

.....  
Jun 2003  
=====

If Sue Lawley asked me to go on Desert Island Disks, my luxury item would have to be a regular supply of chocolate.

It would be more difficult to choose just one piece of music. My favourite varies from week to week. I've been listening to a new Hoagy Carmichael CD this week, so Stardust is my current favourite.

And which book would I choose? Again, that'd be difficult, but if I were shipwrecked in the next couple of weeks maybe I'd ask for Staying Alive, an anthology of poems edited by Neil Astley. In the introduction he quotes someone saying, 'Poetry is a place where all the fundamental questions are asked about the human condition.'

I'm looking forward to a visit to the National Portrait Gallery in London, to see the painting that won the BP Portrait Award, an amazing portrait of her grandmother by Charlotte Harris, showing a lifetime's experience in an old face.

It takes a discerning eye or ear to distinguish the best sights or sounds, but developing discernment is well worth it. Through the arts, one can feel most alive, most human. They can give an insight into the human condition, but only if you're prepared to make an effort to understand and appreciate them. I get irritated by the way the announcers on a rival radio station keep telling us to 'relax' while listening to classical music. Music can inspire us or challenge us, but it won't if we're too relaxed – it's a two-way thing, and we have to listen, not just hear.

There are many good things in life. The wonders of the natural world, a good meal in the company of friends, a lazy afternoon out of doors in the summer sun, are things that happen once and soon become a pleasant memory. By developing an appreciation of the arts, we can develop another dimension to life, which doesn't depend on the weather, wealth or poverty, company or solitude, privilege or deprivation. Art is created by human beings for human beings, about being human. Even if the subject matter is difficult, or there is no obvious subject – sounds or colours, or movement, say – we can learn and wonder. I think it's wonderful how many creative, clever people there are to enrich our lives.

.....  
Aug 2003  
=====

In a way, doing Thought for the Day might be considered good training for a political candidate, as most politicians these days have to present their ideas in as few words as possible. We live in a sound-bite age.

There aren't many people who can hold an audience in thrall with a speech lasting two or three hours, rather than the two minutes I'm being allowed this morning. I've only heard a couple. As an art student, I attended a lecture by the great American architect [Buckminster Fuller](#), who invented the geodesic dome – you can see them at the Eden Project in Cornwall. He spoke for three hours without notes in a small lecture theatre, in a heat wave, but it was fascinating stuff and none of us wanted him to finish, despite melting.

On 21st July it was the anniversary of the death of another great American, the 19th century orator and political speechmaker [Robert G Ingersoll](#), who could draw audiences in their thousands. Ingersoll was famous for his distinguished service as a Colonel in the Civil War, as a defence attorney in controversial cases, and for making speeches on controversial subjects, such as the emancipation of women and African-Americans.

One of the reasons that Humanists like me admire Robert Ingersoll is his opposition to the Religious Right of his day. He popularised the theories of Charles Darwin on evolution, and was a tireless advocate of science and reason. In 1886, Ingersoll defended Charles B Reynolds free of charge. Reynolds was a prominent freethinker who'd been arrested in New Jersey under an archaic blasphemy law. He was convicted, and Ingersoll paid the \$50 fine himself. He'd done such a good job of mocking the idea of a blasphemy law in a free society that few have attempted to bring similar charges again.

Ingersoll's collected works have been published in 12 volumes but there are many short sound-bites to remember him by, such as:

“Reason, Observation and Experience – the Holy Trinity of Science – have taught us that happiness is the only good; that the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so.”

.....  
Sep 2003  
=====

Rain

It's nothing personal you understand, as I'm sure they're all very nice people, but I'm getting a tad irritated with weather forecasters. Whenever they mention that there'll be more fine dry weather they tell us it'll be lovely, and every time they hint at the prospect of a spot of rain they sound positively apologetic.

The earth in my garden is rock hard, the grass has turned brown, my water butt is empty again, and in any case I really don't have the time or energy to lug cans of water around to my poor parched plants. It's not just the garden that's wilting; I'd really like to feel wet, and breath air that's been refreshingly ionised and washed of all the dust and pollen.

Why is it that rain seems to be regarded as a bad thing these days? What's wrong with getting wet? It's natural, in what used to be our temperate climate, to experience changeable weather, not weeks and weeks of clear skies.

I don't want to start a town versus country argument, but I wonder if all this anti-rain sentiment is due to the ability of urban man and woman to control so much of his or her environment? Is it because so many people seem to want to keep nature at arms length? Yet we're part of nature, made of about two thirds water, and like all growing living things we need rain.

Frogs love rain. I'll never forget the rainy night I drove through Needham Market after a drought. When I got to the bridge over the river on the road to Creting St Mary, there were frogs everywhere, hopping about like fools. They were visibly plumping up after being dry for weeks. It took ages to drive through without squashing any. When it rains I'll be out in my garden, soaking up the rain like those frogs.

So let's hear a cheer for wetness; for thunder storms and rainbows and puddles; for the sound of running water and the shine on leaves; for greenness; for snails and slugs and frogs; for rivers rising and ponds filling; for ducks dabbling and swans swimming.

If you don't like it, stay indoors.

.....  
 Mar 2003



[caption id="attachment\_3092" align="alignright" width="232"] Michel de Montaigne[/caption] I'm fond of quoting the French humanist Michel de Montaigne. He died on the 13th September 1592, but his observations are as relevant today as when they were written. At forty-two Montaigne had a medal struck with the words, *Que sçais-je?*, meaning 'What do I know?'. He's best remembered today for his essays, where he examined what he did or didn't know, accepting that we can't know everything, while questioning everything. The essays were, in effect, his autobiography, but they didn't give an account of his life in chronological order – I was born, I did this or that, etc. Instead, we get to know him through his thoughts, which are much more revealing than a conventional autobiography. His portrait on the cover of my ageing copy of his essays, published in the late '50s, shows a bald man with a clear gaze, who looks as though he's thinking about what to write about the experience of being painted. His translator, J M Cohen, describes him as modest, truthful, humorous, and objective. I've learned that he was fond of cats. He wrote, 'When I play with my cat, who knows whether she is amusing herself with me, or I with her?' I'm most likely to quote Montaigne on death. He thought that one ought to accept that one day we'll die, and that we must make the most of life while we can. He was honest about mortality. 'We must use plain words,' he wrote, 'and display such goodness or purity as we have at the bottom of the pot.' He pointed out that we'll be remembered according to how we've lived: 'Wherever your life ends, there it is complete. The value of life lies not in its length, but in the use we make of it. This or that man may have lived many years, yet lived little. Pay good heed to that in your own life. Whether you have lived long enough depends upon yourself, not on the number of your years...' That was very sensible advice. But Montaigne gave just as much attention in his essays to diverse subjects such as cannibals, or the custom of wearing clothes, or smells. He quoted the Roman playwright Plautus, who wrote; 'A woman smells most perfectly when she does not smell at all.' The same might be said of men, methinks. If Montaigne were alive today I think he'd be an entertaining contributor to the 'Thought for the Day' slot, and I'd love to ask him to dinner.

## A talk given at Ipswich Crematorium's Open Day by Margaret Nelson in 2003

My mother died suddenly at a party at my sister's on Christmas Eve, just after she'd demonstrated how to do the can-can to some children. I don't what they thought about a woman in her mid-70s doing high kicks, but she was very proud of being able to kick her own height. I told her it was time to go because I still had things to do for dinner the next day. She fell with an almighty crash as she lifted her arm to take her coat off the hook by the door. She was dead within the next ten minutes or so, having had a massive cerebral haemorrhage. It was a great way to go, especially after we'd nursed my dad through cancer that same year – he'd died six months earlier – and she'd said she didn't want to die like that, but wanted to go like her mum, quickly, without fuss. A little while later I found a poem in an anthology called 'The Long Pale Corridor', published by Bloodaxe Books, and although the circumstances were different, the dramatic exit it described reminded me of mum. I told a client about it a while ago – her mum had made a similarly dramatic exit in a dentist's waiting room, and since she'd been an attention-seeker all her life, my client thought she could almost have planned it. Anyway, this is 'The Going' by Bruce Dawe, which he wrote for his mother-in-law, Gladys.

Mum, you would have loved the way you went! One moment, at a barbecue in the garden – the next, falling out of your chair, hamburger in one hand, and a grandson yelling. Zipp! The heart's roller blind rattling up, and you, in an old dress, quite still, flown already from your dearly-loved Lyndon, leaving only a bruise like a blue kiss on the side of your face, the seed-beds incredibly tidy, grass daunted by drought. You'd have loved it, Mum, you big spender! The relatives, eyes narrowed with grief, swelling the rooms with their clumsiness, the reverberations of tears, the endless cuppas and groups revolving blinded as moths. The joy of your going! The laughing reminiscences snagged on the pruned roses in the bright blowing day!

I like the bit about 'laughing reminiscences'. We often have laughter at Humanist funerals, as people are told stories about the person who's died. That's as it should be; laughter and tears are close at times like these. We use poetry in our funerals because it often expresses human experiences so well, in ways that people will recognise and identify with. Sometimes people might say they're not 'poetry people', until we point out a poem that they like, to their surprise. Poetry isn't boring, not if it's good. For non-religious funerals, it's far better than bible readings that have little relevance to the situation. However the Bible isn't all religion. There are some parts, like the wonderfully erotic Song of Solomon, which don't seem to belong. Though some Christians might disagree, the Bible isn't a book, it's an anthology, and the parts don't all seem to fit the whole. Ecclesiastes is another book in the Bible which has relevance to the religious and non-religious. These lines may be familiar; they've been adapted from Ecclesiastes III, 1-8. They express a fatalistic, realistic view of life and death, which has been adopted by many writers and poets throughout history.

For everything there is a season, And for every activity under heaven its time: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot; a time to pull down and a time to build; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time for mourning and a time for dancing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear and a time to mend; a time for silence and a time for speech; a time to embrace and a time to refrain; a time to hurt and a time to heal; a time to love and a time for peace.

Personally, I like those poets who adopt a matter of fact approach to death. We all die, and accepting this fact might help us to make the most of life while we can. The great Latin poet Horace was born in the year 65 BC and died 57 years later. His maxim – *Carpe Diem*, or 'seize the day' – was brought to the attention of many through Robin Williams' film, 'Dead Poets Society'. This a translation of what Horace wrote:

... Life's short. Even while We talk Time, hateful, runs a mile. Don't trust tomorrow's bough For fruit. Pluck this, here, now.

The 16th century French philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne, who loved his cats and lived well, had a similar attitude. He wrote,

Wherever your life ends, there it is complete. The value of life lies not in its length, but in the use we make of it. This or that man may have lived many years, yet lived little. Pay good heed to that in your own life. Whether you have lived long enough depends upon yourself, not on the number of your years...

The English poet and composer Ivor Gurney died in 1937 in a mental hospital. I don't know when he wrote this, but he must have been reasonably sane at the time.

The songs I had are withered Or vanished clean, Yet there are bright tracks Where I have been, And there grow flowers For others' delight. Think well, O singer, Soon comes night.

So there's a warning – soon comes night – that we're all mortal. I know that some people don't like this. They imagine that there's some other life, an 'afterlife', so that we're not really mortal at all. Of course, this idea may comfort some, but it doesn't comfort me. I once had a discussion on Radio Suffolk about this with an evangelical Christian who told me that he believed God had responsibilities for him after he died. I think I said that we'd have had enough of responsibility when we're dead. There are many people who've had far too many responsibilities in life, so how unfair it would be to find there were more waiting for them. If anyone asks me if I think there's a life after death, I say 'I hope not'. I can't imagine anything worse than being condemned to spend eternity in some place where I probably won't be able to choose my companions. My mother believed she'd be reunited with her mother when she died, but I never asked her who else she thought might be there? She wasn't especially keen on her father, for example. The Hispanic-American philosopher George Santayana speculated about such things in 'The Life of Reason', where he wrote:

It would be truly agreeable for any man to sit in well-watered gardens with Mohammed, clad in green silks, drinking delicious sherbets, and transfixed by the gazelle-like glance of some young girl, all innocence and fire. Amid such scenes a man might remain himself and might fulfil hopes that he had actually cherished on earth. He might also find his friends again, which in somewhat generous minds is perhaps the thought that chiefly sustains interest in a posthumous existence. But to recognise his friends a man must find them in their bodies, with their familiar habits, voices, and interests; for it is surely an insult to affection to say that he could find them in an eternal formula expressing their idiosyncrasy. When, however, it is clearly seen that another life, to supplement this one, must closely resemble it, does not the magic of immortality altogether vanish? Is such a reduplication of earthly society at all credible? And the prospect of awakening again among houses and trees, among children and dotards, among wars and rumours of wars, still fettered to one personality and one accidental past, still uncertain of the future, is not this prospect wearisome and deeply repulsive? Having passed through these things once and bequeathed them to posterity, is it not time for each soul to rest?

Even if you don't agree with me about such things, you might agree with me that, whatever we believe happens when we die, we should make the most of life. This is a fundamental principle of Humanism, as we don't think we can assume that we'll get another chance to finish any unfinished business if we don't do it now. Not that I imagine I'll ever be any better organised than I am now. As John Lennon said, 'Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans.' Still, I'd like to be remembered as someone who did her best at whatever she'd been doing. Some people have done more than that. They've given much more than anyone had a right to expect of them, and sometimes I have to conduct funerals for people who've witnessed the most unimaginable horrors in wartime. Mostly they haven't talked about it – men who were born at the beginning of the last century were taught that boys don't cry, nor wear their emotions on their sleeves. There are poems I've read at such funerals that might help younger members of their family to understand what happened to them. This is from an anthology of 2nd World War poetry called 'The Voice of War'. Many of the poets were killed in action, such as Sgt. Pilot E. Linmar, who wrote this poem on the 12th August 1940, the day before he was posted missing in action.

If I never live again, This day will always be, A rapture of my soul, A treasured memory. If I go down ere night, At least this day I knew, With all its combat wild, In skies of azure hue. Old Time, with cruel scythe, Sends all memories to decay: Yet, neither Death, nor Time, Can ever steal this day. If I never live again...

When you hear stories like that, it humbles you. I try to be kind and patient with people who complain a lot about very little. I tried never to ask someone I used to know how he was, because if I did, he'd tell me a tale of woe about all his ailments for at least half an hour. Secretly, I called him Marvin, which wasn't his real name, because he reminded me of the paranoid android in Douglas Adams' brilliant radio series, 'The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy'. It's OK to moan and groan a little, but not to make it a habit. The danger there is, of course, that if you get really ill, no one will believe you. Not long ago, I conducted a funeral for a woman who'd been such a hypochondriac that when she was dying, no one noticed until it was too late. In Letters from a Father to his Son, John Aiken wrote about differing attitudes to life:

It may, I think, in general be observed, that the greatest lovers of life are persons of sanguine temperament, engaged in active pursuits, full of projects for futurity, readily attaching themselves to new objects and new acquaintances, and able to convert every occurrence of life into a matter of importance. On the other hand 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.

I had to go into hospital the other day and when they were filling in the forms I was asked what I did. I said I was a Humanist Celebrant, and they said, 'What's that?' It's a common reaction. Religious ministers do funerals, but they're expected to – it's part of their job. When we do it, sometimes people think it's a little odd to choose to do something like this. One of my friends used to peer intently at me as she asked, 'But are you all right?' She was convinced that I could crack up any minute, because of the nature of my work. Well, of course I'm all right, or I wouldn't do what I do. It's fascinating, and I feel privileged to meet so many people from all walks of life and hear so many life stories. When the writer Somerset Maugham was dying, he told his nephew, 'Dying is a very dull, dreary affair,' then he smiled and said, 'and my advice to you is to have nothing whatever to do with it.' It's interesting how attitudes to death have changed. An increasing number of people are choosing to die in their own homes and avoid going into hospital, but not long ago many people would have as little to do with the whole business as possible. In the 18th and 19th centuries things were very different. The mortality rates were higher. Most women had large families and many babies died. People were laid out at home. The headstones in parish churchyards were often inscribed with descriptive or witty epitaphs, very different from the ones we see today, which are often heartfelt but unimaginative. For example, the grave of Lydia Eason at St Michael's in Stoke bears the inscription:

All those who come my grave to see, avoid damp beds and think of me.

Another, in Staffordshire, has a sad but confusing rhyme:

Here lies father and mother and sister and I, We all died within the space of one short year; They all be buried at Whimble, except I, And I be buried here.

I like the epitaph for a working man in St Britius' churchyard at Brize Norton:

My sledge and hammer lies declin'd My bellows too have lost their wind: My fire's extinct my coals decay'd And in the dust my vice is laid; My days are spent my glass is run, My nails are drove my work is done

There are lots of sad stories, and sad poems to suit the occasion, but funerals needn't be all gloom and doom. They were during Victoria's reign, but she made a career out of mourning and everyone joined in. She wore black, but few people wear black for funerals these days. Only a few weeks ago I did a funeral where many of the mourners wore brightly coloured Hawaiian shirts in honour of the deceased, who'd been a keen camper. So I shall end on a lighter note, with a popular poem by Joyce Grenfell:

If I should go before the rest of you Break not a flower nor inscribe a stone, Nor when I'm gone speak in a Sunday voice But be the usual selves that I have known. Weep if you must, Parting is hell, But life goes on, So sing as well.

Thank you.

.....  
Oct 2003  
=====

When I was a child my parents were members of a Caledonian Society, a social club for Scots people. They had children's parties several times a year and one of them was for Halloween. At that time I didn't have any idea how it originated, I just knew that it was fun to bob for apples in an old tin bath, carve a pumpkin lantern, and dress up in a scary costume while the grown-ups pretended to be frightened of me. There was no trick or treat – that was a later American import.

Anyway, now that I do understand what it's all about, how does a Humanist respond to Halloween?

Its origins go a long way back, from the Celtic festival of Samhain (sow-en), the beginning of winter, when the barriers between the living and the dead were lowered, when chaos ruled for several days. The Christians took it over and called it Halloween, the eve of All Saints or All Souls Day.

I understand why children enjoy the spooky, scary stuff. Being scared, but not too scared, is exciting for a child. My mother had a wicked sense of humour. If I was engrossed in a scary story on the radio, for example, she'd rinse her hands under a cold tap so they were icy and creep up behind to grab my by the neck, making blood-curdling noises so I'd jump. The Humanist philosopher A C Grayling calls this sort of thing 'recreational fear' – the sort we experience during a horror film, or a ride on a ghost train. The original Halloween festival was about real fear; fear of death, fear of the unknown, fear of the dark and cold during a harsh winter. The stories that religious people used to be told about what would happen to them when they died were enough to frighten any impressionable person. Ignorance and fear sap confidence and make people timid. We ought to know better now. As Franklin D Roosevelt said, 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.'

Halloween today has very little to do with any of the superstitious nonsense that our ignorant ancestors might have believed, so let the children enjoy the ghost stories and the spooky costumes and the creeping about in the dark, just as long as they don't over-do the tricking. It's a pity that most children don't seem to make their own costumes for trick or treating, but buy them ready-made. Maybe I shouldn't criticise, because I've no intention of making any toffee apples or biscuits, but will buy sweeties to offer any scary creatures that turn up on my doorstep tomorrow night.

.....  
Dec 2003  
=====

Next Sunday, the 7th December, I'll be contributing to the annual Celebration of Human Rights at the Unitarian Meeting House in Ipswich at 10.45. This year's theme is Women's Rights, but there is precious little to celebrate. Maybe that seems pessimistic of me, but I can't help feeling that because the majority of women and girls in this country enjoy more freedom and independence than their great-grandmothers enjoyed, we've become complacent. For the majority of women in developing countries, as well as a huge number who live in the so-called 'developed' countries, women's rights are still a dream. I get quite irritated by women who preface a remark about some relatively minor inequality with 'I'm not a feminist, but...' Feminism means equal rights for women, and who would argue with that?

I've been a feminist ever since I knew the meaning of the word and will die a feminist because we won't have achieved universal women's right by then, however hard we try. There is just far too much to do. I'm not talking about men opening doors for women, or bra-burning, nor am I anti-men – I love the men in my life, including my son.

I'm talking about the catalogue of abuses and unspeakable acts of cruelty perpetrated by men against women worldwide, which is too harrowing to relate now while you're possibly eating your breakfast, but they are relentless, systematic, and widely tolerated, if not explicitly condoned. The news on TV is dominated by out of control men and boys – male terrorists, marauding gangs of young men creating mayhem – and male bullies, many of them politicians, while not enough is said about the victims of male violence, rape, sex trafficking and all the other crimes against womankind that are commonplace.

Next Sunday I'll be reading from 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' by Mary Wollstonecraft, who died in 1797 aged only 38. She wrote of women, 'Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so, for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to resorting on their oppressors, the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect which he keeps under his feet.'

Rights for women – if only more women enjoyed them.

Mary Wollstonecraft

.....  
Dec 2003

=====

When I was in my teens I lived on Merseyside and worked in a bank, and when I didn't have to work on a Saturday morning I used to go hiking around North Wales with my best friend for the weekend. Catching the ferry across the Mersey at tea-time on Fridays meant wading through a crowd of commuters all going to Birkenhead and beyond. Many of them spent the short time on the ferry walking around the deck in the same direction – clockwise. My friend and I delighted in walking in the opposite direction, just to annoy everyone. We had large rucksacks, so were guaranteed to be a nuisance to the conformist commuters.

This train of thought was prompted by a recent visit to Ipswich during the Christmas shopping frenzy; sheer hell, as far as I'm concerned. I beat a hasty retreat and did the rest of my shopping locally. There's something about being in close proximity to lots of other bodies and having no personal space that prompts me to try to assert my individuality in some way. I wouldn't be happy in China; in collectivist societies like that, harmony is considered more important than individualism, so I'd be an embarrassment to my family – who might say I already am.

Humanists are, on the whole, staunchly individualistic. We tend not to follow any crowd, but if we find ourselves in one, we're likely to ask why? Why are we here? What are we doing? What for?

Take Christmas, for example. Last year I was too busy to post any cards, so hardly anyone I knew got one. I don't know what possessed me this year; guilt, I think. I was absurdly pleased with myself for ordering charity cards over the internet, then sending them by the last day for 2nd-class post. All that effort, to find that at least half the people I'd sent them to had already crossed me off their list, probably thinking, 'Thank goodness – that's another I don't have to worry about,' when they didn't get a card last year.

So I've made a resolution. Christmas isn't compulsory, especially for a heathen like me, so no more Christmas cards – ever. The charities I'd otherwise buy cards from will get a donation instead.

Oh, by the way - Thank you to George and Vicky in Little Bealings, who send me a midsummer card every year. One year it had a picture of Rudolph on his holiday.

Have a happy, non-conformist, healthy and peaceful New Year.