promises – “this airplane we just got on has no mechanical problems” – in whom her secular faith resides. Religious faith, she suggests, for those for whom religion is deeply reliant on science, is a combination of faith in ones self, and what Henry Nelson Wieman called the creative event,

Harvey Sarles goes beyond astronomy, physics and engineering by a different road, to challenge us to embrace the “soft sciences,” in which ordered and rational observation of human behavior leads to speculation regarding unseen inner and relational functioning and motivation. The next time you watch an infant and its mother interact, try **not** noticing the baby take in the world **through** its parent’s interaction with the surrounding environment! Sarles’ ruminations on the origins of morality in this foundational relationship echoes Ketcham and Ferrier’s assertion that religious humanism is in part an application of science to the solving of human problems, in this case, understanding the mechanisms of moral development.

Perhaps the most vexing of all human problems is how to deal with the knowledge of our own mortality. In the very first issue of Religious Humanism, more than four decades ago, Lester Mondale tackled the question of what it means to know that we will all reverse the microcosmic route of Bryson’s great journey, and go from there being something, to there being nothing at all. Our Heritage article this time is Mondale’s short poetic reflection on dying, including his homage to Paul Carnes, who had recently been diagnosed with lymphoma, and had written movingly of living near the “edge of the abyss.” Mondale, like most of us imbued with scientific values, was no sentimentalist, but at age 63 was clearly touched by the presumed fate of his relatively young colleague and friend. Carnes, then 46, in fact went on to live another eleven years and serve briefly as the third President of the UUA.

Finally Carol Floyd and Doug Muder add a couple of book reviews to the mix, bringing in the non-UU perspectives of Harvard chaplain Greg Epstein, secularist and philosopher Ronald Aaronson, and Constitutional scholar David Strauss. Carol’s review of Epstein’s “Good Without God” is particularly timely, given his multiple presentations at the 2010 General Assembly and accompany Humanist Homecoming program. The book was a record best seller at the HUUMANIST booth.

So pick an approach, or as the postmodernists might say, select a set of lenses, and start reading ... it's all science (except for all the other stuff) and it's all good.

Roger Brewin