

Manitoba Humanist



Gem Newman, local skeptic and our speaker for November

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“We are beyond belief”



www.mb.humanists.ca

WE'RE SKEPTICAL IN NOVEMBER

HAM's November meeting will take place on November 13th at the Canad Inn Polo Park, located at 1405 St. Matthews Avenue.

Our speaker is **Gem Newman**, from the Winnipeg Skeptics group.

Gem's talk is called "What I Believe – And More Importantly, What I Don't". It will be about how he became a skeptic.

In addition to his day job as a senior developer for a local software company, Gem is both the founder of the Winnipeg Skeptics group, as well as the organizer behind last month's Skepticamp event.

Skepticism is definitely closely related to humanism and atheism, since both rely on rational thought and a questioning attitude.

As a definition, Skepticism can be called an approach to accepting, rejecting, or suspending judgment on new information that requires the new information to be well supported by evidence.

The Winnipeg Skeptics are currently planning an outing – a visit to Winnipeg's Christian Evidences Museum, which is based on a literal biblical interpretation of creationism.

In a recent article, the Uniter quoted Gem as stating "Resistance to science and resistance to evolution is just



November 20 is the Transgender Day of Remembrance. Learn more on page 2

a bad idea because you end up accepting a lot of ridiculous claims”.

We're sure Gem will have lots more to say on the subject at our November meeting. Don't miss it!

HAM'S OCTOBER MEETING

At our October meeting, we met two very special young people whose lives have been touched by the Rainbow Resource Centre.



Emi and Sebastian

Our first speaker, Emi, knew by the age of 12 that she was different. She wasn't interested in boys the way that other girls were. She's now only 15, but even at that tender age, she's sure about her sexual identity as a lesbian. Even more amazing to me, is her level of confidence and self-esteem. When she's picked on or bullied at school, she has a clear sense of her own rights, and tells those in charge that that sort of behaviour is not acceptable.

Our other speaker, Sebastian, is now 20. This young person always knew that being a girl didn't feel right. He is transgendered – a person whose birth gender doesn't "fit". Someone who is transgender could be born a male, but consider himself a female. In Sebastian's case, he was born a female, but he now lives as a male. However, the physical operation to change one's gender is, of course, quite expensive and not covered by our health care system. So, it could be many, many years

before Sebastian can have his outward appearance match the way he feels inside.

Sebastian's story is also a reminder that gender identity and sexual preference are two separate things. One's identity as either male or female is really independent from one's sexual preference.

A TRANSGENDER DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

The Transgender Day of Remembrance is an occasion in the LGBT community set aside to memorialize those who were killed due to anti-transgender hatred or prejudice. The event is held on 20 November. It was founded by Gwendolyn Ann Smith to honor Rita Hester, whose murder in 1998 kicked off the "Remembering Our Dead" web project and a San Francisco, California candlelight vigil in 1999. Since then, the event has grown to encompass memorials in hundreds of cities around the world.

- Wikipedia

WHAT I LEARNED AT WINNIPEG'S FIRST SKEPTICAMP

Winnipeg's first ever Skepticamp was poised to deliver a variety of interesting ideas, and even more interesting speakers, and it certainly didn't disappoint.

There were a variety of topics, ranging from nutritional superfoods, to faking your own UFO photos, and from homeopathy to a deconstruction of the techniques used by reality television to tell their specific story.

However, my personal favorite was the presentation by Professor Arthur Schafer from the University of Manitoba's Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics, because it led me to learn about a man I'd never heard of before.

Dr. Schafer's talk was entitled "The Ethics of Belief", which was actually taken from the title of

an essay written by William Kingdon Clifford, in 1877.



William Kingdon Clifford

Clifford was an English mathematician and philosopher. Born in 1845, he was educated at King's College London and Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1871, he was appointed professor of mathematics and mechanics at University College London and in 1874 became a fellow of the Royal Society. He was also a member of the London Mathematical Society and the Metaphysical Society.

A quick check of Wikipedia also nicely summed up Clifford's main argument in "The Ethics of Belief":

For arguing that it was immoral to believe things for which one lacks evidence, in his 1877 essay "The Ethics of Belief", which contains the famous principle: "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." As such, he was arguing in direct opposition to religious thinkers for whom "blind faith" (i.e. belief in things in spite of the lack of evidence for them) was a virtue.

Essentially, Clifford was emphatic in his assertion that ANY irrational thinking was to be avoided.

Here are some further quotations from Clifford:

"If I steal money from any person, there may be no harm done from the mere transfer of possession; he may not feel the loss, or it may prevent him from using the money badly. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself dishonest."

"No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe."

"The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery."

"This sense of power is the highest and best of pleasures when the belief on which it is founded is a true belief, and has been fairly earned by investigation."

"If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it -- the life of that man is one long sin against mankind."

The best part of these modern times is that Clifford's entire essay is easily accessible online. Just type in the title and Clifford's name in Google or Yahoo. Or, the entire text can be found at www.infidels.org. Even better, an image of the original volume called "Lectures and Essays" from 1879 is available at www.archive.org.

The most tragic part of Clifford's story is that he died so young. He was only 33 when he succumbed to tuberculosis. What else would he have contributed if he'd been around longer? Unfortunately, we'll never know.

"I was not, and was conceived. I loved and did a little work. I am not and grieve not." – Clifford's epitaph.

- Donna Harris

OUR NEW HOME FOR THE WINTER

The Humanist Association of Manitoba now has a home for our meetings – at least for this season.

HAM has decided to have the balance of our meetings at the Canad Inn Polo Park until at least next summer. Believe me, Aqua Books was a close second, but when the votes were tallied, the members of your Executive had decided in favor of the Canad Inn.

The exception (of course, there's always got to be an exception, right?) will be our Solstice Party in December. Right now, we're looking at having that event at the Eat! Bistro at Aqua Books. We'll let you know more once details are finalized.

BOOK REVIEW – IN THE LAND OF BELIEVERS

In The Land of Believers: An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey into the Heart of the Evangelical Church
By Gina Welch
Metropolitan Books, 333 pages, \$30

The bad news is, if you're looking for a juicy, scandalous indictment of ignorant Christians by an evil atheist wielding a poison pen, this is not it. The good news is, Gina Welch puts a decidedly human face on the Christians she meets, and reveals herself to be a non-believer with a conscience.

Welch is a graduate of Yale University, and a self-described secular Jew from California. She now teaches English at George Washington University, and while her writing has appeared in university publications and magazines such as Time Out New York and Playboy, this is her first book. In 2002, she moves from California to Virginia to attend graduate school. In time, she adjusts to living in the South, but she has a harder time understanding the Evangelical Christian movement, which was gaining strength

at the time. In order to learn more about what motivates these believers, she decides to conduct her own anthropological experiment by going "undercover" and joining their church. She doesn't choose just any church; instead, she joins Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church, in Lynchburg, Virginia.

In order to be accepted, she lies and feigns new-found belief, even being baptised in the church. Along the way, she learns many things about her new contemporaries, and even more about herself. As she attends regular church services and the EPIC singles ministry, Welch gains an understanding and an insight into the appeal of religion. She sings along with the hymns, enjoys being part of the group, at times is overcome with what she calls "Feeling X", for lack of a better term, and discovers the support that a close-knit community can offer.

Another writer with more vitriol and less feeling would have written a far different book. But Welch is thoughtful and sincere. And nice. Exceedingly so. Her lies and her fear of being discovered cause her great discomfort. Much of the tension in the book arises from Welch's fears of being caught, and her growing anxiety over the lies that she's told these people, especially as she finds herself considering some of them as friends.

As long as she can retreat to her own home two hours away, she maintains sufficient distance to continue with her charade, but once she finds herself volunteering to go along on an evangelical mission to Alaska, her inability to find private time and her "witnessing" to help bring a child to accept Jesus Christ as lord and saviour, may prove to be her undoing.

Along the way, there are some interesting tidbits about Thomas Road Church. She finds the other church members' homophobia deeply disturbing, as well as their reluctance to pray for anyone who isn't already an evangelical Christian; unless, of course, if it's to pray for their salvation.

Welch is there during the death of Jerry Falwell, and she recounts her own mixed feelings as well as the impact that his passing had on the entire

church. She also recounts a free Easter Sunday dinner put on by the church, nicknamed “The Feeding of the 5,000”, which also includes an impassioned pitch for financial offerings. Welch calls the event “a sleight of hand, a fund-raiser disguised as an amazing act of the church’s generosity”, and re-names it the “Fleecing of the 5,000”.

Ultimately, Welch is what SOME might call that most elusive creature – a sympathetic atheist, capable of empathy and deep feeling. She grows from her experience, and it is ultimately, for her, life-changing. One would only hope that if the situation was reversed; if, say, a religious believer went undercover and spent time with a secular organization such as the Freedom From Religion Foundation or the American Humanist Association, that they would portray their new acquaintances just as gently and respectfully.

- Donna Harris

CUTE PET PICTURE

Our Doberman cross, Morgan, dressed up in his Halloween costume! And no, he didn’t go trick or treating! He gets enough treats at home!



- Donna Harris

UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, November 13, 2010

Monthly Meeting

Location: Canad Inn, Polo Park

Time: 5:30 p.m.

Speaker: Gem Newman, Winnipeg Skeptics

Topic: “What I Believe – And More Importantly, What I Don’t”

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Solstice Party

Location: Eat! Bistro, Aqua Books (tentative)

Saturday, January 8, 2011

Annual General Meeting

Location: Canad Inn, Polo Park

Speaker/Topic: TBA

Saturday, February 12, 2011

Monthly Meeting

Location: Canad Inn, Polo Park

Speaker/Topic: TBA

Executive:

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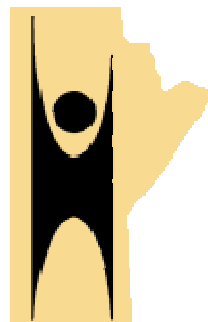
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We're on the Web!

See us at:

mb.humanists.ca



Yes, I would like to BECOME A MEMBER of the Humanist Association of Manitoba

New Member Renewal

Membership Category:

- Individual Membership \$25.00
- Individual Limited Income \$10.00
- Household Membership* \$45.00
- Household Limited Income \$15.00

* After July 1st, just pay ½ the yearly fee for the rest of the year. After October 31st, pay full fee and get the entire next year.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ Province: _____

Postal Code _____

Telephone#: _____ Cell #: _____

Email address: _____

*Household Memberships: Please give the names of all additional Humanists in your household 18 years or over:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

DONATION (Tax receipts issued for all donations of \$10 or more)

I would like to make a donation to HAM of:

- \$10 \$20 \$30 \$50 \$100
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PAYMENT: Cheque Money Order
 Visa Mastercard Amex

Please complete the following if paying by credit card:

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Please make cheque or money order payable to:
Humanist Association of Manitoba and mail to:
Humanist Association of Manitoba, 7 Pinehurst Lane, Mitchell, MB, R5G 2J3.

Or bring your form and the fees to any HAM meeting and give it to Helen Friesen, or any member of the executive.