

Next meeting,
Wednesday
November 10th

Value for money?

- Cost of the Iraq War, \$66.8 billion (March 2003), plus approx \$50 billion a year (and over 20,000 civilian casualties).
- Cost of the US election, \$4 billion (£2.1 billion).
- Cost of the 320 cruise missiles aimed at Baghdad at the beginning of the war, \$256 million.
- A single stealth bomber, \$1.26 billion.
- Cost of bringing Africans up to the same level of health and welfare enjoyed elsewhere—\$25-35 billion per annum.
- Cost of providing education for the 115 million children around the world who don't go to school—\$5.6 billion per annum.
- Cost of meeting the UN's Aids programme deficit—\$1.7 billion.

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Suffolk Humanist News

November 2004

What shall I do about Christmas?

Yvonne Peacock

As I have never embraced Christianity, I've always found this time of year a bit difficult. As a just pre-war-baby, I grew up through fairly hard times and Christmas was an oh-so-needed land-mark. There was excitement and surprise, with parents doing unexpected things like hanging up paper chains, putting silver three-penny pieces in puddings, digging up little trees and cursing over fairy lights that would never work, but which looked nice to me anyhow. There were little presents and new jumpers from aunties. There were even grown-ups drinking a teensy bit of alcohol!

So I look back on the time with nostalgia and I think my own children loved it similarly.

However, now I think it is time to get my head round it. For me the nativity has a historical significance and that is all. But also it seems to have built up into such a monster of greed and commercial opportunism with people begging themselves to provide what is 'expected' of them. I've finally decided to turn



Yvonne Peacock

my back on the whole shemozzle, but being grandma to ten (to date) has its responsibilities and being a miserable old git is not an option, so I have reverted to good old astronomical and biological ideas and have a winter solstice party for family, neighbours and friends. The cause for celebration is simple; the passing of the shortest day and longest night with the hope of a new year of growth, rebirth and all that. The wheel turns for a seasonal change and I can rejoice in the gentle movement from the dark, cold winter to the sweet spring. As well as making a thank you opportunity to all those around who love and care for me.

On this occasion the children are allowed to hold matches and light

fires. We have a firework display (absolutely no bangs), sparklers, night-lights in jars, a bonfire, wood gathering and chopping. Then they light and keep fed my two open fires indoors. The house is mostly candle-lit. Then I sort out some activities. They make sun, moon and star cakes – fairy cakes with icing and silver and orange decorations. They make solstice cards with gold and silver stick-and-cut and can make large willow weavings with thin branches from my tree. Each child has a gold and silver bag with little gifts all of which are hung up (weather permitting) on the tree outside. These include a small torch each, a little piece of jewellery or a toy, a gold or silver decoration and a sweet of some kind. With the torches they then do a treasure hunt in the dark, finding a list of things tucked up in odd places. Indoors we have another treasure hunt right through the house. They have done this last for many years now and are very sharp-eyed about it, finding things like the tiny salt spoon stuck to the lamp-shade in no time at all.

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Suffolk Humanist News



Norse and Teutonic people used to burn a Yule log (from the old Norse for 'wheel') during the midwinter festival to symbolise regeneration.

“At least we are reinforcing our idea that at grass roots level we can be kind, rational and civilised.”

Margaret Nelson, a tutor with the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE), has been asked to join the Advisory Panel of the new East of England Faiths Agency (EEFA), founded by SIFRE's David & Cynthia Capey.

What shall I do about Christmas?

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I do a pheasant soup and a veggie one, cold meat, cheese and bean salads and a bit of everything else with a sun and moon cake – with, of

course, plenty of alcohol.

So far I have found this is a good mix of fireworks, Christmas and New Year. It comes a week before most people start celebrating and has enough darkness, difference,

scariness and danger attached to it to rejoice the children and the grown-ups.

I would be very interested to hear of other folk's alternatives to the mighty spend.

Colchester Inter-Faith Network

The Suffolk Humanist group has been represented at the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) for ten years, but the Colchester Inter-Faith Network is new. Suffolk Humanists member Yvonne Peacock flies the flag for Humanism at CIN.

Colchester Interfaith Network is a young group but learning fast. It held its first multi-faith 'service' recently in Colchester Spiritualist church, a simple building close to the town centre. The president of the group, David Robinson, belongs to this church. It was quickly full of folks of all ages, talking cheerfully and enthusiastically. Ten of us gave a three to five minute offering to the

audience and we included men and women who belonged to Buddhist, Baha'i, Jewish, Pagan, Spiritualist, Quaker, and Unitarian faiths. Bob Russell MP also contributed. Some spoke a poem, gave a reading or told a story or, as I did, described our journey towards our beliefs. I felt quite comfortable most of the time, but there were a moments when I felt it was assumed that I was going along with what was being said. Maybe this is because I reject all ideas of 'spirituality', whatever that is, which can make a Humanist feel a bit like an outsider looking in. However the social, chatty

part of the evening dispelled that. Many faiths are represented in the membership and we all seem to get on really well. We're a very friendly bunch, deeply committed to our own views but always listening thoughtfully and with real interest to one another. It's a group that warms the cockles of my heart, especially as happenings in the world seem driven by bigotry and self-interest (as they probably always have been.) It sometimes seems that we don't ever learn anything. At least we are reinforcing our idea that at grass-roots level we can be kind, rational and civilised.

Colchester Inter-Faith Network—Introducing Humanism

This is what Yvonne told CIN about her 'guide to living'.

I must say I found it surprisingly difficult to put down what I think of as my guide to living, especially since I have attempted to follow the Humanist way for nearly half a century. You'd have thought I'd have it sussed by now.

For good or ill, I'll say

my piece about Humanism as I see it. If you would like a more erudite and detailed description, I commend to you a single sheet which lays out the Affirmation of Humanism, a statement of principles and values.

So I quote the Little Oxford Dictionary which puts it neatly in two parts. 'Humanism is a non-

religious philosophy based on liberal human values.'

First we are non-religious as we find no evidence to persuade us that anything classed as supernatural is other than a creation of our imagination. Man made the gods, not the other way round.

Some Humanists are

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Colchester Inter-Faith Network—Introducing Humanism

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atheists and believe there are no gods. Others, like me, are agnostics (which means literally ‘without knowledge’). I think it is impossible to know whether or not God exists.

The second part – ‘a philosophy based on human values’ – I quote Claire Rayner, agony aunt, counsellor, parenting guru and past president of the British Humanist Association; ‘If you are a Humanist that means you care about other human beings, so you have to think about that. Even shopping for a bunch of grapes becomes part of a whole pattern of right and wrong.’

Yes, I think it is true to say that everything we think or do is by, with, and for community. What matters most is how we behave, not what we believe. I like to think of the guiding motto of ‘do as you would be done by’. This seems to help us with the constant adaptation that the forces of evolution put us through.

Humanists have been around for a long time, certainly among the Ancient Greeks and maybe before. It seems we can be good without God; be happy, love, suffer and delight in the planet; be stunned by its loveliness and potential just like others who *have* religious

convictions.

My personal journey was easy. In my own family, I was a third generation Humanist. It fitted with the socialist, lefty ideas of the elders. I was given free reign to explore and discover for myself. I went to church, Sunday school, a little village church primary school, and secondary school with a Quaker headmistress. As a student I became a young communist, but was deeply attracted to Buddhism. By about twenty I had settled into Humanism.

Later I married a young journalist who had grown up in a typically true blue household, pro-royalist, patriotic and devout C of E. Indeed he had done a stint as chairman of the Chelmsford Young Conservatives! And I must say we spent quite a bit of our amicable forty-two years of life together happily arguing the toss about all that and learned a lot and both shifted our attitudes a little.

I came into the Humanist movement through my husband’s funeral, which was beautifully conducted by Margaret Nelson, a Humanist officiant from Suffolk.

My only sadness is that as a movement we have no fine buildings, art works or much music inspired by us and we have to meet in rather ordinary little halls –

but maybe that is all part of it.

Also, being a pacifist, I often find swearing quite a relief instead of socking someone on the jaw. And of course, all the liveliest expletives are deeply imbedded in Christianity – and I think it would be disrespectful to use them! So I feel some frustration on that score.

Two years ago, I was cut out of a car and airlifted by helicopter to hospital to die. I did not, as you see. But nothing in my prolonged near-death experience left me with any change of heart with regard to an afterlife. I am still OK with the thought that what lives on of me is any influences or impressions I may have made on my children, the rest of my family and the wider community, hopefully more useful than not.

I have found Humanism, and those around me who think likewise, caring, comforting and supportive.

So are we about community? I would say so. I leave you with this thought by Robert Ingersoll, a Humanist writer who sums it up with; ‘The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.’



Robert Ingersoll ,
American orator and
speechwriter(1833-1899)

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Suffolk Humanist News

Hang on, God's trying to tell me something



When Kirsty Wark

asked Jonathan Miller

why he hadn't been

influenced by religion

in childhood, he said,

"No one got to me

before I had a chance

to develop my

cognitive immunity".

(A Brief History of

Disbelief, BBC4,

October)

God's back in the White House

"He truly believes he's on a mission from God. Absolute faith like that overwhelms a need for analysis. The whole thing about faith is to believe things for which there is no empirical evidence. But you can't run the world on faith."

Bruce Bartlett, former treasury official for the first President Bush on George Junior's "weird, messianic idea of what he thinks God has

told him to do." (Interview in the New York Times)

George W Bush is obsessed by the whole terrorism thing (though he can't even pronounce it). If you believed him and Tony Blair, they're all that's standing between us and total annihilation by the bogeymen Al Qaeda. Oh, and the might of the US and UK military. Meanwhile, the polar ice caps are melting faster

than the scientists' worst predictions, the rain forests are being destroyed by logging companies, and the US still refuses to sign the Kyoto agreement. God doesn't seem to have mentioned them.

I don't know about you, but George frightens me far more than Bin Laden. If he's talking to God, he, she or it must be giving him some very dodgy advice. MN

Suffolk Humanist people

Founder SH member Ron Alston is in Addenbrookes after a couple of scares with his dicky ticker. They're going to give his cardiac plumbing an overhaul while he's in there, so it works a bit better.

Joan Posford (who some of you met at the Darwin Day do) is seriously ill, but appears to be making the most of the company of her supportive family and friends.

Marie Haworth broke her Achilles tendon in Ipswich Hospital car park (Ouch!), conveniently close to A & E, and will be in plaster for about seven more weeks.

Our best wishes to everyone who's ill or incapacitated.

Joan and Ted Matthews were our gracious and generous hosts at the Music & Poetry evening in October. Michael Imison was DJ. Thanks to all

three. The music included Schubert, Don MacLean and Liz Mitchell's uncle singing a folk song, and the poetry included Wendy Cope, Joyce Grenfell, and Aphra Behn.

Sophie Lovejoy has a new job as joint manager of the University of Essex Colchester iLab - a creative space designed for brainstorming, innovation, creative problem solving and other events.

What the Faiths teach about Justice

A Suffolk Forum of Faiths meeting was organised by the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, supported by the Crown Prosecution Service, at the new Crown Courts in Russell Road on the 23rd September. I supplied a written paper, as I'd arranged to go to the 75th anniversary celebration at

Conway Hall, London.

The collected papers can be found on the SIFRE website (www.sifre.org.uk), or in printed form from SIFRE, c/o Suffolk College, Rope Walk, Ipswich, IP4 1LT, for £2.00 inc. P & P. We'll get a few copies for resale.

New members and others may wonder why Suffolk Humanists are involved with SIFRE, as some secularists take a dim view of associating with the religious. We find it's useful to have an opportunity to give an alternative point of view, while learning something ourselves. MN



"All virtue is summed up in dealing justly"
Aristotle

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Education news

I contributed to Kesgrave High School's Matters of Life & Death conference for Year 11 students on 14th October. It involved spending a morning at the school, during which I talked to three tutor groups. There's always a diverse collection of speakers at these things. I asked one of my groups who they'd heard before me, and was told he'd been a Baptist Minister who told them that God created the world 6,000 years ago, and we couldn't be related to the apes because our leg bones are the wrong shape. I'm pleased to say that the students didn't buy this explanation, though they didn't seem to know much about evolution.

On 25th November I shall return to Kesgrave for their Year 10 Marriage conference. It's gratifying that I've been asked back several years running, due to positive

feedback from students, teachers and governors, while other speakers haven't had a second invitation. Wonder if the creationist will?

On 23rd November I'll address a 6th form assembly at the County Upper School, Bury St Edmunds on the theme of 'Coming of Age', as a warm-up to a SIFRE conference a few days later.

A few days ago I had an email from a student at the American High School at RAF Lakenheath, Suffolk, who asked for a speaker to talk to their Diversity Club. I'll probably go before the end of term. My student contact describes herself as a 'secular humanist'. I wrote that, judging from what we've heard about the US during the election, a majority of American people are evangelical Christians, so she must be in a very small minority. She replied, 'It is

true that the US is a very religious nation. My school has a surplus of Roman Catholics as well as Mormons and the entire military community is very right-wing and religious. I understand from the school psychologist that we also have other atheists and some Wiccans but I don't know the numbers. Oh, and we have one Buddhist, and he is a member of the Diversity club.' I look forward to my visit to Lakenheath and will report later.

Next week I've got another SACRE meeting (Suffolk County's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education), when no doubt we'll be discussing the new National Framework for Religious Education, which includes Humanism.

Margaret Nelson



© Margaret Nelson

"It is true that the US is a very religious nation. My school has a surplus of Roman Catholics as well as Mormons, and the entire military community is very right-wing and religious"

Meetings

At our meeting on Wednesday 10th November we'll be considering what it means to be a Humanist. How does a Humanist deal with an ethical dilemma? Should a Humanist ignore or challenge religious absurdities? Do politics and religion mix, and should we try to be more politically

active? How would you deal with a conflict between religious and secular interests within your own family? Is there a right answer to any of these questions? There certainly isn't an easy answer to most of them. Bring your thinking caps.

At our meeting in September we had a fine time ranting

about things like the decline of vocational education, and increase in junk mail. Some rants generated hilarity, which led a first-time visitor from Essex to comment that we didn't take Humanism very seriously, so she wouldn't be coming again. Oh well, you can't please 'em all!

Suffolk Humanists meet in Room 4 at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. We start at 7.30 pm and leave by 10 pm. Sympathetic guests and raffle prizes are always welcome. Please phone 01473 658828 if you need or can offer a lift.

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS

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The Suffolk Humanist group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, and the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource.

If anyone is interested in representing us at the BHA GRAM (Groups Annual Meeting) in London on 20th November, please get in touch.

Humanists on BBC Radio Suffolk

Margaret Nelson and David Mitchell contribute regular Humanist Thoughts for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk—95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm. We don't have the new rota yet, but keep listening anyway. T4TD is on at about 7.25 am every day.

If you're not an early bird you can hear a recording later in the day via the Radio Suffolk website—www.bbc.co.uk/england/radiosuffolk—or read some past thoughts on the BHA website, via the 'humanism' page at www.humanism.org.uk

Margaret will be reviewing the Sunday papers on Radio Suffolk at about 7am on December 5th.

HUMANIST CEREMONIES

The Suffolk Humanist team of ceremonies celebrants operates independently of the British Humanist Association. We provide funerals, weddings, baby-namings, gay affirmation ceremonies and other ceremonies, such as civic ceremonies, in Suffolk and N E Essex. If you or someone you know would like more information, please contact Margaret Nelson, 01473 658828. We can provide a leaflet about planning a Humanist funeral for yourself or a close relative.

Humanist travellers

When Marie broke her tendon (see page 4), she'd just got back from a holiday in America, where she celebrated her birthday with family members. One of the highlights of her trip was a visit to the newly opened National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington. A huge, very impressive building, there was far too much to see in a day, says Marie, but she enjoyed exploring the collection of Native American art, artefacts and costume.

At the end of January Nathan Nelson will travel east on a round the world journey, beginning with a fortnight at an aid camp at Pettai, near Tamil Nadu, Southern India, where he'll help with the interior decoration of a newly refurbished primary school for dalit (untouchable) children.



Gypsy children at Pettai

Nathan will fly to Mumbai, Delhi, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Bangkok, Hanoi, Ho Chi Min City, Sydney, Christchurch, Auckland, Papeete, Easter Island, Santiago, Lima, La Paz, Quito, Miami, New York, and back to London, and he'll travel overland in between. If you're on the Internet, you can follow his progress via www.mybigtrip.info

I hope Nathan will talk to Suffolk Humanists about his adventures when he gets back at the end of next year.



Marie Haworth
Nathan Nelson

MN