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Apr 2004
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Occasionally I'm asked about appropriate dress for funerals. People who've never been to a funeral before, let alone had to arrange one, might worry about "doing the right thing", or the etiquette of mourning. They may be reassured to know that few wear black to funerals any more. Formal clothing, usually in subdued colours, is the usual choice, but you can wear more or less anything, apart from obviously inappropriate beachwear.

Why black?

[caption id="attachment_3020" align="alignright" width="211"]  Queen Victoria in old age[/caption]

Black mourning dress became popular during Queen Victoria's reign. After Prince Albert died she never wore anything else, and the fashion persisted until the late 20th century. Most people don't know why they wear black, if they do, or why they should. It began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when death rituals demonstrated worth and social status. The poor could not afford to spend a lot of money on funerals, but the middle and upper classes could and did. They bought special clothing, coaches, coffins and all the accessories that an increasing number of commercial funeral directors were only too keen to sell them. This display was designed to show that they were respectable people. The poor did their best to imitate them, and show that they too were respectable, even if the best they could do was borrow or improvise mourning dress. When I was a child, many people still covered mirrors, closed curtains and observed other strange customs on the death of a relative. It all contributed to a gloomy, morbid feeling. Young children would have been frightened by this, but they weren't generally encouraged to go to funerals. [caption id="attachment_3021" align="alignleft" width="240"]

Hawaiian shirt, as worn at a funeral[/caption]

Modern funerals

Most people attend funerals wearing smart but not too formal clothes that don't attract a lot of attention, but it all depends on who the funeral is for. A biker's funeral, for example, will usually be attended by lots of people wearing black motorcycle gear. When a young Goth woman died, almost everyone at the funeral, including me, wore black and purple - her favourite colours. When a keen camper died, his friends all wore bright Hawaiian short-sleeved shirts in his honour. Sometimes terminally ill people have instructed their family and friends not to wear black but bright colours, and they have. One of the most striking funeral outfits I've seen was at the funeral for a man in his thirties who died of a drugs overdose. Many of the mourners were crusty new age hippies. One was a woman who was about six foot six tall, with a veiled bowler hat over thick dark hair cut pudding basin style in a short bob. She wore an old hacking jacket that had been patched and embroidered over several brightly coloured layers, and a long full purple tulle skirt over black leggings, striped socks, and black DMs. As she left she extended a hand, which was clad in fingerless lace gloves, and smiled graciously. I resisted the temptation to curtsey. The rules There are none. I don't think it matters what you wear for a funeral, as long as you behave in a dignified and respectful manner. If you don't, it can be distracting and upsetting for the chief mourners. Fortunately, most people, even if they've never been to a funeral before, instinctively know what is right.

Margaret Nelson

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Jan 2004
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As you know, I do funerals. That is, I conduct Humanist funeral ceremonies. Some think there's a form of etiquette for funerals. What matters, surely, is being well-mannered, considerate, and sensitive to the feelings of the bereaved. I don't think it matters what you wear, as long as you behave in a respectful manner.

Strangely, some of the rudest, most disrespectful people I've come across have been buttoned-up elderly women who've talked in carrying whispers throughout (they're probably the same ones who talk during the matinees at the Wolsey Theatre), or deaf people who've ignored the available loop system, sat at the back, and asked their neighbour 'What did she say?" every few minutes. I have, so far, resisted the urge to tell them to shut up.

One of the things that people ask is what they should wear. Few wear black to funerals these days. Formal clothing in subdued colours is the usual choice, but you can wear more or less anything, apart from obviously inappropriate beachwear. It's not a good idea to draw attention to yourself, unless you're the dear departed's nearest and dearest, in which case you can wear what you damn well please.

Black mourning dress became popular during Queen Victoria's reign. After Prince Albert died she never wore anything else, which strikes me as a bit OTT. The fashion began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when death rituals demonstrated social status, and persisted until the late 20th century. The poor couldn't afford to spend a lot of money on funerals, but the middle and upper classes could and did. Things are changing, but some still use a funeral as an opportunity to display their affluence and respectability. I've conducted a funeral where the widow and her daughters wore the largest, most ostentatious hats, more suitable for a day at the Ascot races. Another not only wore a huge black hat, but seemed to be wearing most of her jewellery too.

For a young Goth woman, almost everyone, including me, wore black and purple - her favourite colours. For a keen camper, his friends all wore bright Hawaiian shirts in his honour. Motorcyclists have worn black leather. A widow wore a bright red suit – a present from her husband. Sometimes terminally ill people have instructed their family and friends not to wear black but bright colours, and they did. The important thing for all of them was being there.

More on the subject of funeral etiquette

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Feb 2004
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Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin was born on 12th February 1809. He didn't do especially well at school, being more interested in bugs and beetles than in Latin grammar. His father thought he ought to study medicine, but Charles quit medical school after less than a year, saying he couldn't stand the sight of blood. He went to Cambridge instead, and developed an interest in geology and natural history.

In 1830, one of Charles's teachers learned that they needed a naturalist on a Royal Navy survey ship, the Beagle, which was due to sail for South America, and Charles leapt at the chance to go. The Beagle surveyed the remote Galapagos Islands, where Charles's observations led him to his theory of evolution by natural selection. The flora and fauna in the islands is unique; of the 56 species of birds on the islands, 28 occur nowhere else on the planet. Charles reasoned that the creatures of the Galapagos hadn't been created, as fundamentalist Christians like the Beagle's Captain Fitzroy believed, but had evolved from similar ancestors carried on floating vegetation from the mainland. The more he developed his theory, the more Charles realised that it would upset established opinion in Victorian England, and since his natural inclination was to enjoy a quiet life, he didn't publish his hugely important book "On the Origin of Species" until another scientist threatened to beat him to it.

Three and a half billion years ago the earth was uninhabitable. It took half a billion years for simple organics compounds to be formed and a lot longer for DNA to develop, which made more complex life forms possible. The trilobites and ammonites didn't appear until about 570 million years ago, insects 300 million years ago, and the dinosaurs were relatively recent. If we represent the history of earth with a diagram of an hour in time – a clock face – we human beings have only appeared with the last minute or so. I think that's a far more interesting, and credible, story, than the Genesis myth. It's all pretty amazing.

A great man like Charles Darwin deserves to be honoured as someone who helped us to understand where we came from, over trillions of years. Some are campaigning to make 12th February a public holiday by the year 2009, the bicentenary of Darwin's birth. Whether or not they succeed, there'll be an international celebration of science and humanity as exemplified in the life, work and influence of Charles Darwin.

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Mar 2004
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If whoever bombed the Madrid trains aimed to make those living in crowded European cities feel more vulnerable, they've probably succeeded, if only because it's hard to ignore the films and pictures of the aftermath. Without paying a penny, euro or dollar, modern terrorists gain maximum coverage from the modern media, encouraging a siege mentality. The trouble is, the more frightened people are, the less clearly they think about the threat, and how to deal with it.

In countries like Columbia or Northern Ireland, ordinary people have been living with terrorism for years. Across Africa and Eastern Europe, random acts of violence are commonplace. That's terrorism too – it just doesn't make the news so often. Killing people in ones and twos doesn't attract the same sort of publicity or sense of outrage as the destruction of the Twin Towers or the Bali bombing.

Terrorism may be motivated by nationalism, religious fundamentalism or just sheer nastiness – people with warped minds carrying out despicable acts. What terrorists have in common is that they take a 'them and us' mentality to extremes. They regard anyone who isn't one of them as less than human and totally expendable.

Whatever else we do about terrorism, such as increasing our vigilance and internal security, we must be very, very careful that we don't fall into the trap of regarding anyone who's different from us as a potential threat. For example: a lot of what's been written on the asylum and immigration issues in the tabloid press over the last couple of years has been thinly disguised xenophobia, expressing a fear or hatred of strangers. Hatred prevents us from seeing other people as human beings, and that's how terrorists think.

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Apr 2004
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Blossom

My mother used to recite a daft poem at this time of year: "The spring has sprung, the grass is riz, I wonder where the birdies is?" Tennyson was a little more eloquent when he wrote, "In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."

I don't know about thoughts of love, but there's definitely something in the air at this time of year, besides pollen. I heard something on the news the other day about fertility treatment for childless couples. Apparently you have more chance of conceiving during the summer months, when the days are longer and lighter. They haven't worked out the science bit yet, but why should we humans be that different from other species, most of whom breed in the spring and early summer? Now that April's here, the birds are nesting, the buds are bursting, the grass is growing and there are ducks wandering along the lanes, looking for nest sites, oblivious to the traffic. The natural world is all fecundity and renewal.

The origins of the spring festival of Easter go back much farther than the Christian festival called by the same name. The name is believed to derive from the name of a Teutonic goddess of spring, Ostera. The Easter egg, and the Easter bunny (which always used to be a hare, not a rabbit) are obvious symbols of fertility. The festival used to take place at about the time of the Spring Equinox at the end of March, the first of two days each year when day and night are of equal length, and we change our clocks.

You don't actually need to know about goddesses or myths or bunnies and hares to enjoy the arrival of spring, and I don't need any excuse to enjoy chocolate Easter eggs. It's good to shed a few layers of clothing and open the windows. It's good to see things growing, even if it does mean you're going to have to get the mower out again. If your fancy turns to thoughts of love, why not? "The flowers that bloom in the Spring, tra-la", and all that! Happy Easter!

Bill Potts from the Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area say that this is the original, Brooklynese, version of the Easter poem.

> Spring is sprung;
> De grass is riz.
> I wonder where de boidies is.
> De boid is on de wing.
> Why dat's absoid,
> Cuz everybody knows
> De wing is on de boid.

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Apr 2004
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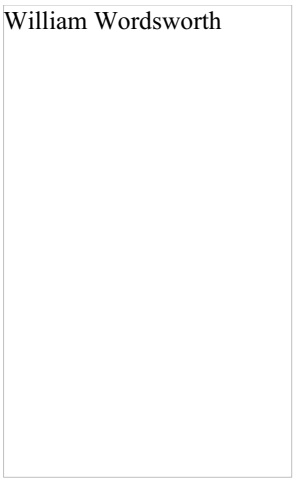
The English poet William Wordsworth began and ended his life in April. He was born on April 17th 1770, and died on April 23rd 1850. In 1843 he was made poet laureate.


William Wordsworth

Wordsworth is associated with the English Lake District, where he began and ended his life. A lot of his work celebrates the beauty of Nature and the English countryside. The Wordsworth poem I know best is the one about daffodils, which many of my generation were expected to learn by heart at school – "I wandered lonely as a cloud…" and so on. The poem was inspired by Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, who recorded her impressions of the daffodils in her journal in April 1802.

The trouble with poems like Wordsworth's Daffodils, and some well-known bits of Shakespeare, is that they've become devalued through being force-fed to generations of schoolchildren who didn't understand them, but recited them in a da-de-dah sort of sing-song voice. Then there's the bit about lying on his couch, "in vacant or in pensive mood", which sounds a bit soppy. P G Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster might have been inclined to call anyone who lay about on couches, dreaming about daffodils, "a drooper", which is how he described Madeleine Basset; "one of those soppy girls riddled from head to foot with whimsy". So lots of other people, who don't have much time for poetry, might also be inclined to dismiss Wordsworth's Daffodils as not their cup of tea. Which is a pity, because if you actually read the whole poem, and think about it, it says something about the value of calmly reflecting on the memory of something beautiful when you're tired or fed up. How often do you make the time to be alone with your thoughts, and think about something soothing? Or are you one of those people who feels guilty about seeking a bit of peace and quiet, and not doing anything "useful"?

Wordsworth wrote, "Ten thousand saw I at a glance, tossing their heads in sprightly dance". That's a bit different from having a small bunch stuck in a vase, which soon droop like Madeleine Basset. The flowers he saw were a bright splash of yellow, blowing in the wind, against the background of green hills and grey water. I think I'd have remembered them too.

So I'm grateful to William Wordsworth for that poem, amongst others. If you haven't read any poetry lately, give it a go.

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May 2004
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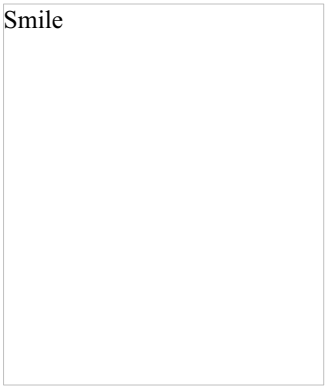
That splendid actress Anna Massey was interviewed for one of the broadsheets last week about her role as Aunt Jemima Stanbury in Trollope's He Knew He Was Right, which finished on the BBC TV last night.

I love that name – Jemima – though I can only think of one other, and that's Jemima Puddleduck in the Beatrix Potter stories. Anyway, I digress…

Ms Massey was asked about her character's disdain for artifice, such as the girls in the story who wear hair pieces, and she responded by saying, "I don't like artifice either." She spoke of people who have botox injections to smooth out facial wrinkles, "To me, the most interesting thing about a person's face is the journey it expresses." Ms Massey has a wonderful face, pert and bright-eyed and full of character. Perhaps because my own physiognomy betrays my age and experience, I tend to regard older faces as far more interesting than the bland prettiness of young girls or the smooth good looks of young men, but then I'm no longer a pretty young girl on the lookout for good-looking young men – O, I don't know though…


Smile

The thing is about botox, I've heard, is that it smoothes out your wrinkles, and also your ability to express emotion. We used to call my headmistress at school "Old Concrete Face", in that nasty way that horrible schoolgirls did. That was mainly because she always maintained a severe expression, as though she was incapable of smiling. There are smiles and smiles, of course. The one displayed by that stupid America servicewoman abusing Iraqi prisoners (the one whose photo is in all the papers) is the sort you'd like to see wiped off.

The thing about faces is that they're all so different. Apart from identical twins (and even they have subtle differences), every single one of the sixty-four thousand million plus faces on the planet is unique. Whether or not you can understand each other's language, or whether or not you even speak to one another, each face displays signs of its owner's experience, personality, character and mood. So why, if you're unique, would you want to change your face so you look more like lots of other people? The easiest and quickest way to change it for the better is just to smile – as long as it's a pleasant smile.

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May 2004
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I'll be a pensioner in a couple of weeks. Does that mean I'm old? I don't feel it, but I probably look it to small children who only see grey hair and wrinkles.

I don't plan to grow old gracefully – where's the fun in that? And the older I get, the less patience I have with people who waste my

time, such a tele-salespeople, or whingers. I'm more inclined to speak my mind, which some find a less than endearing habit, but I think one can be too polite for your own good sometimes. I mean, if someone's talking rubbish, I might not actually say 'Don't talk rubbish," but I'm more likely to say, 'I don't agree.'

We older people have several advantages; we've lived longer, so we know more – well, some of us do – some never seem to have grasped anything useful over their sixty-plus years. Then we're close to outnumbering young people, which means that they've got to start taking notice of what we want, what we think. In my Sunday paper the other week there was an article about the greater spending power of the active over-sixties, but still the fashion pages were full of waif-like girls who looked about twelve, wearing floaty outfits. I might want to wear a floaty outfit, but it'd have to be a bit bigger than the ones the waifs were wearing.

Although old age can be a pain because of incurable problems like arthritis, those of us who're fortunate enough to live in the developed world have a lot to be grateful for. Yes, the body wears out, but age is all in the mind. I've known some very lively octogenarians and nonagenarians, like my friend Mary, who bought herself a computer and taught herself to use it when her grandson went abroad, so she could email him. An author called John Aiken wrote, '…the phlegmatic, inactive, dubious, desponding, and indifferent, as soon as the warmth and curiosity of youth are over, frequently become careless about the remainder of life, and rather consent to live on through habit, than feel themselves much interested in the continuance of their existence.' You've seen them; those people who start practising being old as soon as they pass their sixtieth birthday, and get quite good at it.

Me, I'm too busy to grow old, yet. I don't believe in an afterlife, as my mother did, so I've got to make the most of whatever time I have left.

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Jul 2004
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A contributor to our village newsletter let off steam this month about those who drive too fast through the village (which is illegal anyway), park inconsiderately, and ride excessively noisy motorbikes. But it's not just teenage motorcyclists who shatter our rural peace and quiet. If it's fine today, a so-called 'day of rest', you can bet that quite a few grown-up people who'd like to think of themselves as upright, considerate, law-abiding citizens, will be creating a noise nuisance to rival the motorcyclists.

I refer to the racket from power tools – shredders, mowers, strimmers, hedge trimmers, and the odd chain saw and drill. It's so much quieter on a weekday when their owners are all at work. I'm wondering how I can get an Anti-Social Behaviour Order for them. There's new European legislation aimed at the manufacturers of power tools, enforcing noise levels, but what about the people who use them? There you are, just about to take a nap in the garden in the shade of a tree, when someone starts making a noise like an extremely loud raspberry or a monstrous angry bee, and it goes on, and on. If they're not doing that, they're playing the radio out of doors so you have no choice but to listen to it, or retire indoors and shut the windows.

Many people seem to have become accustomed to constant background noise. It seems most kids have TVs and CD players in their bedrooms so they can't settle to sleep at a reasonable hour because their brains are still buzzing, then they're tired and irritable the next day and everyone shouts at one another. They grow up to find silence unnerving. Is it any wonder that so many people feel so stressed?

When it's quiet out of doors, you can hear a gentle murmur of conversation without distinguishing the actual words, or bird song, or a breeze in the trees – the sort of sounds that soothe. They lower the blood pressure, calm the mind, rest the brain and body, and make us ready to face the rest of the week, refreshed and renewed.

So this is a plea for a bit of hush, just one day a week, on a Sunday – nothing to do with religion, everything to do with common sense. As the proverb says, silence is golden, but if we can't have silence, at least let us have quiet – please!

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Aug 2004
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Last Saturday I went to the BP Portrait Award exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. It was the second time I'd been. Last year's winner, Charlotte Harris, painted a canvas four feet square of her grandmother, just her head and shoulders. The old woman's skin has a translucent fragile quality. She's looking down with a pensive expression – what was she thinking? What stories could she tell? This year's winner, Stephen Shankland, painted a mother and child; nothing like those we see in religious paintings, but a real flesh and blood young woman looking straight at you, while her baby plays with a ring. The artist has captured a moment, probably with the aid of photographs. It's almost impossible to paint small children and animals in the same way that you can paint an adult – they won't keep still.

I sometimes paint or draw portraits. It's a wonderful excuse to stare at someone, to study his or her face, and it was useful when I worked as a supply teacher with difficult children. I'd bribe them to behave with the promise of a picture to take home to their mum. One surly youth, who'd sauntered into the room with a belligerent attitude, agreed to sit for me and the rest of the class. We drew him in his skin-tight black jeans, black shirt, and Doc Martin boots. I never heard a peep out of him all lesson, and at the end he carried off his prize, very pleased with himself. Why? He was vain, and he'd been the centre of attention for an hour or so, without really trying. There are other portraits like that boy in the black shirt, some of them hundreds of years old, showing young men posing with that 'look at me' expression that seems to say, aren't I the bee's knees?

Pencil portrait

We talk about creating a likeness of someone – not a copy, a 'likeness', a resemblance. A portrait can be very formal or very loose, but there must be something there that you can recognise. I've heard that some primitive tribes are, or were, afraid of cameras, because they thought they stole something from them; a part of their life force, or their soul. There's some truth in that. George Bernard Shaw wrote, 'You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul.' Shaw meant our essential nature, the centre of our personality, intellect, will and emotions. A good portrait artist will capture some of that, without taking anything away.

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Aug 2004
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It's August bank holiday – the end of the summer holidays and the beginning of autumn. Keats wrote, 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness', not 'Season of soggy cereal crops'. You used to know where you were with the seasons. Not any more. Everything's topsy-turvy, seasonally. We've had warm winters and soggy summers, early springs and late autumns. The birds and beasts don't know if they're coming or going. There are lots more bugs about, because there haven't been the hard frosts to kill them off, while seabirds off the Scottish coast have failed to breed because the small prey they feed on have all swum north in the milder seas. We may not face the same sort of flooding as those unfortunate people in Cornwall did the other week, but the seas are rising, and our Suffolk coastline is retreating.

Anyone who says it's nothing to do with global warming could be right, but if they're not, and we could do something to put things right, we should. You can't gloat while you're afloat. The Government isn't doing enough to change things, which is understandable. The electorate is unwilling to change so it's a vote-loser, being environmentally friendly.

Will your grandchildren and great-grandchildren (if you have any) thank you for your complacency, or will they be too busy struggling in a world that's too dry in some places, too wet in others, while insurance premiums have gone sky-high?

We usually save up new resolutions for New Year, but, as all good hippies used to recite in the sixties, this is the first day in the rest of your life. Our small planet needs you. It needs all of us to be more ingenious, more considerate, to conserve energy, and to think in terms of sustainability. Don't blame the weather – blame our lifestyle, then let's change it. This is a non-party-political broadcast, asking you to consider the future, whether the weather be fine, or not.

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Sep 2004
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We had some fun at a Humanist meeting last night, thanks to you, Mark [Mark Murphy, BBC Radio Suffolk presenter]. Well, partly thanks to you, and partly thanks to Lesley [Lesley Dolphin, also from Radio Suffolk, and Mark's wife]. She asked me to be a Crabby Old Woman on her programme a couple of weeks ago – I think you'd told her I could be a bit grumpy sometimes.

We copied the idea at our meeting, when everyone was told they could have a rant for five minutes about something that really annoyed them. I took my red plastic tomato timer from the kitchen, but I needn't have bothered. As soon as someone started, everyone else joined in to say how much they were annoyed by the same thing. The subjects included junk mail, excess packaging, premium rate phone calls, queues when there's nowhere for elderly people to sit down, and litter. One of our members despaired at the way we have lots of graduates but not enough people with practical skills, due, he says, to the decline of vocational education. Another spoke about the prevalence of straw polls, on TV and in newspapers, which don't actually prove anything because they're not conducted scientifically. It sounds very grumpy indeed, but the thing that struck me was that we laughed a lot. It was like a group therapy session, being encouraged to let rip. Everyone enjoyed it.

I learned a couple of good ways to deal with unsolicited phone calls from sales people – apart from the telephone preference service, that is. Cliff lives in sheltered accommodation, so when someone tried to sell him some double glazing he told them he wasn't sure, as he was in a home for the feeble-minded. Another time, he said it was a pity they'd rung just then as it wasn't very convenient; there was a body on the kitchen floor and the police had just arrived – could they ring back later?

Apart from laughing a lot, there was a lot of agreement. Many of the issues were related to the environment. It seems we Humanists care passionately about waste, pollution, and taking responsibility for the planet and the other living creatures we share it with. It may not have seemed very constructive, just letting off steam like this, but I felt heartened just the same. Here was a group of people who weren't just complaining; they were also talking about the ways they could make a difference, from picking up litter to cutting down waste. It all helps, doesn't it?

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Oct 2004
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I hate it when I get included in things without my permission. For example; in a recent radio programme (not on Radio Suffolk), the presenter, who said he lived in the countryside, gave the impression that most of us who live in the country are angry about the hunting ban. "Not true!" I yelled at the radio. I take exception to being associated by default with those who demonstrated outside parliament a few weeks ago, since no one's ever bothered to ask my opinion, and I get the impression that the subject doesn't get much of an airing in my countryside neighbourhood anyway.

Then there was the case of poor Boris Johnson, sent to apologise to outraged Liverpudlians for daring to allow his leader writer to suggest that the mass mourning for the unfortunate Mr Bigley was nothing of the sort. The anonymous journalist had written what lots of us had been thinking, including lots of Liverpudlians; that we grieve for those we've known and loved, not for those we never knew, however much we may sympathise with their families and friends.

I do wish that the media would discourage the unhealthy trend of including everyone in everything, whether we like it or not. It's a sort of emotional blackmail, suggesting that if we don't wish to be included in whatever it is, there must be something wrong with us. Far from it. But it does mean that you have to be brave to say, "Actually, I'd rather you left me out of this."

I've always been inclined to resist being taken for granted. I can speak for myself. So can many other people who don't care to have someone else give their opinions or express their emotions – whose opinions and emotions are they, after all? Of course, there are a few who quite like having other people make up their minds for them; it's less bother that way; you don't have to think about it. And it's possible to get swept away on a tide of emotion when you're in a crowd being led by charismatic leaders. The mass media can have a similar effect, which is why they have a responsibility to be very, very careful about doing so.

Of course, if you think for yourself, you have only yourself to blame if you get things wrong, but I find that other people seldom take the blame for anything, especially if several thousand other people agree with them. In Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, Pickwick says, "It's always best on these occasions to do what the mob do." "But suppose there are two mobs?" suggested Mr Snodgrass. "Shout with the largest," replied Mr Pickwick.

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Sep 2004
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A Humanist point of view - Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource Forum of Faiths

You might say that I'm contributing my paper under false pretences. Firstly, although the Suffolk Humanist group, Suffolk Humanists, is affiliated to SIFRE, we wouldn't describe Humanism as a 'faith'. Faith is defined as 'a strong belief in something, especially without proof', or 'a specific system of religious beliefs'. It's also defined as having complete confidence or trust in something, but since Humanists are essentially sceptics, we're not inclined to have faith in anything that isn't proven. Humanism is an approach to life for people who live without religion and who care about right and wrong.

Secondly, we would not presume to 'teach' anyone anything, since we have no book of rules, and no secular equivalent of clergy, imams, rabbis and the like to convey Humanist teachings. There is no Humanist party line on justice, any more than there is on many other things. However, we do encourage people to think rationally about their rights and responsibilities, and to see themselves as accountable to for their actions.

Therefore, this paper is a personal reflection from a Humanist who's thought about justice and what it means. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review of Humanism and justice. Many Humanists would agree with me about some, if not all, of this; others might differ. One of the distinctive things about being a Humanist is thinking for oneself. Some might say that Humanism is a cop-out, since we're not required to follow any set of rules. This is nonsense. We seek the best in and for human beings, and the advancement of humanity by its own efforts, so we give much thought to doing the right thing in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, which, we would argue, is actually more difficult than following a set creed.

Justice is the administration of law according to prescribed and accepted principles. Aristotle said, 'All virtue is summed up in dealing justly.' The ancient principle of 'due process' is based on an individual's right to a fair and public trial, properly conducted, the right to be heard at his or her trial, and the right to an impartial hearing. It also means that laws must be framed so that any reasonable person might understand them.

We might also say that just laws should not reflect ignorance and prejudice, such as the law that criminalised homosexuality until

recently, and that they should be relevant to the way we live now, not decades or hundreds of years ago. There are many laws on the statute books that should have been repealed long ago. For example; a few years ago, a male body was discovered in a Woodbridge park. It had been dead so long that it was impossible to tell the cause of death, though it was probably natural. The person who'd dumped it was a close relative who must have kept it at home for a long time, for peculiar reasons. The only offence the police could find to charge him with, due to a lack of evidence, came from an ancient ecclesiastical statute – failing to give the body a Christian burial. A local journalist contacted me for comment, since I've conducted lots of non-religious funerals. Did this mean that all the people who'd arranged secular funerals for their relatives had been breaking the law? No one was going to bother prosecuting them, as this particular law was no longer considered relevant – except when it came in useful in the body in the park case.

Institutions of the law are essential in any civilised society, yet they enshrine injustice. One of the framers of the American Constitution, Thomas Jefferson, wrote, 'Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind,' yet in modern America, the neo-conservatives are impeding progress and even reversing it. Americans still claim their constitutional 'right to bear arms' and powerful evangelical Christians impose their views on abortion and sex education on everyone through legislation. In Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, Islamic sharia law is being used to impose a medieval version of 'justice'. This is a misuse of power.

Gene Roddenberry, the American who wrote the original Star Trek TV series, expressed some fundamental Humanist principles through his stories. Conflict resolution was achieved through negotiation, not force. Equality was a principle underlying the organisation of the star ship Enterprise – equality of gender, race and so on. Similar principles are enshrined in the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, which begins with the words 'Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world…' and goes on, in article 3, to state, 'Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.' We've a very long way to go before these ideals are achieved for everyone, everywhere. One obstacle is nationalism. As long as some countries – including America, the most powerful country in the world – resist the imposition of fundamental principles of justice by an international criminal court, they'll continue to get away with murder, and more.

The current governments in Great Britain and America are perhaps the most religious they've been for a long time, and religious politicians are abusing their positions to impose their beliefs on us. Religion should not play any part in either politics or the law, which should be entirely secular. It's illogical to enshrine belief, or faith, in a justice system. People have faith without evidence, yet evidence is fundamental to the law. People of faith should enjoy the same rights as everyone else, but there must be equality. There are, in any case, so many different faiths, and they all seem to contradict one another. The law must not permit special privileges for religious people. One does not need a faith or religious belief to be a good person, yet this is a common assumption, despite the evidence for all the cruelty and injustice perpetrated in the name of religion. Humanists want a level playing field, which means, for example, that religious ceremonial should not play any part in the rituals and traditions of the judiciary, the military or government at any level. Such practices are old-fashioned and discriminatory. It makes it much harder for an atheist to become Prime Minister, for example, and almost impossible for an atheist to become President of the United States.

Here are some of the ways that Humanists or secularists have influenced the law in this country.

The National Secular Society (of which I'm a member) was founded in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh, who was elected MP for Northampton in 1880. It was usual then for MPs to swear a religious oath on the Bible when entering Parliament. Bradlaugh asked to be allowed to substitute a secular affirmation but was refused, despite the support of the Prime Minister, William Gladstone. Because he wouldn't swear a religious oath he was not permitted to take his seat in the House of Commons, it was declared vacant, and a by-election was called. At one stage, he was arrested by the Sergeant at Arms for attempting to take his seat. However, after he was re-elected several times, he was finally allowed to take his seat in 1886. It would be interesting to know how many of the witnesses who swear the traditional oath on the Bible in court are actually religious, and how many realise that they can make a secular affirmation. Perjury (meaning lying on oath) is rightly a very serious offence, as it's crucial to establish the truth in court, yet it could be argued that very many witnesses perjure themselves before they begin, by swearing an oath that's meaningless to an atheist, agnostic, or non-theist (such as a Buddhist).

Humanists were actively involved in the campaign to reform abortion law through the Abortion Law Reform Association, resulting in the passing of the Abortion Act of 1967. Not all Humanists are happy about abortion, but most would prefer women to have abortions carried our safely in hospital, rather than risk dangerous back street abortions, which are still common elsewhere. Most Humanists are in favour of legalising voluntary euthanasia (as is a majority of the British public), and many support the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. The subject is currently under review by a House of Lords Select Committee.

Humanist organisations, including the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society, have contributed to parliamentary consultations over issues like free school transport (when children attending religious schools have been given preferential treatment) and the legal requirement for schools to have collective worship, which is unpopular, impractical and often flouted. The most recent legal statement of the requirements for collective worship (as distinct from assembly) is contained in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

Humanists across Europe have been campaigning to keep religion out of the new European Constitution. We think that faith organisations already have more than enough privileged access to government and that existing laws cover most of the issues they complain about.

In May 2002, Lord Avebury introduced a Religious Offences Bill, which aimed to abolish the common law against blasphemy and miscellaneous obsolete laws about religious offences. It also proposed a new law against incitement to religious hatred. We want the abolishment of the law of blasphemy, which some faiths would like extended, but have concerns about the proposed new offence of incitement to religious hatred. The issue is complicated and there's a lot of potential for misuse of a badly framed law. Some of us are concerned, for example, about the possibility of its use to punish causing 'offence', as some religionists are easily offended, and we're keen to maintain the principle of free speech, even when it's used to express opinions we loathe, such as extreme nationalism.

In an ideal world, courts of law should be places where experienced and impartial minds can consider the merits of each case and offer practical ways of dealing with them. However imperfect the system may be, it's preferable to the alternatives – arbitrary tyranny, corruption, gun law, chance, or trial by tabloid. If we haven't broken any just law, we have nothing to fear. The Greek philosopher Epicurus wrote, 'It is impossible for someone who secretly does something that mankind has agreed is harmful, to be confident that he will escape detection, even if he escapes it ten thousand times. Until he dies, he will always be uncertain of remaining undetected.' And if he's detected, let justice prevail.

**With thanks to the British Humanist Association (http://www.humanism.org.uk)
and the essays of Dr A C Grayling, distinguished supporter of the BHA
(The Meaning of Things, The Reason of Things).**

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Oct 2004
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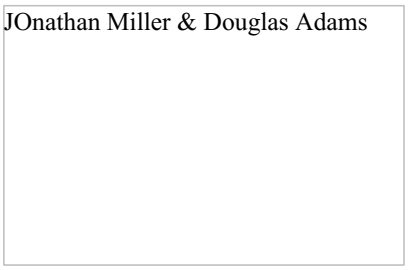
I swear, dear listener, that I don't earn a penny from the BBC for saying nice things about them. I don't even get paid for getting out of my lovely warm bed at some ungodly hour to come and talk to you. Well, it'd have to be ungodly, because I'm totally ungodly, or god-free. So it gives me great pleasure to tell you that next Monday the BBC begins what it describes as 'the first ever television history of disbelief' with Jonathan Miller on BBC4. I look forward to hearing Jonathan Miller, who I expect to be erudite and witty. It will be good to hear someone talking about atheism, including his own atheism, without a hint of apology. What is there to apologise for?

I find it very irritating when incredulous religious people can't or won't understand why I don't regard my lack of religious belief as a problem. It's not a matter of having missed something, or not having been given the right guidance, and if only I could see things their way I'd be much happier… I just don't believe in God, and I don't think you can make anyone believe something they're disinclined to believe, nor do I think anyone has a right to try to make me believe. What would they say, these people who'd like me to believe, if I tried to persuade them I'm right and they're wrong? Exactly. So I won't preach atheism to believers, if they leave me alone. In any case, the onus of proof lies with the proposition, not the opposition, and as I'm not very interested in the proposition, why should I bother explaining myself?

The thing is; there are good atheists and bad atheists, just as there are good religious people and bad religious people. Saying you're an atheist, in itself, doesn't tell anyone anything about your values. It does, however, usually suggest that you've given the matter some serious thought. The late Douglas Adams, author of The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy, when asked about his atheism, said, 'I really mean it, have thought about it a great deal, and that it's an opinion I hold seriously.' I'm with Douglas on this. So if you are too, please don't apologise for it. There are lots of atheists who tend to go all quiet when anyone starts pontificating about how religion is good for us. Maybe it is, for some people, but, for crying out loud, we don't get burnt at the stake any more, so be honest about yourself, and your disbelief. Most of us atheists have a strong sense of right or wrong, and try to live responsibly. Atheists, assert yourselves! You've nothing to apologise for.



Jonathan Miller (left) & Douglas Adams (right)

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Dec 2004
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My friend Yvonne says she asked herself, why go through the same routine as lots of other people over the festive season, and decided enough was enough. She remembered the magic of a child's Christmas when she was young, with a stocking and presents like new jumpers hand-knitted by kind aunties, but she couldn't see that it was good for families to 'beggar themselves', as she put it, to meet rising expectations these days. Is that what it's all about? Spending money you haven't got to buy things you don't need, and far more food and drink that any hungry person could consume in a month?

Forgive me if you've heard me say this before, but Christmas isn't compulsory. The word 'Christmas' is the name the Christians gave the midwinter festival when they decided to adopt it, in about the 4th century, but it's much older than that. However, the orgy of consumption that so many retailers seem to rely on is a very recent phenomenon, and I find an increasing number of people saying they hate the whole business. I do my best to ignore it.

Yvonne decided to reinvent Christmas. Having lots of grandchildren, she says she doesn't have the option of ignoring the whole thing and being a 'miserable old bat'. She's gone back to celebrating the midwinter festival on the day it should be celebrated – the midwinter solstice, or shortest day, on 21st December. So she plans treasure hunts (indoors and out of doors), fireworks (strictly no bangs), small gifts wrapped in silver and gold paper and hung on trees in the garden, a ritual made out of lighting open fires – the Yule log is a symbol

of regeneration – and all sorts of activities that the whole family can share after dark.

Me? I don't have grandchildren, so can look forward to my usual quiet time with good food and drink, and a good book or two. My sister and I have already discovered we've both been thinking about giving presents to someone who really needs one, such as a mosquito net to an African child to prevent malaria, rather than giving each other something we don't want or need.

Take no notice of anyone who calls you Scrooge if you try to ignore Christmas. If enough of us do it, it'll go away. If you do celebrate the midwinter festival, try doing it creatively, and if you can afford to spend lots of money, perhaps there are better ways of spending it?

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Dec 2004
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Ice cream

Are you hungry? I am a little – haven't had breakfast yet – but I'm not worried because I know I'll get something to eat within an hour. Why do I ask?

A few thousand years ago, before they changed the name of the midwinter festival, it was a time when rituals were performed to ensure the return of the sun. The death and rebirth of the sun mattered very much to people who feared that if the days didn't lengthen again, they wouldn't be able to grow the crops they relied on for their survival.

Now we have fridges, freezers and store cupboards stocked with tasty food, all the year round. Some of us grow some of our own food, but it's not a matter of survival these days – not here, anyway. It's ironic, in a way, that in these times of plenty, you see people in the supermarkets with overflowing trolleys, as though they're stocking up for a siege.

Yet not everyone is so fortunate. Since the World Food Summit in 1996, when governments promised to cut hunger, the number of people suffering from serious undernourishment has increased. The most shocking fact is that, though there is more than enough food in the world to feed us all, a child under five dies from a hunger-related disease every five seconds. Hunger kills far more people than war or terrorism.

We can't call the human race civilised as long as we allow such things to happen. Some will feel a little better about the situation, if they think about it at all, when they buy the new fund-raising CD, "Do they know it's Christmas?" I don't know about you, but I wonder why it's left to charities to try to feed the hungry.

You might ask, what's the point of telling you this? What can you do about it? It may not seem much, but writing at least one letter can help. Write to your MP; ask why not enough has been done to feed the 842 million people in the world who don't have enough to eat, and keep asking.

Forgive me if I've put a dampener on your day, or even your Christmas. There's no reason to feel guilty about enjoying yourself as you tuck into your turkey, or whatever you have for dinner in your house. Just give a little time, and maybe some money too, to try to make a difference. If enough of us try, we might succeed. It'd be a start, anyway.