

Suffolk Humanists Monthly Bulletin

November 2020

From the chair

It has been over 6 months since I last prepared a News Bulletin and of course the main reason has been the uncertainty due to Covid-19. I had started to draft one several times but anything I had written was so rapidly overtaken by events that I gave up.

Unlike many parts of the country (and the world) we in Suffolk have so far remained relatively free from infection and I hope that you have all managed to keep safe.

Obviously all our planned meetings have been cancelled and our programme of school visits/talks which had been building up nicely over the year has come to a sudden halt. There has been some speculation that it may be possible to restart school talks via Zoom but I have not yet heard of anyone actually doing it.

I know some humanist groups have had Zoom meetings and I did think of organising some for us but I was having so many with family and close friends that I was so completely 'Zoomed Out' that I couldn't face any more. That said it is incredible technology. Incidentally our own Mike Whybray was one of the leading lights in developing the technical standards for video telephony for many years. Who would have thought 30 years ago that we would not just have multi-person video conferencing available to almost everyone on the planet but that it would be almost free and on phone we carried round in our pocket? But great as it is, it is not the same as being in the room with people.

Our AGM

Our AGM should have been in August. This is normally a fairly informal affair followed by a social event. In August the signs were that the epidemic could well have subsided within a few

weeks so I held off thinking we might be able to return to some normality. Needless to say that proved grossly optimistic. I will now set up a Zoom based AGM in the near future.

Our finances are currently very healthy mainly because our costs of meetings and postage have dropped dramatically. At a recent meeting of the committee it was suggested that that we should put some of this to good use either by donating directly to a humanist cause such as the Ugandan Humanists Schools Trust, a Humanists UK campaign or to a local charity such as Suffolk Refugee Support.

Any such donation would need to be proposed at the AGM so if you have any suggestions or objections regarding this please let us know.

Woo

For many years I have followed the talks and performances of James "The Amazing" Randi who died a few weeks back. He is widely accepted as having been the greatest escapologist since Houdini and many say that he surpassed him. He was a superb conjuror as well as an all round entertainer. However it is as a 'debunker of woo' after he retired as a stage magician that made him even more famous. He publicly exposed various psychics – amongst them Uri Geller, the evangelist Peter Poppoff and the so-called medium Sylvia Browne as frauds and charlatans. These were often using standard conjuring tricks and other cheats to convince the vulnerable that they had magical powers to fool and extract money from them. On top of this he offered a prize of one million US dollars to eligible applicants who could demonstrate evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event under test conditions agreed to by both parties. Nobody was ever successful. Houdini had also made a similar challenge in his lifetime regularly debunking spiritualists.

You might think that by now few people would continue to be taken in by irrational propositions. However the trend seems to be in the opposite direction and belief in nonsense sadly seems to be on the increase. This is being significantly amplified not just by social media but by political 'leaders'. The spread by groups such as Qanon peddling a hotch-potch of conspiracy theories focussed against liberal and science based thinking is particularly alarming. Followers include anti-Vaxxers alongside a group that believes G5 mobile radio transmissions are the cause of Covid19 while at the same claiming Covid19 to be a hoax. Many (quasi) religious ideas are embedded within the messages so that the whole thing has all the trappings of a new faith group. To top it all they have elevated Donald Trump as their 'Saviour'. You couldn't make it up.

Not all bad!

At least there is one encouraging sign that should disappoint the anti-Vaxxers. A few weeks ago I rolled up for my annual 'flu jab . This was a mass-vaccination event at the Woodbridge Community Hall for the over 65s. I first went along at about 1.30 pm to see a queue of at least 150 snaking in a socially distanced fashion from the hall all the way to the station. I went for a walk and came back an hour later – still well over 100. An hour later I turned up again to find only about 30 but just as I joined the queue out came the organiser to tell us that they had run out after injecting 800 people in less than 3 hours. This was twice as many as the total in previous years. Fortunately they had a second session a couple of weeks later and I was able to get my dose then. News that Boots and Lloyds pharmacies had run out of stocks and demand this year has been unprecedented suggests that the views of the anti-Vaxxers are being comprehensively ignored by us oldies.

A Prayer Poser

My (limited) understanding of history has always led me to believe that in the past people turned towards prayer in times of plague.

So I have been rather struck by the fact that the religious organisations have been unusually quiet and I don't think I have seen a single suggestion that the current pandemic has been due to 'sin' or that more prayer was the solution.

I thought I'd do a quick on-line search to see what the various religious groups were recommending and there are certainly a lot of incantations available for download.

Unsurprisingly these focussed on prayers for the bereaved, the sick, the doctors, the nurses etc. and for all those suffering. Two groups however were conspicuously absent. The first was the scientists developing vaccines. I only found one that mentioned them but I suppose they are a competitor to prayer therapy and that is not unexpected. The second is those volunteers (now hundreds of thousands of them) who are taking part in blind trials to test not just the effectiveness but the safety of over 100 potential vaccines.

But that led me to thinking as to what a prayer for these volunteers would look like. Would it be to pray that none become infected - so preventing the effectiveness of a vaccine being revealed? Or should it be that lots of placebo cases become seriously infected and possibly die so that an effective vaccine is found quickly. Either way the results would be rendered invalid!

Future Events

No events are planned at the moment.

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