



THINKING ALOUD

Humanist Thoughts for the
Day on BBC Radio Suffolk
by Margaret Nelson

A collection from 1995 to 2003

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Thanks to Marie, for the breakfasts

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Published by Margaret Nelson
5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk, IP7 6ND
margaret@suffolkhands.org.uk

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HUMANIST THOUGHTS

I started doing *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio Suffolk in mid-1995. I was told there were a few rules: 'KISS,' or 'Keep it short, stupid,' (no more than two minutes); avoid using the phrase 'as a humanist'; no preaching; no proselytising. The idea is express a humanist point of view, not to give a lecture on humanism. If I broke the rules or was boring, I wouldn't be asked back, they said.

A variety of speakers do *Thought for the Day* in Suffolk, not all religious. Some, like me, are members of SIFRE (the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource), a local educational charity. Suffolk Humanists, our local group, is affiliated to SIFRE, and member John Aldam and I are SIFRE tutors, giving occasional lectures on humanism to the public and members of organisations like the WEA (Workers' Educational Association). It was through SIFRE that John was invited to talk about humanism on a Sunday evening programme and to do some *Thought for the Day* slots, then I became involved.

Over the last few years, I've become a regular contributor. I'm introduced as a humanist, so there's no need to introduce myself. Often I don't have a clue what I'm going to say when I sit down at the computer the night before. *Thought for the Day* is at about 7.40am, which means I have to rise at about 6am and drive 8 miles into Ipswich from my home in a village. I'm not a natural early riser, so it takes effort, especially in the winter.

People sometimes stop me in the street, phone or write to tell me what they thought about my 'thought', so I know *someone* is listening.

So how do I approach *Thought for the Day*? In a way, I regard myself as a secular subversive, not attacking religion directly but demonstrating that it's irrelevant to most ethical issues. I aim to provoke a response, to encourage people to think, to offer a humanist way of looking at things that listeners might identify with. It seems to me that many people are deeply concerned about ethical issues but are used to political and religious leaders deciding things for them. I try to encourage people to consider issues and make up their own minds. Or I might just entertain them for a couple of minutes. Either way, a few more people have heard of humanism in Suffolk and N E Essex.

MURDERED CHILDREN

2nd August 1995, during a heat wave and a few days after three children were murdered.

It's asking a lot to come up with a *Thought for the Day* today.

Daydreaming is easy – just an idle wander round the fluff-filled corners of the mind. Thinking takes discipline. A leading Humanist, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, said, 'Many people would sooner die than think. In fact they do.' It's hard to think in hot weather like this. Maybe that's why the Scandinavians have an intellectual reputation while those who live near the equator are expected to be fiery and emotional?

Thinking is one of the few things that distinguishes the human species from all the others, yet many seem to regard it as too much trouble. The tabloid press is full of unthinking reaction with headlines that label people 'cheats,' 'liars,' 'evil sickos,' and all sorts of other names. If you say, 'Hang on a minute, can that really be true?' to some of the emotive statements that are casually flung about, people look at you sideways.

I feel very sorry for those bereaved by last weekend's child murders. It's natural to feel revulsion at the killing of a child. At such emotional times people react more than they think and anxious parents imagine bogeymen round every corner. Before anyone knows anything about the killers, they're dismissed as 'evil.' Yet the people who commit such crimes are often as sad as they're mad or bad. Most child abusers have themselves been abused. Most wife killers have experienced domestic violence as children. Meanwhile, parents are snatching their children off the streets in fear, though the children are far more likely to be killed in a traffic accident than by a stranger who planned their murder. In Britain, we have fewer child murders by strangers than anywhere else in the world. Children are more at risk of being murdered by people they know and trust. Stepchildren are more at risk than others. We can't assume that children are safe at home, with their family. Many families need a lot more support than they seem to get now. We could do with less ill-informed reaction and more thought about parenting. We're all responsible for all our children. Think about it.

TRADITION

18th September 1995

Louise Woolcock is Rugby School's first head girl in its 428-year history. There've been protests from traditionalists who regard her appointment as the end of civilisation as they know it. It might just be the beginning of civilisation at Rugby – girls are thought to bring a positive influence to bear on boys of the same age, though possibly don't benefit from the arrangement themselves.

Louise of Rugby has been subjected to a poster campaign. The slogans read, 'We're not sexists, we're traditionalists!' Why is tradition often regarded as positive and valuable? The dictionary defines it as 'opinion or

belief or custom handed down ... from ancestors to posterity.' Does that make it a good thing? Not necessarily. In different cultures at different times, ritual mutilation, sex discrimination, racism and cruelty to animals have been practised in the name of 'tradition'. There have been attempts to extend the law of blasphemy (an anachronism, if ever there was one, at the tail end of the 20th century) by the defenders of 'traditional' teachings who are offended by any criticism of their faith, however reasonable. The Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin committed the ultimate crime, according to some Muslims. She wrote a book that called into question their traditional values. She is now the subject of a fatwa, or death sentence, and lives in exile in Sweden.

Every time I hear someone promoting 'traditional values' on TV or radio, I want to throw something. Few of the examples, such as 'Victorian family values', bear close scrutiny. The illusion of Victorian middle class respectability, for example, was partly maintained by a huge number of prostitutes.

Tradition is often used as an excuse to resist change. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, 'Everything flows and nothing stays.' Humanists believe that if we're to survive — the human race, life on earth, and everything — we must be ready to weigh up the pros and cons of any course of action, and decide what's the right thing to do, traditional or not. Most traditions die out eventually. We ought not to die out with them.

FEELING MELLOW

9th October 1995 (a Monday)

Yesterday I sat and wondered what to offer you today, finding it difficult to concentrate. The sun was casting long shadows over the garden. The cats had spent several hours stretched out on the shed roof watching the world go by through half-open eyes. The sparrows were having a loud argument about roosting space in the hedge. The Virginia Creeper had turned red when I wasn't paying attention. Nothing much had happened all day except that those bits of me which had become tired and tense were gradually unravelling themselves. Bliss.

Periods of rest and recuperation are essential for everyone. Many people regard leisure, like the rest of their lives, as something to seek at full tilt, no expense spared; it doesn't count unless you've driven miles to do it, spent money and worn yourself out in the process. Recently a busy career woman complained to me that she couldn't cope with juggling her commitments any more. She was trying to keep several balls in the air at the same time. I suggested she drop one or two and found some time for relaxation. 'Good idea,' she said. Later she announced she'd find someone to give her some therapeutic massage, which meant finding a masseur, driving to wherever he or she was, and forking out more of the money she'd worked so hard to earn. Her idea of relaxation sounded stressful to me.

Relaxation is about letting go: letting go of the feeling that you're indispensable; letting go of guilt about failing to meet other people's expectations; letting go of all your anxieties; letting go of the feeling that you ought to be doing something, without knowing quite what; allowing yourself to just *be*.

William Henry Davies wrote: 'What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.' What indeed.

CONVENTION

11th December 1995

I'm not normal, but I don't want to be normal, or, as it says in the dictionary, 'conform to the standard, regular, typical, usual.' I was never very good at conforming, as my school reports prove. Most of my teachers were eccentric, so they had no business criticising me. There was Miss D, who sat at her desk and heaved her vast bosom onto the blotter as though dropping her shopping onto the kitchen table; Miss S, who wobbled round the town on a large black bicycle like the wicked witch from *The Wizard of Oz*; Miss J, the headmistress (known as 'Old Concrete Face'), who gave out detentions for going hatless in the street. None of them would survive five minutes in one of today's comprehensives.

Over the years I've known many eccentrics: the Oxford don who wore a starched shirt front which never lay flat, but rolled up like a window blind under his chin; the gay friend who used any excuse to wear his special purple frock with the feather boa (we danced round the town square on New Year's Eve when I was hugely pregnant, and I don't know who looked the most gorgeous); the friend who bred Salukis (dogs as slim and graceful as she was fat and awkward), and wore button-through cotton print dresses with white plimsolls or wellies (according to the season), and always ate sausages for tea.

All these people were non-conformists but at ease with themselves. It's easier to live as a non-conformist in cities like London or Oxford, where there are so many eccentrics that no one bothers. In small provincial towns, and in many schools, fingers may be pointed, unkind remarks made, people might laugh. Children are notoriously conformist – slaves to fashion in clothes, footwear and leisure interests. Odd children are frequently bullied.

Why should it matter if other people are different from you, if they're doing no harm? It's just one step from bullying a child because she's studious and retiring, to beating up a man who chooses to express himself through effeminate clothing. This is the tyranny of conformity, where no one can escape the peer group, the gang, the association of right-minded citizens. It's not just a matter of looking normal; too many nasty, small-minded people demand that we must all think the same way, have the same bigoted opinions, persecute the same victims, or be suspect.

Dare to be different. Dare to allow other people to be different.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

17th January 1996

The Brains' Trust on TV the other night was asked to ponder whether an atheist could know the meaning of life – or maybe they were asked if an atheist could understand the meaning of life. I wasn't paying too much attention at first. Either way, the answer's all a matter of interpretation. The way the question was put implied that theists – or religious believers – already know the meaning of life. Do they? It all depends what you *mean* by the meaning of life. If you define meaning as purpose, as in 'What's the purpose of your life?', you might get an answer like, 'To make the world a better place', which is the sort of thing that beauty queens used to say. The poet Keats wrote of a fieldmouse, 'The creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it.' The fieldmouse's purpose is staying alive to pass its genes on to the next generation, to go on living. One of *The Brains' Trust* brains was Professor Richard Dawkins, who said he'd be inclined to answer the question as a scientist, offering evidence for life, or the absence of life.

I suspect that the viewer who asked the original question was more interested in a philosophical answer. The thing about answers is that, if you're a thinking person, they stimulate more questions. It's not that easy, or necessarily a good thing, to have absolute answers to everything. Paul Valéry, in an essay on aesthetics, wrote: 'Leaf through a dictionary or try to make one, and you will find that every word covers and masks a well so bottomless that the questions you toss into it arouse no more than an echo.' 'What is the meaning of life?' is a big question with many answers, possibly no absolute answer at all. Does it matter? I think not. I think that *how* we live our life matters more than what life means, if anything. Not that we shouldn't go on asking. One of my favourite answers is in Douglas Adams' *The Hitch-hikers' Guide to the Galaxy*. The mega-computer, Deep Thought, was asked to find the answer to 'Life, the Universe and Everything', and after 7½ million years it came up with an answer. 'You're not really going to like it,' said Deep Thought, 'the Answer to the Great Question ... of Life, the Universe and Everything ... is 42.' So now you know.

BABY-NAMING

26th February 1996

On Saturday, I was privileged to conduct a Humanist Naming Ceremony for a delightful baby girl. It's a way of celebrating the birth of a child, of welcoming them into the family and the wider community, without religion. Too young to know what was being said about her and her family's hopes for her future, she gurgled, chuckled and blew bubbles.

Throughout history, humankind has always marked the most important events in life with rite of passage ceremonies, with music, dancing, singing and feasting. The religious have no special claim to them. On

Saturday, the baby was the first-born of a young couple for whom parenthood is an exciting, novel and rather daunting experience. We'd prepared a ceremony that included contributions from them and their closest friends.

'Parentage is a very important profession,' said George Bernard Shaw, 'but no test of fitness is ever imposed in the interest of the children.' I don't know what sort of test he might have had in mind. In parenting, as in everything, there are extremes. There are those who behave as though a child is a possession or a product, to be moulded into a pre-defined form. There are those whose approach is to allow their confused offspring total freedom, with disastrous consequences. Some Bradford Muslims are insisting that their children should boycott school RE lessons for fear that they will become 'confused' about religion. They appear to come from the former school of thought. A spokesman is reported as saying, 'These children are very young and we are still having difficulty in forming their beliefs.' By what right does an adult form a child's beliefs? Children should be taught to *think*, not to believe, and to cherish independence of mind.

A Humanist approach to parenting is a balanced approach, being consistent, not swinging between extremes of total indulgence or total repression. I can't claim to have been 100% successful, but then, no parent can. We can only do our best. The Golden Rule is 'Don't do to others what you wouldn't like done to you,' which can be applied to parenting as to all other relationships.

No one can predict what challenges Baby Jessica will have to face as she grows up but her parents have declared their intention of helping her to face them with confidence, flexibility, laughter, and lots of love. She has many advantages, but perhaps her parents' attitude is the most important one.

NATURAL OR SUPERNATURAL

11th March 1996

Though I enjoy The X Files or a good ghost story, I'm at a loss to understand why so many people feel a need to explain the unknown in supernatural terms, when the natural world is full of wonders, of mysteries, of amazing phenomena. There are some things we don't know, there are some things we'll never know, but it doesn't mean that these things will turn out to be supernatural. The supernatural is defined as 'due to or manifesting some agency above the forces of nature,' and in my view that's impossible. None of the aliens created by science fiction filmmakers or illustrators matches the strangeness and huge diversity of creatures found on earth, at the bottom of the sea, in deepest rain forests, and down the lens of a microscope. The mind boggles at the resilience of living things that survive the coldest of winters, the driest of summers, the darkest of habitats.

It's spring, and the annual miracle is occurring when the seemingly lifeless becomes full of life. The cycle of the seasons goes on, year after year. In the depths of winter, under the duvet, it's easy to forget that nothing lasts forever – the cold, the wet, the dark, the long nights. Everything changes, everything is renewed.

The trouble with a constant preoccupation with the artificial, the fantastic, the man-made, is that it encourages arrogance. It's assumed that humankind has the answer to everything, that if we mess up we can put things right. Maybe we can in many cases, but however clever the technology we've invented, it depends on responsible, skilled, informed people to use it effectively. The world is a wonderful place; I don't want a space ship to take me away from it when we've made such a mess we can't live here any more. I don't want to escape into a supernatural fantasy as an alternative to accepting responsibility for it. Why does science fiction so often cast aliens from outer space as villains who'll destroy the earth? Earth-bound villains are far more dangerous.

There are more natural wonders in our world than the authors of science fiction have ever dreamed of. The real universe is bigger and wider than the one explored by the crew of the Enterprise in Star Trek. There are plenty of amazing things going on right now, at the bottom of your garden. The natural world is amazing.

WORLD AIDS DAY

2nd December 1996

Yesterday was World AIDS Day. On Saturday volunteers from the Ipswich AIDS Helpline were giving away red ribbons and collecting money at a local supermarket. An older woman, after making a donation and taking a ribbon, commented, 'You just don't know, do you? I hope it won't happen, but one of my grandchildren could become affected.' She didn't seem to have considered that it might be an older person. 11% of people with AIDS in the UK are over fifty. I suspect that most of the people who walked past the information stall at the weekend think that we've nothing to worry about here, in rural Suffolk. If only that were true. Only a few weeks ago I conducted a Humanist funeral ceremony for someone who'd died of an AIDS-related illness, not far from here. It seems it's only a matter of time before more local people become infected. It's not just the sexually active young who are at risk. A research project carried out in 1992 demonstrated that mutually monogamous couples are uncommon. In my own quiet Suffolk village adultery is not that unusual, and it's not an unusual village. Many people are running a small but definite risk of acquiring HIV.

The biggest obstacles to tackling AIDS are complacency, ignorance and prejudice. Censorious and muddled attitudes to sexuality get in the way of an objective response to HIV and AIDS. If HIV wasn't mainly a sexually transmitted disease there wouldn't be so much time wasted apportioning blame, which makes it harder for those affected, their families and friends, to get the help and support they need. The stigma of

AIDS affects everyone who has it, however they were infected, including children.

Rebecca Handel was given an infected blood transfusion 14 years ago in Canada, before blood was routinely screened, when she was pregnant with her daughter Bonnie. Bonnie died, aged 12, 3 years ago. Rebecca died nearly 2 years ago. While they were alive their family kept the nature of their illness a secret, to protect them from discrimination. Now they're dead Rebecca's parents can speak openly about it. Her father says, 'The disease can affect ordinary families like ours. Be afraid of AIDS – not people with AIDS.'

The National AIDS Helpline number is 0800 567 123

CHRISTMAS AGAIN

30 December 1996

I grow tired of Christmas these days even before it's started. I long for Christmas-free TV and radio zones, for those of us bored with the repetition of synthetic jollity. I'm not alone; many people will privately confess that they dread the extended hoo-ha. Isn't it time we reviewed our options? Couldn't we enjoy the season without the hype and humbug?

The artificiality of the 1990s festive season has little relevance to the original mid-winter solstice festival. For me, as a non-believer, it has no religious significance. Peel away all the layers of 'tradition', which means different things to different people, and what are we left with?

The mid-winter festival has been divided into two parts, Christmas and New Year, but used to be all-in-one, around the time of the shortest day, when humankind's precarious survival depended on the vagaries of nature and their own resourcefulness more than at any other time. Cold, dark mid-winter tests us. This may seem over-stated when all that most people face is the stress of shopping expeditions and the demands of over-excited children. The urban majority is buffered from the winter weather inside cars and centrally heated homes. The poor suffer the cold, as they've always done. Some die in cold houses, shop doorways and other inadequate shelters.

For thousands of years, in Europe, Scandinavia and around the Mediterranean, communities have celebrated life, and their survival, in the depths of winter, with eating, drinking and other fundamental pleasures. There was nothing contrived, nothing artificial about it, just sheer enjoyment.

I wouldn't want to go back to living without the comforts of the 1990s. Being a member of one of the simple communities that celebrated the winter solstice thousands of years ago mattered; if you were not part of a community, your chances of survival were limited.

The same can be true today, yet we have the means to create a sense of inclusive community and with it freedom from want and hunger, so that

everyone has something to celebrate. I sense an increasing disillusionment with Christmas as an over-extended, expensive event that fails to meet unrealistic expectations. Is anyone interested in devising a new version?

VALENTINES

17th February 1997

It's just a few days after Valentine's Day, when Squidgies everywhere told their Pussikins they loved them to bits. There's been a lot of talk about love, of the romantic, falling-into variety. They've been talking about it at the Seattle Science Festival.

We know that love has physical effects, as well as emotional ones – trembly knees, fluttery hearts, and so on. Now an American anthropologist, Dr. Helen Fisher, is providing the evidence, having persuaded volunteers to have brain scans to reveal the neurochemistry of being in love. She believes that different kinds of love, from the first flush of new love to plain lust, are demonstrated by different neurochemistries. Could it mean, one day, that a brain scan would reveal whether your true love is really true to you?

Another scientist, Randy Thornhill (his name doesn't mean the same in America as it does here), has spent years developing his theory that lovers look for symmetry in each other's faces and bodies because asymmetrical eyes, knees or even little fingers could signify that they're genetically defective, so a poor choice for procreation. If your lover tells you that he or she loves your knees or elbows, it may be that they've been mentally measuring you up.

For uncompromising romantics, applying science to love is anathema. But it's already being done. Psychologists and sociologists have been analysing what makes relationships work, to provide some of the answers to questions of fidelity and the reasons why most murders are committed within the family. There may be a moon in June, but will you still love him or her when you're 64? Maybe a personality profile can answer that.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare wrote: 'Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind; and therefore is wing'd cupid painted blind.' Anne Hathaway probably got some incredible love-letters, but did her Will take turns with the washing up, or change his daughter's nappies, when they were married? Little things like notes on the pillow might matter now, but little things like whether he cleans his teeth regularly matter more in the long term. You needn't rely on science to predict the durability of your love, just common sense, which, it's been said, is inclined to fly out of the window when loves walks in the door.

OFFENDING THE GODLESS

4th May 1998

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names may never hurt me.' Except they do. Scant regard is paid to the possibility of causing offence to people who have no religious beliefs, while the sensibilities of religious people are generally protected.

A few years ago, the TV, radio and press news had been full of reports about rioting and hooliganism in urban areas. Our parish magazine contained an article by one of the local ministers, blaming the lawlessness and violence on 'godlessness' in society. I was so annoyed that when I met him outside the Post Office I demanded to know why he imagined all godless people were hooligans, because, as a godless person, it had never occurred to me that I should be out there creating mayhem with the rest. He could see I was a bit cross and apologised, saying he hadn't realised the significance of what he'd written. Quite.

In the 4th century BC the Greek philosopher Protagoras taught that 'man is the measure of all things.' In other words, that human values are formed by reason and experience. He, and many other thinkers who formed the humanist tradition, believed that we can be good without a God or gods, that we can be moral without religion. It's silly to suggest otherwise. It's silly to suggest that everyone who lives without religion is a bad person. Non-believers used to be subjected to sticks and stones, were sometimes killed, for their failure to conform to the religious orthodoxy of their time. In some parts of the world they still are. Many prejudiced people are ready to judge their fellows not by how they behave, but by what they say they do or don't believe.

Belief is a personal matter. It's how we put it into practice, how we behave, that matters.

DIANA'S DEATH

30th August 1998

I didn't mourn the death of Diana, nor did many other people. How could we? It was all such a waste, and very sad for her family, but we didn't know her. Grief is personal.

Throughout history, humankind has mourned its dead in a variety of ways in accord with the customs of the community. It's different now. Things are less clear. The media, especially television, is a huge influence. There is a lot of confusion. People seem to want to be told what to do, as though there's an etiquette of mourning. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why so many people behaved the way they did a year ago, when crowds lined the streets of London around the palaces and along the route of the funeral procession. Maybe for a few hours those people felt a sense of community, otherwise missing from their lives.

A year ago I was on Radio Suffolk talking about the news of Diana's death with Rachel. I said that many people seemed to have lost a sense of proportion. I saw Rachel wince, anticipating a backlash from enraged listeners, but the only calls we had were from people who said they agreed with me but hadn't liked to say so. I resented the way that those of us who didn't identify with the 'we' the commentators kept talking about were discouraged from saying anything at all, even from saying that we felt it was all a bit excessive. Too many people made a virtue out of weeping for Diana. Weeping for her was something you did or didn't do, but no one should have been made to feel that if they had no tears they should apologise for it.

Grief, the genuine article, affects everyone differently. Some go quiet. Some weep. Some get angry. Some want to be alone. Some want to be with others. Some do all these things. The situation changes daily. Grief affects us emotionally and physically. Some people, bereaved for the first time, are shocked by how little control they have over it. If you loved someone, even if you didn't always like him or her, grief is the very natural consequence of losing them. And it's personal – very, very personal.

So if you feel there must be something wrong with you because you haven't been swept away on a tide of popular emotion, I can assure you there isn't. Many other people feel like you, but just don't like to say so. As Shakespeare wrote:

... to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

CANCER

26th October 1998

I've been wearing a pink ribbon over the last couple of weeks as part of the Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign. I've been very aware of breast cancer for the last 12½ years because I'm a breast cancer survivor. My life is divided into two – BC and AD – Before Cancer and After Diagnosis. I'm one of the lucky ones, unlike the young woman whose funeral I'll be conducting tomorrow. I've conducted too many funerals like hers and every time I think that could have been me. I've lost friends, and my friends have lost relatives and friends.

Breast and testicular cancer are two of the commonest cancers. Both involve wobbly bits of our bodies that help to generate and nurture new life, so it's especially cruel that those same bits can kill us – or not, if we catch the disease in time and take effective action. A couple of weeks ago I saw my oncologist. Though he's a very nice man, I was delighted to be told to go away and not bother him any more because I'm OK.

Since cancer drew attention to my mortality life has changed. I'm less tolerant in some respects, more in others. It infuriates me to see people doing stupid things, like driving one-handed with a mobile phone

clutched to their ear as they take a corner, risking their life and mine — the life I've fought so hard to hang on to. What sort of pathetic excuse would they offer my family for killing me with carelessness? I'm less inclined to sympathise with whingers who don't know when they're well off. I tolerate things that used to bother me, things that really don't matter. I worry less. I value my family and my real friends, those who've seen me through the bad times. I'm more inclined to say what I think, but maybe that's just my age? Whatever it is, life's too short for waffle.

If you value your life, take care of yourself. Feel your wobbly bits regularly in the privacy of your bathroom or bedroom, and if there's anything there you're not quite sure about, go and see your doctor. Stay well. Be happy.

BEING GOOD

23rd November 1998

I've come across quite a few people who don't believe in God but who've described themselves as 'Christian', when what they really mean is that they like to think that they're essentially good people, that they're 'moral' in their behaviour and attitudes.

This sort of muddled thinking is due to the influence of old-style religionists (there are still plenty of them about, particularly in fundamentalist sections of the church here and in the States) who've taught that it's not only wrong but sinful not to believe in God, and that if you don't believe you're a bad person, condemned to go to hell. As someone who is openly humanist, used to speaking publicly about my beliefs, I tend to attract hostility from a few religious people, but it doesn't bother me — it's their problem, not mine. However I do feel it's understandable that such intolerant attitudes, often expressed in aggressive terms, might inhibit non-believers from 'coming-out' as atheists.

I'm not interested in arguing with those who strongly disagree with me — there's no point — but I am interested in what it means to be good.

For many people, for hundreds of years, being 'good' had little to do with being happy. Indeed, for puritanical religious leaders, being happy was suspect, an indication that you weren't being good. It was all about control. No one was allowed to have fun, because fun was bad for you. If you enjoyed yourself you were likely to lose control, and then where would you be? Going to sleep with a happy smile on your face wasn't encouraged.

At a baby-naming ceremony I conducted this summer one of the little girl's mentors (the secular alternative to a god-parent) quoted some advice given by an author called Peg Bracken in her book *It's A Funny Thing About Me*. There was lots of down to earth stuff, like 'Try not to create unnecessary pain,' but one of my favourites was, 'Try not to act morally superior towards someone doing something that doesn't happen to tempt you, or which you haven't been caught doing ... yet.' Another

was, 'Try not to think you must make the most of every golden moment and act accordingly, unless you do so in private, for the contrast could be quite discouraging to someone who's having a bad day. (As one boy scout asked another, "Don't you ever have days when you feel just a little untrustworthy, disloyal, unhelpful, unfriendly, discourteous, unkind, grumpy, wasteful, cowardly, dirty and irreverent?")'. Of course I do.

As long as you try to observe the Golden Rule (Don't do to others what you wouldn't like done to you), it makes no difference whether you're religious or not, or whether you sometimes behave badly, you can still regard yourself as a basically good person. Nobody's perfect, even if they'd like you to think they are.

FREEDOM

9th December 1998

Thursday will be the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 1 reads: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.' But are they? It all depends on the circumstances of our birth, and for millions of babies the ideal is meaningless; they die before they've had a chance to learn what freedom could mean.

Wendell Lewis Wilkie, an American lawyer and businessman who died in 1944, wrote, 'Freedom is an indivisible word. If we want to enjoy it, and fight for it, we must be prepared to extend it to everyone, whether they are rich or poor, whether they agree with us or not, no matter what their race or colour of their skin.' I'd add, 'or their gender,' since the female of our species is generally discriminated against, however far we might imagine we've come in achieving equality in the developed world. The only way freedom works is when it's evenly distributed. If some have more, others must have less. Rights and responsibilities, freedom and restriction – it's all relative.

'OK,' you might say, 'I agree with you, but what's it got to do with me? I don't torture or kill people. I live a quiet, law-abiding life.' Many people feel revulsion at the carnage, the torture, the starvation and destruction they see on their TV screens or in their newspapers, but don't feel that there's anything they can do. Meanwhile those who are being persecuted and tortured, who see their friends and families die through war, famine or persecution, are asking 'Who will help us? Someone must help us!' If it were you, wouldn't you expect someone – anyone – to come to your rescue?

It takes courage to stand up for the oppressed, whoever they are. George Orwell said that freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear. We're bound to be unpopular, to be threatened, by those we challenge. But if we say nothing, do nothing, to stop the bullies and tyrants, torturers and villains, who'll be next? In another fifty years, will the next generation thank us for making the world a safer place, or blame us for not caring? Will they have been born free and equal?

HAPPINESS

3rd January 1999

Happy New Year! We've all wished each other 'A Happy New Year' over the last few days, but what does it *mean* to be happy?

The late great Joyce Grenfell was easily pleased. She said, 'Happiness is the sublime moment when you get out of your corsets at night.' She seemed to be defining happiness as an absence of constraint. Sigmund Freud wrote, 'What we call happiness in the strictest sense of the word comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree.' Well, corsets certainly dam you up.

I asked a couple of my nearest and dearest what made them happy and they came up with interesting lists: being with friends who give you a hug when you meet up; doing a good job, and having people appreciate it; having a full tummy, being warm and comfortable, and listening to some good music; walking up a windswept hill and enjoying a beautiful view from the top. None of the things they mentioned depended on huge sums of money or having 'things' of one sort or another.

A child who is fortunate to be born into a loving community of family and friends, who doesn't want for food or shelter, who has plenty of opportunities to explore the world safely and playmates to share his or her games, will never think about being happy until, perhaps, someone will ask him or her, when grown up, 'Did you have a happy childhood?' A happy child is too busy just being to even consider the question.

For adults, just being is more difficult. So many things, so many people, interfere with it. One of the great thinkers who helped develop humanism was the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, born in 1748 — a man with a lively mind and a great sense of humour. Bentham said, 'The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.' He campaigned for social reforms like more humane prisons, free education, better working conditions, sickness benefit and old age pensions over 100 years before the Welfare State made them a reality. He saw that happiness is incompatible with want, disease and fear.

Nowadays, with a higher standard of living for the majority, access to free medical care and education for all, you'd think that people would be happier. They are, on the whole. But though poverty and disease are still with us, most unhappiness is caused by behaviour, our own and other people's. Jeremy Bentham and many other great thinkers taught that behaving well towards other people is good for us too, because we can only be truly happy when we have helped to make others happy.

I hope your New Year will be happy.

PURSE POWER

8th March 1999

I'm looking forward to watching TV on Friday – Red Nose Day. A host of comedians will be trying to make us laugh and part with some cash for those less fortunate than ourselves.

Less fortunate? What does that mean? Does that mean that the recipients of our largesse have had some bad luck? Does it mean that we're doing this out of the goodness of our hearts, but we haven't had anything to do with creating any of the poverty and deprivation we're being asked to confront? Who's responsible for all the problems we see on the Red Nose programmes?

Take bananas. The current banana crisis has only impinged on our collective consciousness because the Americans have fired a shot across our bows over a trade dispute, and hit other industries, like the cashmere knitters of Scotland. It's all because the American company which virtually monopolises the banana trade – Chiquita – doesn't like the Europeans and us offering favourable terms to the small-scale banana farmers of the Caribbean. These former colonies grow bananas because of us. We've expected them to supply us, on our terms, for years. Last year they were hit by a hurricane when they were already struggling for survival. In St. Vincent, one of the Windward Islands, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population depend on the banana trade and the farmers receive less than 10% of the price we pay for them. If we give in to the Americans these people will be ruined. They will be forced to rely on aid, rather than trade. It's likely that some might resort to a cash crop there's an increasing demand for; drugs.

So, what's best, free trade or fair trade? We in the developed world, import vast amounts of food and clothing from producers in the developing world. As long as we can buy their stuff cheaply, we can afford to give when Red Nose Day comes around again. How generous!

The power of public opinion has been underestimated. Just think about how consumers have influenced retailers over the last ten years or so. Manufacturers of household chemicals are falling over themselves to reassure us that their goods are 'environmentally friendly'. There are more vegetarian foodstuffs on offer, and meat-eaters are demanding to eat only happy animals, which have been slaughtered humanely. Everyone's taking an interest in genetically modified food and the Government's taken aback by all the fuss. An increasing number of people are asking suppliers whether the people who grow and make the things we buy are being paid a fair wage. Due to public pressure, retailers are offering more Fair Trade products, like tea, coffee and chocolate, which cost slightly more. But it's still only a very small proportion of the goods we import. So as well as having fun and giving on Red Nose Day, use your purse-power as a shopper to influence ethical buying policies among retailers, and do your bit all the year round.

MILLENNIUM BABIES

12th April 1999

Apparently, people are trying to have babies to win the Year 2000 race, turning conception into a game show. Seems to me that doing something quite so daft might disqualify you as a responsible parent. I mean, what with the threat of millennium bugs playing havoc with everything from traffic lights to telecom systems on New Year's Eve 1999, not to mention the prospect of under-staffed, under-resourced maternity units struggling to cope with an increase of 20% or more mothers in labour, the already risky experience of childbirth is likely to be a whole lot riskier. And will those babies who manage to meet the midnight deadline thank their parents for exposing them to the intrusive, persistent attentions of journalists, documentary film-makers and advertisers, and – through them – every other busy-body who wants a piece of the action? I think not.

None of us asked to be born. We were all conscripted into the human race. The least you might expect – if you're going to be born at the beginning of a new millennium – is to be given as many advantages as possible. The next century, let alone the next millennium, is likely to be scary. OK, so there'll hopefully be lots of fun, huge changes in technology, an end to some more nasty diseases, improved health and wealth, but the old evolutionary principle still applies: the fittest are most likely to survive. The rest may find it a struggle.

George Bernard Shaw said, 'Parentage is a very important profession; but no test of fitness for it is ever imposed in the interest of the children.' It would, of course, be difficult to measure the fitness of prospective parents – people can and do surprise you – but perhaps one indication might be the thought given to their role. Humanist naming ceremonies – as alternatives to traditional religious christenings – tend to be chosen by thoughtful people who want to do their best for their children, regardless of their circumstances.

Recently, two humanist parents resolved at their child's naming ceremony: to take joint responsibility for the welfare of their child; to provide continuing love and support, and to help their child grow to independence; to respect their child as an individual; to help their child develop physically and intellectually, by encouragement rather than pressure; to influence their child's behaviour by good example, rather than by authoritative orders; to help their child to develop her own opinions, beliefs and values. Sounds like a good place to start.

ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

19th April 1999

Some people seem determined to anticipate the worst, no matter what. My mother didn't like answering the phone in case it was bad news. She'd be several minutes into a conversation before she relaxed, having

realised you just wanted a chat and weren't going to tell her you'd smashed up the car, been burgled, or done something disgraceful. I learned never to mention anything remotely unpleasant unless I had to, for fear of confirming her suspicions.

I used to know someone who always greeted you with a catalogue of disasters. It was a mistake to ask him how he was because you'd be told how practically everything had gone wrong for him lately. Life, it seemed, was full of disappointments, the greatest being when his wife left him. I suspect she couldn't stand being depressed by his tales of woe. He always reminded me of Marvin the paranoid android in *The Hitch-hikers' Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams' wonderful 1970s radio series, who was inclined to say things like 'Life! don't talk to me about life,' and, when told to do something would comment, 'I won't enjoy it.'

I suppose that persistent optimists can be just as irritating – those Pollyanna types who insist that nothing can be that bad. You wonder which planet they're on when they keep insisting that everything's wonderful, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

A few years ago I was on a demonstration in London with thousands of other people (I won't say what it was about, because I'm not going to get political today). I can't walk far, so my son was nobly pushing me along in my wheelchair. It was raining and I was sitting in a puddle of water – very cold water. People had been laughing and talking, but as they got wetter and wetter, they got quieter and quieter. Just as we got to Trafalgar Square there was a clap of thunder, the rain came down even heavier, and there was almost total silence. Then someone three or four rows behind us sang, 'Always look on the bright side of life...' and everyone burst out laughing and joined in.

On the whole, I suppose you could say I'm a cautious optimist. If you're having a bad time there's nothing worse than being told to 'cheer up', so I won't. But maybe, just maybe, something good could happen any minute, so keep one eye open to the possibility, just in case.

MAY

17th May 1999

I love this time of year. Everything's becoming lush and green – at least it is where I live, out in the countryside. I look forward to investigating the garden every morning, to see what's happening. The wisteria I planted a few years ago has flowered for the first time. A pair of blue tits make regular trips to my bird table – there must be a nest full of voracious babies nearby. Some wood pigeons have started competing with the collared doves for corn; every now and then there's a bit of an avian punch-up. Mornings and evenings there's a chorus of birdsong, a lark sings in the field over the road, and I often hear a cuckoo and a woodpecker. Many of the trees around the village are laden with blossom, and leaves in shades of green and red.

The beauties of the natural world are all around us, for everyone to enjoy. The West Country poet and novelist Thomas Hardy, who died in 1928, celebrated the beauties of Nature through his work. In his poem 'Afterwards' Hardy hoped that when he had been 'stilled at last' people would remember how he'd enjoyed the Spring –

When the Present has latched its postern behind my
tremulous stay,
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,
'He was a man who used to notice such things'?

Hardy's philosophy was humanist. His view of life was that there is no God, but that 'Man is alone in the Universe, no better and no worse than other creatures who live or have lived for a brief moment on this speck called Earth.' He loved life and the beauty of the English countryside. If he were still alive he'd be a strong advocate for the environmental lobby.

When religious people talk about spirituality, they mean something different from what a humanist might mean. For me, an awareness of those things that inspire awe, wonder and appreciation is part of it. An awareness of the beauties of nature replenishes the spirit, even if you can only stop to look and listen for a few minutes every day. The American Indian, before his way of life was changed forever by the arrival of the white man, wouldn't have understood why the invaders needed to have a day set aside for worship. The Indian looked about him and worshipped nature all day, every day. Chief Luther Standing Bear, born in 1868, explained it like this: 'The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart away from nature becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans too. So he kept his youth close to its softening influence.' Standing Bear and Hardy would have understood one another. Both knew that it's never a waste of time to stand and look at nature.

LIFE, THE UNIVERSE, & EVERYTHING

31st May 1999

Are you sitting still? Maybe, and maybe not. It all depends on what you mean by 'still'. Since I started this sentence, the Earth has travelled 100 miles around the Sun, the Sun has moved 1,000 miles round the galaxy, and the Orion Nebula has moved 100,000 miles relative to us. So whether or not you can say you're sitting still (or standing, or lying) is relative, as Einstein might have said.

A few years ago NASA took a photograph with the Hubble Space Telescope, leaving the shutter open for 10 days. The 10 inch square photo shows an area of space which, to the naked eye, is about the same size as a grain of sand viewed from 6 feet away, yet to cross it at 10 times the speed of light would take 300,000 years, and there are 1,500 galaxies in the picture, each containing billions of stars.

When I talk to schoolchildren about humanism, as part of their RE course, I find the younger ones are fascinated by life, the universe and everything. They ask whether I think there's intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. (I sometimes wonder whether there's much intelligent life here). I usually say there probably is intelligent life out there, on a planet near one of the billions of stars in another galaxy, but by the time we receive any sort of signal from an intelligent species they could be long gone, just as by the time we see the light from a distant star it's travelled so many light years the star has gone, or there could be life, but still at the primitive stage we were at thousands of years ago, like the ape-men in Stanley Kubrick's film '2001'. The odds against life beginning when it did here, on our small planet, hundreds of million years ago, were astronomical. The fact that we're here at all is amazing.

Before we had the scientific knowledge that we do today, tribal communities tried to make sense of our existence with stories of myth and magic. Some of these stories were handed down from one generation to the next. One such story was the Genesis myth, which started in Babylon 2,500 years ago. At about the same time, Greek thinkers were attempting to explain our existence not with stories, but with reason. One of these was Democritus who studied nature and concluded that the universe is made up of matter. He even worked out an atomic theory. What he didn't do was claim that the universe was 'created'. That's always been the religious view of things. Humanists, like me, say that there's no proof of this, but there's plenty of evidence that life developed by chance. It just happened.

Anyway, what I'm on about is that life is pretty amazing, we're pretty amazing, and we still know very little about life, the universe, and everything. We do know enough to say that if we muck up this small planet of ours it's only in Star Trek and Star Wars that they have intergalactic space ships with warp drives, ready to whisk you through a worm hole to another world far, far away. We've got to make the best of what we've got. It wouldn't hurt anybody to sit (relatively) still and think things through more often. Did I say that the human brain's an amazing thing? If you use it.

ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

26th July 1999

There's a photograph of a fit young woman in an advert in one of the weekend newspaper supplements, advertising a gadget that's supposed to tighten your tummy muscles while you watch TV. She's wearing a smug smile and a bikini, and her tummy's so taut a timpanist could play the 1812 Overture on it.

I had a tummy like that, once. I didn't have a gadget to get it that way. It was pre-childbirth and pre-middle-age sag. I didn't go to the gym. There were no gyms then, unless you count the one at school, which I hated. Our PE teacher was a sarcastic sadist who kept her hankie in her knickers. She put me off team games and gymnastics for life. No, I exercised by

cycling to and from work, walking the dog and running to catch buses. Lateness has always been a problem.

Anyway, to get back to the young woman in the advert which offers 'The simplest way to get a great summer shape' – what's a summer shape? I mean, we're all different shapes, our own special shapes, all the year round. It's our genes and our diets that determine our shapes. I blame my parents. Even if the device works, I doubt that anyone could achieve the results suggested by the photograph before the end of this summer. You'd have to plug yourself in for 8 hours a day, every day of the year, to begin to see any difference, and then it would probably only be chafe marks where the pads attach to the skin.

It says at the bottom of the advert, 'Money back if not completely satisfied.' Can you imagine them coughing up when Mrs. Thing of Wotsit writes in to say, 'My body is still a flabby size 20, despite regular use of your device over a 6-week period. I demand a summer shape, a fully functional magic wand, or my money back.'

At this time of the year, while the weather's hot, summer shapes surround us. Lots of 'em. Acres of flesh – round and wriggly, tall and skinny, young and jiggy, old and droopy. It's not just the shapes that are different, it's the facial expressions, the gestures, the movements, and the way they're all put together.

If you could walk into a High Street store and buy a perfect size 10 body, would it make you happy? Personally, I'll stick with the one I've got. It's not fully functional, but it fits comfortably.

ONE WORLD

23rd August 1999

The devastation in Turkey is on such a scale it's hard to appreciate what it must be like for those scouring the rubble for stinking bodies. It may be the biggest earthquake we've known for a long time, but it won't be the last. We can't do anything about earthquakes. They remind us that we live on a planet that's constantly changing. When our distant ancestors were shaken by earthquakes few died – the population was small and lived in primitive, light structures that didn't have far to fall. Increased numbers and unsafe buildings have made many more vulnerable.

At the end of the last Ice Age humanity numbered only about 10,000 people – less than a quarter of the numbers estimated to have perished in Turkey. The world's population has just reached 6 billion. It's taken less than 40 years to double in numbers. It means, among other things, that there's nowhere to go for those who live in vulnerable places, like earthquake zones and flood plains. The recent hostilities between Kosovan refugees and local people in Dover demonstrate that, however sympathetic and generous British people might be when foreigners are displaced, they don't necessarily want them to turn up on their doorsteps. Those who are fortunate to live in the developed world guard their privileges.

I've been leading up to two observations. Firstly, that Nature is indifferent towards us — I think it was a character in *The X Files*, Dana Skully, who said 'Respect Nature, because Nature will not respect you' — so we must anticipate natural disasters, and act accordingly. Secondly, that the world's population is still growing, fast. Within 50 years it will double again, according to some scientists. There ought to be better ways of reducing our numbers than allowing thousands to die in disasters. It's ridiculous that an intelligent, resourceful race — the human race — should continue to be divided into nations who behave as though other nations' problems are nothing to do with them, unless they choose to get involved. Humanists helped found the UN and UNESCO and other important international organisations. Further development is urgently overdue. Imagine having an international emergency service to go to the rescue of people like the Turks, rather than the current ad hoc arrangements. Imagine having an international authority to hold governments to account for permitting unsafe housing, as corrupt Turkish politicians have done. Imagine pooling our resources so that every child born fifty years from now should be wanted, and might expect the best healthcare and education, wherever they live — thousands of babies are currently dying for lack of the most basic food and hygiene. Imagine an international court, to try tyrants and torturers. However uncharitable you might feel about sorting out other people's problems, if we don't do something about them within fifty years there'll be a lot more refugees from man-made or natural disasters banging on our doors. It will take a complete change of attitude. Other people's problems are our problems. Distinctions like nationality, race, party politics, gender, religion and age will have to matter far less to the next couple of generations than being citizens of the world, because the world's getting smaller every day.

BAD TIMES, GOOD TIMES

6th September 1999

There's a new programme on BBC Radio 4 called 'Straw Poll', which takes the form of a weekly debate. Last week's motion was 'The therapy culture is responsible for more harm than good.' One of the proposers was Claire Rayner, a distinguished supporter of the British Humanist Association. The gist of Claire's argument was that a lot of unhappy people are being exploited by psychotherapists and counsellors who aren't subject to regulation and who promise what they can't deliver, encouraging the notion that if you're unhappy, you're a victim of something or other. Claire said that no one had the right to be happy. I agree with her, because happiness isn't about rights, it's about how we respond to the changes and challenges of life.

Someone once said that the world is full of pain and suffering, and anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is trying to sell you something. Imagining that you have a right to happiness, whatever happens, is a totally unreasonable expectation. A worryingly high proportion of otherwise intelligent people seemingly aren't prepared to tolerate any

unhappiness, disappointment or frustration, whatever the circumstances. It seems to me that if being happy meant never being upset or hurt or disappointed, there wouldn't be any reason to change or develop. If doctors could give us a pill to make us better every time something unpleasant or sad happened, we'd be living bland, meaningless lives in some science-fiction never-never land. I'd rather be as I am; sometimes tired and emotional, sometimes angry, sometimes downright miserable, sometimes hurt, but ready to appreciate and enjoy the good things in life, knowing they can't last. For example: by loving someone and being happy with him or her, you risk losing them and being sad – it's a price worth paying. We need deep shadows to appreciate the light, or the best we can hope for is an illusion of happiness.

In an ideal world, everyone would have someone to talk to when life gets tough. So maybe a good counsellor can be like a paid friend; someone to listen while you get yourself sorted out. Ultimately, that's what we all have to do. Sort ourselves out, I mean. Sort out our expectations. Sort out our priorities. Sort out the people we can rely on from the ones we can't (and avoid marrying anyone in the latter category). And sort out what's important in our lives. Self-sufficiency's the name of the game. 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, which we ascribe to heaven,' as Shakespeare put it.

LIFE SKILLS

13th September 1999

Many were appalled by the plight of the children in the BBC documentary, *Eyes of a Child*, the other week. We might applaud the Government's promise to end child poverty, but I agree with the members of the National Appeal Board of the NSPCC's Full Stop Campaign who wrote to the *Observer* to say, 'Blaming the ills of those children on poverty muddies the waters: the causes of child abuse are many and various. Poverty is a contributing factor, but it is not decisive.'

It seems that the Government's got a lot to learn about what's gone wrong for many children. Instead of pushing for the under-fives to learn more, what about helping them to play more? No need for expensive toys – sand, water, paper, crayons, empty plastic bottles and pots and pans are all you need. It's staggering how many young parents don't know how to play, and children learn through play. Instead of pushing more young mothers into work when their children are very young, what about finding ways for them to be with their children, but not in isolation, so they can learn from more experienced parents? The children in the TV programme suffered because their parents had no positive role models, so the cycle of neglect and deprivation continues. Never mind all the emphasis on academic subjects in school, what about bringing back domestic science? How many children leave school unable to feed and clothe themselves on a budget, because no one has taught them? It's not just a problem for families on low budgets. I know of relatively affluent families where the parents haven't a clue about hygiene or good nutrition.

When Delia Smith made a TV programme about basic cookery skills, she was sneered at. 'Who needs to know how to boil an egg?' her critics asked. Well, lots of people do. If you know how to do these things, someone probably taught you.

It's the same with love. If you're not taught how to do it, it's a lot harder to learn. Over 20 years ago I had a neighbour, a young mum with a son the same age as mine. Her father was in prison for murder, her mother was an alcoholic, her brother was a thief, and her husband beat her. She turned up on my doorstep late one night, black and blue. Neither she nor her little boy, Billy, had ever known real affection. When Billy was older you'd see them walking down the road with him four or five paces behind, little legs going like pistons, trying to keep up, but never hand in hand. She thought I was 'soppy' because I kissed other members of my family. She did her best. She kept Billy clean and well fed, but she didn't know about play. When Billy came round to play in our paddling pool or sandpit she'd say, 'It's all right for you, you don't care if they make a mess.'

Gradually, over the next few years, things changed for little Billy. His mum decided that it might be OK to let him make a mess, and it wasn't OK to let anyone abuse her. She discovered it was good to play with Billy, and to show affection. They walked hand in hand. She met an older man who was kind to them both, and married him. I occasionally wonder what happened to Billy. He'll be 24 now, and possibly a father himself. I hope he learned enough to avoid ending up in the same sort of mess as his unhappy relatives.

HUMANIST PARENTING

9th November 1999

I was talking about moral values the other day with someone who wondered how atheists like me conveyed a sense of right or wrong to our children.

When I had my son I didn't read any books about how to bring up a baby, and neither did he. I was over thirty and had observed a lot of other parents, so I trusted my own judgement. Overall we got on fine, and he was happy. I never had any really bad behaviour to deal with (and neither did he). He grew up knowing right from wrong, and religion had nothing to do with it.

For most people it's easy to have a baby. Once you've got one, it gets more difficult. I'd recommend a few years of growing up for any prospective parent. Do whatever you want to do first — study, party, climb Everest, make enough money to buy lots of great clothes or whatever. Forget any notions you might have, as a modern, liberated grown-up person, of living your life as you did when you were childless. They talk of working mothers 'having it all' these days. They do. All the work. All the worry. All the shopping, cooking and cleaning. All the poo

and the sick and the spots. All this and you're expected to bring up a model citizen too?

When it came to encouraging moral values in my child, I paid no more attention to rule books than I did to baby-care books. There are too many self-appointed moral authorities, like that dreadful woman they keep wheeling out on TV whenever there's a child-related moral issue to comment on. I won't name names, for fear of litigation. There's so much conflicting advice, and so many influences on children. There's seductive advertising. There's peer pressure. There are teachers with academic targets to meet. There are lots of interesting things going on at once, some of them quite exciting, and in the middle of all this, all your own pressures and problems. The old-fashioned way, as practised in God-fearing homes for a couple of centuries, was to read selected bits of the Bible – the scary bits – or other improving texts, and frighten your children into being good for fear of punishment, in this life or the next. Enough to give any impressionable child the heebie-jeebies.

My advice for new parents is: avoid extremes of indulgence or repression – be consistent; encourage and praise your children; listen to them; never spend lots of money on them to compensate for not spending time with them; have fun with them; when you're displeased, say so, but avoid resorting to physical punishment; respect them; love them; learn from them. Don't expect respect or gratitude as a right; they have to be earned. As Ogden Nash wrote:

Children aren't happy with nothing to ignore
And that's what parents were created for.

As for moral values, children learn them by example. What motives can we have for doing good? To please ourselves and others; to live happily and peacefully; to gain the affection and esteem of our fellows; to avoid the remorse felt by those who've done harm. It's natural to want all these things. We've no need of any external moral authority, only our own conscience.

IMAGINATION

29th November 1999

Albert Einstein has been described as one of the greatest names in mathematical physics in this century. His *Theory of Relativity* changed our way of thinking about the nature of the universe and of time and space. He led philosophers to take an interest in physics, and physicists to consider philosophical and moral problems. He wasn't an unworldly scientist; he was a kind and caring man who was also a great humanitarian. He was a humanist.

Einstein said, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge.' He believed it isn't necessary to memorise lots of facts and figures, only to know how to use a library. If he were a boy now, would he be allowed to shine? Like many creative thinkers, Einstein didn't like school and hated exams. He'd have been labelled 'difficult' by conventional teachers. Even

unconventional teachers would have a hard time coping with young Albert. They're under pressure from the government to test their charges every step of the way, to demonstrate that they're following an agreed syllabus, not being diverted by some interesting ideas into new ways of thinking. In his autobiography Einstein wrote: 'It is nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not yet strangled the holy curiosity of enquiry.' He obviously had the resilience to survive his so-called 'education', but many bright children don't. I don't claim to have been a brilliant teacher, but when I was working in schools I did notice that highly intelligent and or creative children whose behaviour was disruptive, through frustration and boredom, were often relegated to the group that used to be called 'remedial', where no one rated their chances of success very highly. Today's stressed teachers, however much they might want to encourage a vital spark of curiosity, have to write reports and meet deadlines. Creative thinking tends to get in the way of all that.

As you may have heard, Summerhill School at Leiston is under threat of closure by the Government since a recent Ofsted report. It doesn't conform to the prevailing notion of what a good school should be, but then it never has. A S Neill founded the school in 1921, since when many Summerhillians have gone on to live happy, successful lives, despite his unorthodox approach. Summerhill children have the freedom to learn what they like, when they like. Former student Angela Neustatter says Summerhill echoes Yeat's view that 'education is not filling a bucket but lighting a fire'.

Children, it goes without saying, are all different. They develop differently. We all do. Difference matters. The major advances in science, literature, the arts and so on have been achieved by people who thought differently. So why are the powers-that-be trying so hard to enforce conformity? Many are happy in conventional schools. Many, like Einstein, are not. I suspect that he'd have enjoyed school if he'd been at Summerhill.

CAUTIONARY VALENTINES

14th February 2000

Have you ever wondered who writes the verses in Valentine's cards? I have this mental picture of a mature lady in a black basque slaving over her word-processor, muttering to herself, 'This'll get 'em going!' as she dashes off another declaration of love, while her toy boy massages her toes. A bit like me, really, except for the toy boy.

In my adolescence, home-made Valentine's cards contained verses like,

My love is like a cabbage
Divided into two;
The leaves I give to others,
The heart I give to you.

Cabbages never struck me as a particularly romantic vegetable, nor do they have aphrodisiac properties, as far as I'm aware. Large quantities give you wind, which isn't the sort of thing you want to experience on a first date. So what would you write to your true love, if you wanted to make an impression? Steer clear of the old 'roses are red' stuff, if you want to be taken seriously.

The trouble is that Valentine's Day is about love, of the falling into, fluttery hearts and trembly knees variety, which can (if not kept under control), result in a nasty outbreak of bad verse. It is, after all, an affliction, this sort of love. People can go mad with it. The Scots poet James Hogg, born in 1770, described the condition thus –

O love! love! love!
 Love is like a dizziness.
 It winna let a poor body
 Gang about his business.

Romance is all very well, for short periods, but if you're hooked for longer than a few months I should seek medical attention and avoid life-changing decisions, like whether or not to get married. It's your hormones, you see. Most people's are more inclined to surge in the spring, but some get carried away at any time of the year.

So maybe, instead of romantic Valentines, seasonal cards ought to contain cautionary verses to take the edge off incipient passion. Roald Dahl had the right idea in his *Revolting Rhymes*. His Cinderella said to her Fairy Godmother, 'Oh kind fairy, this time I shall be more wary,' when she realised in the nick of time that Prince Charming was a cad. She used her last wish to ask for a decent man, and ended up with someone who made marmalade for a living.

It's not that I don't believe in love, you understand. It all depends what sort. I'm more cynic than romantic, as far as the moon in June variety is concerned. Here's another one for the greetings cards:

Be my probationary Valentine;
 I'll do the dinner, you bring the wine.
 If we like each other, then maybe
 I'll ask you back next week for tea.

IGNORANCE

21st February 2000

Considering how rich and powerful the United States of America is, it's frightening to discover that, according to a recent Gallup poll, 44% of the US population don't accept that humankind developed through evolution, but believe the Genesis creation myth is literally true. Last year the Kansas Board of Education decided to remove evolution from the state's core science curriculum, and the publisher of a book on the geology of Kansas omitted the first chapter on early fossils, for fear of offending anyone. So it's safe to assume that the BBC's new TV series,

starting tomorrow, on the origins of man, will not find a ready market in some US states. The series, called 'Ape-man', traces the development of Homo Sapiens – our species – from our ape ancestors, over a period of about 4½ million years.

The obstinate ignorance of the Kansas creationists is similar to that displayed by the critics of the great naturalist Charles Darwin. His voyage to the Galapagos Islands on a ship called *The Beagle* in 1831 led him to formulate a theory of evolution, which he detailed in his book 'The Origin of Species'. Darwin was ridiculed by those who refused to believe that we are descended from apes, but he and others after him have provided the evidence for his theories.

Thinking about apes and men, I was reminded of three little figures I inherited from my mother – the three wise monkeys. They illustrate the saying, 'Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.' The first has its hands over its eyes, the second covers its ears, and the third its mouth. Strikes me it's time for a new version; the first with its eyes screwed tight shut, so it can't read or see the truth, the second with its fingers jammed in its ears, so it can't hear the truth, and the third with its mouth wide open, so it can say whatever comes into its head, however ridiculous. My three stupid monkeys would symbolise people like the Kansas creationists and all the other stubborn people who, despite the wealth of information and the educational benefits available to most of us in the developed world, still insist on maintaining their ignorance. They will not have it that anything that conflicts with their beliefs can possibly be true. This is silly and sad, but it's also dangerous, because ignorance and prejudice lead to many of the world's evils.

The Greek philosopher Socrates said the only way he knew he was wiser than other men was that they thought they knew a lot, whereas he knew how ignorant he was. He pursued the truth by the question and answer method over 2,400 years ago, yet he was ahead of many 20th century people in his way of thinking.

The biggest difference between our ape ancestors and us is our ability to reason, like Socrates. What a waste not to use it.

PUBLIC OPINION

4th April 2000

I picked up a newspaper while I ate lunch in a supermarket coffee shop last week, and wished I hadn't. It made me so cross I almost lost interest in my cheesecake. The paper – one of the tabloids – has been campaigning against the scrapping of Clause 28, which is supposed to prevent local education authorities 'promoting' homosexuality. It's that word 'promoting' that's caused all the trouble – no one in education, to my knowledge, has been 'promoting' anything. Anyway, what made me cross about the newspaper was the judgmental, almost sanctimonious tone of its reporting – well, I say 'reporting', but it wasn't really reporting. It was peddling a line while claiming to be reflecting 'public opinion'. If

public opinion is really as prejudiced as the newspaper's editor suggests, it would be truly depressing, but I don't think it is. I think most people are much more open-minded and tolerant than that. Aren't tabloid editors trying to lead public opinion, rather than follow it?

Opinion polls generally provide a fair measure of public opinion. Pollsters ask a random sample of people a set of questions about an issue, rather than just one question. What they can't claim, however, is that the people they've interviewed are properly informed about the issue. The great humanist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote, 'The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatever that it is not utterly absurd.' What's more, there are plenty of unscrupulous people who'll happily manipulate public opinion with emotive language to achieve some very nasty ends. That's what Hitler and his cronies did, and that's what extremist organisations still do today.

We form opinions through experience, through reading about an issue, through talking to other people who know about the issue, through paying attention to reputable radio and TV reporting, through weighing up the rights and wrongs of the situation. These are things we do as individuals, to form an opinion. Then, collectively, we might decide what, if anything, we might do about something, if it has any relevance to the health and well being of the whole human community – that's democracy. Otherwise, if the behaviour of any other individual or group doesn't do any harm, we have no business trying to impose our views on them.

Humanists are sometimes known as 'free-thinkers', because we aim to think for ourselves. We believe that all situations, and all people, deserve to be judged on their own merits by standards of reason and humanity. Public opinion, I suggest, can be led by those who shout the loudest and think the least. Unless we can be sure that a collective opinion has been formed with due consideration of all the facts and without prejudice, we should be wary of paying too much heed to it.

I don't know why that newspaper made me so cross. It shouldn't have. Most people take what the tabloid press says with a pinch of salt, thank goodness. Some just buy a paper for the crossword, not the cross words.

HELL

17th April 2000

The humanist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote: 'The infliction of cruelty with a good conscience is a delight to moralists. That is why they invented hell.' A report published on Saturday by the Evangelical Alliance – which has about a million members in Britain – says that children ought to be told about hell and the day of judgement, to keep them on the straight and narrow.

The sceptical youngsters I meet won't be persuaded that hell awaits them if they're bad. It's like saying, 'The bogey-man will get you.' So, if threats about hell and damnation don't do the trick, how do we raise well-

behaved children? The Government's introducing 'citizenship' into the curriculum. Why talk of 'citizens', when what we really want is just decent human beings, regardless of the state they inhabit? 'Citizens' who offend against their fellows or the state are punishable by law, but that's the stick rather than the carrot approach to good behaviour. Maybe you won't go to hell, but you might go to prison.

When a child gets to secondary school, citizenship training will make little difference if she or he hasn't experienced genuine affection at home from the beginning. In the 1950s the humanist Margaret Knight generated a huge amount of controversy when she broadcast a series of talks for parents on 'Morals without Religion'. She asked, 'Is it in any way possible, by our methods of upbringing, to increase the chance that the child will grow up a warm-hearted and generous person?' Mrs. Knight went on to answer the question by saying, 'Warm-hearted and generous natures are developed, not primarily by training and discipline, important though these are in other ways, but by love. There is abundant evidence that if a child is brought up in a warm, happy, confident, affectionate home atmosphere, he has the best chance of developing into a well-balanced, secure, affectionate and generous-minded person. Whereas a child who has not got this background — the child who feels unloved, or who can never feel sure that he is loved — is the potential problem case.' This is common sense, you might think, but how do we ensure that children are raised with love? We can't legislate for love.

The trouble is that problem children grow up to become problem parents. Abused children grow into abusive parents. Domestic violence, crime, anti-social behaviour of all sorts, runs in families. And are the youngsters who cause many of our problems happy? Will it help to tell them they'll go to hell if they don't stop? Of course not. There are plans to break the cycle of deprivation and neglect, conflict and chaos by teaching parenting skills. Society has become more complicated since Margaret Knight gave her radio talks in the post-war years. People have more freedom to do as they please, but don't know what to do with it. People know how much everything costs, but don't feel personally valued. Training for parenthood's a start. If a child does something wrong, for example, condemn the act, but not the child. What good is telling them they'll go to hell, if they feel they're already there?

THE POWER OF MUSIC

29th May 2000

It took me some time to get started on this *Thought for the Day* yesterday. I'd had a trying time, driving across country through the floods, and needed to unravel a bit when I got home. What better way than by listening to music. Once I started, I drifted off into a nostalgic daydream. I was listening to Kenneth McKellar, the Scots tenor who recorded some wonderful stuff for Decca for 20 years from 1955. My mum loved him. She and Dad had a collection of his songs and the music was part of my

life as I grew up. At the time I didn't really appreciate it, but now, of course, it reminds me of my parents.

Music inspires, soothes, energises, and, for most people, it's wonderfully evocative. Just a few bars, and you not only remember the tune, you remember where you used to hear it. That's why more and more people are choosing to play all sorts of secular music at funerals. It's not just the classics. Folk, '40s and '50s-dance music (Glenn Miller is a favourite), jazz, ballads, brass bands, pop music... anything goes, as long as it's relevant. The most unusual request I've had for a funeral was 'Right Said Fred' singing 'I'm too sexy for my shirt'. It was a family joke, because the dear departed had been fond of strutting his stuff.

Music does something to the brain. It's all to do with how the two halves work together, apparently. It stimulates all the myriad neuroconnections. If you listen to music as you study, more sinks in. Mozart's especially good for this. It's claimed that if young children have a short musical appreciation session every day, just 15 minutes, their schoolwork improves. This is good, but the best thing about it is that they might grow to love music. The composer Igor Stravinsky said, 'The trouble with musical appreciation in general is that people are taught to have too much respect for music; they should be taught to love it instead.'

Of all the arts, music has the power to unite people. There's nothing to beat sharing a musical experience, whether it's singing your head off in a club or pub, joining thousands of young people at an outdoor festival, or listening to a concert or opera at the theatre. Even bad music unites people, as we groan in sympathy. Amid all the chaos and destruction of wartime, musical entertainment raises morale, and on special occasions, like commemorative ceremonies, music expresses what everyone is feeling.

Music offers many things, among them spiritual experiences. The religious don't have a monopoly of these. An appreciation of the beauties of nature, of human beauty, of art, of music, are just some of the ways we might transcend the mundane aspects of our lives, and discover our deepest humanity. Paul Hindemith was a German composer whose work was banned by the Nazis as 'degenerate'. He said, 'People who make music together cannot be enemies, at least while the music lasts.'

I'm going home now, to enjoy more of the BBC Music Live festival on TV and radio. If you're at one of the special musical events today, enjoy yourselves.

WALKING TO JERUSALEM

19th June 2000

A small group of Humanists left Belfast on June 3rd, intending to walk to Jerusalem. They aim to be there for New Year's Day, 2001. Why Belfast to Jerusalem? The two cities have one thing in common; they have been afflicted by religious strife for many years, the sort of strife that afflicts many other places around the world - Algeria, Afghanistan, India,

Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Serbia – the list is endless. For thousands of years people have been fighting and killing each other in the name of religion, and there seems no end to the stupidity.

The walk was the idea of Phil Ward, a 37-year-old married man with two children who works in the printing industry. Phil writes, 'I live in Belfast and I see daily the pain and hopelessness caused here by religion – and I see the same pain else where in the world. Only the name of the religion varies. Its essence and what it can do to our lives is the same. Jerusalem is perhaps the epicentre of intolerance and irrationality fuelled by religion, and the new millennium and its association with Jerusalem provides us with an opportunity to highlight many of our concerns.'

Phil has at least five companions on his long walk, with others joining them for parts of the journey. He says, 'By marching in protest from one epicentre of religious conflict to another, I and my colleagues intend to make a positive statement about Humanism, by highlighting it as a philosophy of life based on human values, reason, secular morality, scientific knowledge...' Humanism, suggests Phil, can heal divisions among people.

Well, it might, but only if the religious opponents are prepared to abandon their long-held prejudices, and that seems unlikely. The sort of people who cause all this pain and suffering define themselves by their beliefs and what makes them different from other people. The practices and customs they observe reinforce their cultural and religious identity, and anyone who suggests that they might be wrong is the enemy. It has to be said that most of this violence is perpetrated by the male of the species. Religion, nationalism, football – they all provide justification for aggression.

Peaceable religious people and gentle men will say we shouldn't judge religion, or men, by the behaviour of the armies of zealots who cause all the trouble, and they'd be right. But Humanism does have something to offer. It's about what we have in common: our humanity. It's about thinking, rather than blindly following one set of dogma or another. It's about tolerance and understanding, rather than prejudice and ignorance.

I admire the energy and commitment of Phil Ward and his companions, and hope their effort makes people think. Perhaps ordinary people might question their own beliefs and consider whether they are guilty of intolerance. Perhaps religious people might consider that those whose beliefs differ from theirs deserve respect, as long as they do no harm. Perhaps secular people might realise that they don't have to apologise for their lack of belief, and discover a philosophy they can be proud of – humanism. Most importantly, perhaps those with influence might realise that the way to combat religious strife is through education. Humanists regard religious schools as divisive. It's only when children are educated all together, in schools free of religious dogma, that the old rivalries might wither and die.

PAEDOPHILE PANIC

24th July 2000

When large numbers of people gather together, strange things happen. A football match, a gifted orator, a band at a music festival, can all have different effects on their audience. When Hitler spoke at the Nuremberg Rally, his followers were whipped up into an irrational frenzy. Anyone clever enough to be able to manipulate the emotions of large numbers of people can achieve more or less whatever they want, which is why we should be very wary of them.

Some sections of the press have a similar effect on their readers. The 'News of the World' yesterday, for example. The editor, reputedly an intelligent young woman, decided to print the names of known paedophiles so that parents might protect their children from them. 'Jolly good,' you can imagine some readers cry, 'let's hang, draw and quarter them!' The prospect of lynch mobs dragging child-abusers into the street, for a dose of 'natural justice', has become a reality. 'So what?' you might say. 'Isn't it what they deserve?'

All this hysteria has been a response to the murder of little Sarah Payne, who went missing close to home at the beginning of the month. While I have every sympathy with her family (though I doubt the wisdom of turning their anguish into a media spectator sport), the 'News of the World's' reaction has been wildly irresponsible, and has helped reinforce all the usual prejudices about child abuse and child murders. Despite the few tragic cases, like Sarah's, there aren't huge numbers of paedophiles stalking unwary children, waiting to pounce, and cases of child murder by strangers are as rare as they've been for years.

'ChildLine', the charity that provides a point of contact for abused children, reports that 95% of children calling them about sexual or physical abuse know their abusers – they are their parents, step-parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents, teachers, family friends, brothers and sisters and other children. Two days after Sarah Payne's body was found, 7-year-old Jade Austin's body was discovered in her bedroom in Northampton, her 8-year-old brother's body in the next room, and their mother's in the kitchen. The chief suspect is Jade's father. While the pile of floral tributes grows where Sarah's body was found, hardly anyone's heard of Jade's death. If the 'News of the World' were to publish the name of every child abuser and murderer, almost all the names would be relatives and friends of the victims, but no one wants to know about that.

Feelings of disgust and revulsion at paedophilia are natural, but shouldn't blind us to the truth. The problem's not going to be resolved by publishing a list of names which will just drive the paedophiles underground, while children continue to be abused and murdered by people they know and trust.

It takes courage to resist popular pressures. However emotional the situation, a humanist approach to such complex and difficult problems involves applying reason and resisting appeals to our sense of outrage. Bad or careless drivers kill far more children on the roads than have ever

been killed, or are likely to be killed, by predatory paedophiles. Will the News of the World publish the drivers' names? Of course not. That wouldn't sell papers.

LIFE ON THE CHEAP

22nd August 2000

You go in the supermarket these days and everywhere they've got these 3 for the price of 2 offers, or so much off this or that. It's the same with gas and electricity. Through TV advertising and other promotions all the energy companies are trying to persuade us that they're offering the cheapest supplies. And a few weeks ago someone stuck a leaflet under my windscreen wiper, suggesting I should boycott the petrol stations on August 1st, to try to bring pressure on the powers-that-be to bring down the price of petrol. Despite most of us being more affluent than we've ever been in the developed world, it seems as though everyone expects to live life on the cheap, as though we have a right to it.

Take petrol. The people who've been campaigning for cheaper petrol say the Americans pay far less than we do for their fuel, and they do. But while Americans in their gas-guzzlers go on paying so little at the pumps, there's no incentive for them to reduce their consumption. With 5% of the world population, America accounts for 22% of world emissions from fossil fuel use. They've avoided keeping their promises about cutting emissions because any US politician who suggested increasing fuel prices would be committing political suicide. So I don't think that cheap fuel, American-style, is an example we ought to follow.

One of the more worrying reports in last weekend's papers was of new evidence of global warming at the North Pole, where scientists have discovered water where there ought to be ice. It took millions of years to build up a store of fossil fuels (which are fossilised vegetable matter), and we're burning it up in a few hundred years. In the mid-1700s the Industrial Revolution started to alter the composition of our atmosphere. In 1885 Gottlieb Daimler constructed the prototype of the modern internal combustion engine, and now most families in the developed world expect to have at least one car, possibly several. If everyone in the poorer countries, like China and India, were to own cars, the carbon dioxide emissions would go sky high. As it is, they've gone up by over 30% in the last 250 years. To stop the increase, we need to cut emissions by half.

It costs more to buy electricity from companies that don't use fossil fuels – windmills are currently the cleanest source of sustainable energy – and from gas suppliers who plant trees to compensate for the carbon dioxide they create, and it costs more to use cleaner petrol. So maybe those who shout for cheap fuel, and those who try to sell it, ought to consider who'll pay in the long run.

If we lived on a spaceship and continually fouled our own atmosphere so that life became very difficult, we'd expect to have to do something about it. We do live on a spaceship – Spaceship Earth. One of my humanist

friends says we ought to call ourselves 'planetists', because if we don't take care of our planet, it won't be fit to live on before long. Will our grandchildren and great-grandchildren thank us or curse us for their inheritance? It depends on whether we take good care of their legacy.

CAN MONEY BUY YOU HAPPINESS, OR JUST MORE 'STUFF'?

16th October 2000

Since the 1950s increasing affluence has allowed many more people to spend, spend, spend, on more and more 'stuff' – household appliances of every sort, TVs and DVDs and WAP phones and cars for every member of the family, and clothes, and trainers, and foreign holidays. For most people, it means working longer hours to pay for it all. Those who've researched such things tell us that though many people have far more 'stuff' (all of the things I've mentioned, and more), fewer people would say they were happy than in the 1950s. It seems that once you get past having good health and good food, a secure home, and a satisfying job, all the other 'stuff' doesn't necessarily make you happier, so why waste precious time working so hard just to spend more money? Meanwhile, the gap between the haves and have-nots is growing wider.

Tomorrow, 17th October, is International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Two years ago United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave a message, which included the following words: 'For the past three decades, we have witnessed the most rapid improvements in the lives of billions. A child born in a developing country today can expect to live 16 years longer than a child born 35 years ago. Infant mortality has been more than halved since 1960, and the share of rural families with access to safe water has risen from 10% of the total to 60%.' 'But,' the Secretary-General went on, '...such gains can be reversed... the struggle for the eradication of poverty has reached a critical phase... So long as every fifth inhabitant of our planet lives in absolute poverty, there can be no real stability in the world.'

Absolute poverty is defined as an income of roughly a dollar a day – which is about 69p a head. Poverty knows no geographical boundaries, spreads over all continents and is present in industrialised and developing countries, though to differing extents. It causes inadequate standards of living, weak health, hunger, unsanitary housing, homelessness, unemployment, social exclusion and illiteracy. It cripples the lives of some 1.5 billion people, whose number is rising by at least 25 million a year, mainly women, children and the elderly. The 1995 World Health Report, 'Bridging the Gaps', found it to be the world's most ruthless killer and the greatest cause of suffering.

The cost of providing basic social services for all in developing countries is estimated at about £27½ billion a year over the next 10 years, which is less than 0.2% of the world income of £17.22 trillion. The sum needed to close the gap between the annual income of poor people and the

minimum income at which they would no longer be poor is estimated at another £27½ billion a year, so the total cost would be roughly £55 billion, or less than the combined net worth of the seven richest people in the world.

Closing the gap between the haves and have-nots could be so easy, given the collective will. Can money buy happiness? It can make a huge difference to those who have very little, but it seems to make little difference to those who have a lot. Once you've got the basic necessities of life, you don't actually need any more. I realise this is heresy in today's consumer culture, where millions of people earn a living producing and selling 'stuff' no one really needs. During the recent petrol crisis, I wondered how many of the lorries on our roads are carrying junk from one end of the country to the other? It's a weird world we live in. All that talent, all that effort, wasted on cluttering up our homes with more and more 'stuff', while a quarter of the world's population live in absolute poverty. Doesn't seem right, does it?

MEME MOURNING

2nd November 2000

Yesterday I noticed that there were lots more wind chimes on the trees in Ipswich Lawn Cemetery than the last time I'd conducted a funeral there. As it was a windy day we had a musical accompaniment. I don't know who started the trend, but it's caught on in Ipswich. I quite like wind chimes - I've got some at home, in my garden - but why fill cemeteries with them? At Ipswich, there are lamps too, the sort you buy from garden centres. I don't know if anyone lights them.

Over the last few years, several trends have developed around death. One of the bearers at the funeral said that he couldn't remember when the practice of laying bunches of flowers at the sight of road accidents began, but maybe it had something to do with tragedies like the Hillsborough disaster, when football scarves and flowers decorated the gates of the club. Then there was Princess Diana's funeral, when mountains of dead flowers piled up on the streets of London and at the Spencer family home. At one time it was enough to wear a black armband to signify mourning; nowadays it's flowers, and cuddly toys, and wind chimes. We appear to be becoming more like our Latin neighbours, who've tended to fill their cemeteries with all sorts of paraphernalia, as they create little shrines by each grave. British cemetery authorities frown on this sort of thing. It makes it more difficult to cut the grass and keep everything tidy.

I have some sympathy with the grass-cutters and tidy-upperers. A few flowers and a teddy bear may appear to be a touching tribute, but a few days in the wind and rain turns everything into a soggy mess, and is that how we really want to honour the dead? When Diana died, I couldn't help thinking that if all the money spent on flowers (however delighted the florists may have been) had been donated to her favourite charities, they'd have been really grateful.

In his book 'Unweaving the Rainbow', the humanist academic Richard Dawkins refers to the meme, a term coined in the '70s, which means anything which can be spread by imitation, like a hummable tune, or a good idea, or the weird fashion for wearing baseball caps back to front. Dawkins calls them 'viruses of the mind'. It seems to me that a pile of cheap wrapped flowers and teddy bears in a public place is a new sort of mourning meme, but it's a strange way to honour the dead. People do these things to show they care, but maybe it's better to honour the dead by benefiting the living, as with poppies on Poppy Day?

BODIES

26th February 2001

When I was an art student, we had anatomy lectures from a retired surgeon, an eccentric who wore a green operating gown to impress us, although he was only using chalk, not a scalpel. He took us to the Hunter Museum and other exhibits at the Royal College of Surgeons. The Hunter Museum is named after the 18th century anatomist William Hunter. I don't remember our anatomy lecturer mentioning it, but Hunter lectured artists at the Royal Academy on the subject of Nature's superiority to Art.

I won't spoil your breakfast by describing what we saw at the museum, in case you're the squeamish sort, but I found it fascinating. The visit reinforced my view that the human body is an amazing thing. Mine doesn't work very well, but considering that so many things have gone wrong with it, I'm grateful it still works at all. I can't claim the credit, however. Several surgeons have interfered with the course of nature, on my behalf. I don't know what they did with the bits they removed, and I don't care. They're no use to me now.

I was reminded of all this recently, during the fuss over the Alder Hey Hospital collection. All over the country, relatives have been demanding to have pathology specimens returned to them, and even having second or third funerals for them. In Hunter's day, before the medical schools were properly regulated, those who lived near them dreaded dissection, not just because little respect was shown for the dead, but because they believed that, on the Day of Judgement, they wouldn't go to heaven with bits missing. I thought we'd got past all that superstitious nonsense, but now I'm beginning to wonder.

Compared with what went on in the 18th century, which was the stuff of horror stories, modern pathology and surgery are stringently regulated, and if surgeons aren't always appreciated for their bedside manners, maybe it's because they try to stay detached, to do what they do. Arrogance is an especially undesirable trait among surgical consultants, dealing with anxious patients and relatives, but an arrogant surgeon can still save your life.

Just because there's a Dr. Shipman, doesn't mean you should be afraid of your GP. And just because there's a Dr. Van What's-his-name at Alder Hey, doesn't mean pathologists collect body parts for fun. The issue of

informed consent has to be dealt with, but the tabloid press has, as usual, whipped up a completely OTT reaction, resulting in a reduction in organ donations. The politicians who've jumped on the bandwagon have a lot to answer for, since some people will die for want of organs.

I can't help feeling that a lot of the recent fuss has been the result of squeamishness, developed since the messier aspects of life were tidied up and dealt with in hospitals and mortuaries. Personally, as long as the doctors respect me while I'm alive, they can do what they like with me when I'm dead, if it helps them to help others to enjoy better health.

WOULD SHAKESPEARE WIN A BAFTA?

24 April, 2002

Yesterday was the date of William Shakespeare's birth and death. He was born on the 23rd of April 1564 and died 52 years later. Nearly 400 years later, I watched the BAFTAs on TV, and wondered if Shakespeare would have won one, if he was alive today.

Shakespeare understood the human condition. He explored human strengths and weaknesses. Some of his characters demonstrated the dignity of the human being, with the potential to think and choose, free from the constraints of society, religion, and the state. He wrote about love – one of my favourite sonnets includes the lines, “it is an ever-fixed mark, that looks on tempests and is never shaken” – and about death – in another sonnet, he wrote, “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, so do our minutes hasten to their end.” He wrote about cruelty and hate, about compassion and wisdom, about men and women being funny, silly, and sexy. Human beings fascinated and inspired him. In Hamlet, he wrote with passion,

“What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”

Perhaps, in these cynical times, a 21st century William Shakespeare mightn't be well received. Maybe he'd be considered too subversive, exposing the self-interest of leaders used to spinning their way out of trouble. Maybe he'd be considered too difficult for audiences who aren't expected to think while watching TV. But maybe they'd give him a BAFTA, the Nobel Prize for Literature, and every other award you can think of, for writing the most wonderful plays and poems about modern life. Humanity, the subject of his work, hasn't changed all that much. We're still struggling to develop our full potential.

WHO KILLED BROCK?

6 May, 2002

Driving home last night, I was in a good mood until I came across a badger lying in the road. I stopped to check it was dead, and move it onto the verge. It hadn't been dead long. Perhaps the driver who killed it was sorry about what he or she had done. Maybe not. It makes no difference to the badger now, or any mate or young it may have had. Someone wanted to be somewhere quickly and the badger got in the way.

Driving at night in the countryside, many are tempted to go faster than they would in daylight because they can see the lights of oncoming vehicles and anticipate slowing down before they reach a bend. What you can't see are the creatures, active under cover of darkness.

Badgers live in the same setts for generations, forming close bonds. They are an ancient species; it's claimed that the earliest fossil remains date back 250,000 years. Since the extinction of the bear and the wolf they've had no natural predators and are the largest land carnivore in the British Isles, though they're comparatively rare in East Anglia. They're protected by several laws, but thousands are killed every year on the roads by anonymous drivers. Every time I come across a dead badger by the roadside, I feel sad and angry; their deaths are pointless and unnecessary - usually the result of speed and casual indifference.

You might think it's sentimental nonsense to be upset about badgers when there is so much human suffering in the world, but indifference to the destruction of wildlife says a lot about a person's morality. If we cannot limit our destructive tendencies towards creatures without a voice, it's more likely that we'll be badly behaved towards people we don't care about, for one reason or another.

It's the breeding season, when the number of wildlife road casualties is high, but it's easy to avoid adding to it. We only have to use our incredible brainpower, and slow down.

BOOKS

28 May, 2002

I'm looking forward to the double bank holiday because it means extra reading time, with fewer distractions.

There have been two stories about books in the news this week. The first was about a survey conducted on behalf of the Orange Prize for Fiction, revealing that 40% of the population never read books, and most people read more newspapers and magazines than books. The average time spent reading is 6 hours a week, compared with 24½ hours watching TV.

The second story was about William Jacques, who's systematically stolen hundreds of rare books from Britain's greatest libraries. They include a book by Isaac Newton, written in 1687, worth a £100,000. The total value of Mr Jacques' haul is over a million. Treasures like those are irreplaceable

Last night, I discovered a new word: bibliotherapist. Patients suffering from depression, stress and anxiety have been referred to bibliotherapists by their GPs for a reading list. This started when librarians observed that many borrowers, returning a book, will often say that it did them good by making them laugh or taking their mind off their troubles. Makes sense to me. Jerome K Jerome's "Three Men in a Boat" always cheers me up.

Reading cereal packets is better than reading nothing at all, but a lot of printed matter barely stretches the mind, and minds need stretching. Have you noticed, for example, how some of the most ignorant people are often the first to express an opinion? If only they could be forcibly referred to a bibliotherapist for some mind-expansion.

The English philosopher Francis Bacon said, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." I like mine with a good cup of tea and a bar of chocolate.

EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION

24 June, 2002

My mum used to send me off to school to face summer exams with the advice, "Do your best." There was far less pressure then, so I was fortunate.

I read in yesterday's newspaper that lots of young people are cracking up under the strain of exams, particularly AS levels - whatever they are. One girl, otherwise a star pupil, fled the exam hall in tears after sitting down to start her 5th exam paper that day, with only 10 minute breaks between.

The current definition of education seems to be about passing exams geared to employability; regurgitating soon-to-be-forgotten facts, and lots of 'em. This is almost as ridiculous as The Mock Turtle's definition of education in Alice in Wonderland: "Reeling and Writhing... and the different branches of Arithmetic - Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision."

The Roman poet Horace wrote that education meant seeking for truth "in the groves of Academe". Horace didn't have to worry about AS levels of course, so that was easy for him to say, and stickily hot classrooms aren't very grove-like. Seeking for truth means thinking, rather than cramming facts, and there's not much time to develop reasoning skills when you've got an exam deadline to meet.

Epictetus was a Greek slave in 1st century Rome who gained his freedom and taught philosophy. He said that "only the educated are free." By this he meant the freedom to live more reflectively and knowledgeably, having learned about literature, history, the arts, science, and practical subjects. A liberal education is essential for any civilised and ethical society. It can inoculate you against what the Humanist Professor Richard Dawkins calls "viruses of the mind"; daft ideas that infect popular opinion and allow stupid, greedy, cruel and ignorant people to gain power and influence.

To those currently struggling with exams, my mum's advice is still valid, but education's not just about exams, and should be life-long. If all else fails, it can be rewarding to seek for truth in the public library.

A LITTLE OF WHAT YOU FANCY DOES YOU GOOD

5 July, 2002

I read or heard somewhere recently that some scientist or other has pronounced that crisps and other fried foods are carcinogenic – in other words, they give you cancer. Even if that were true, I imagine you'd have to eat tons of them to cause much damage. A friend who comes for tea every Sunday always enjoys his cake, and always comments that it's probably bad for him. Other people I know have followed extraordinary diets to rid themselves of "toxins", or "cellulite" (another name for wrinkly fat). The name of the game is denial – denying themselves simple pleasures to achieve some sort of transformation or a sense of self-righteousness. Some scientists, nutritionists and magazine publishers have taken over from the old-style puritans who disapproved of anything enjoyable. Which does more harm I wonder – indulging in high-fat, high-calorie goodies sometimes, or worrying about what they might be doing to you?

Such daftness is only possible in affluent societies, where people have more money and leisure than sense. Millions of people in developing countries wouldn't understand.

What good does it do, to deny yourself small pleasures? Chocolate, fresh cream cakes, a slap-up fried breakfast on a lazy Sunday morning – they're all good for you if you enjoy them and don't overdo them.

It's even better to surprise someone else with something good – a lovely treat, to waken the senses and make him or her feel spoilt – as long as it's received without hurtful suspicion, contempt or indifference. You'll be showing someone they're worth the effort, that you care.

It's the most natural thing in the world to seek pleasure. A lot of what you fancy is greedy, but as Marie Lloyd said, "A little of what you fancy does you good."

LEAVE US ALONE

25 October, 2002

The beautiful Swedish film star Greta Garbo would never have sold her story to the tabloid press. She valued her privacy and was almost a recluse from 1941 until her death in 1990. She's perhaps most famous for uttering the words "I want to be alone" in the 1932 film *Grand Hotel*, but told her biographer John Bainbridge, "I never said, 'I want to be alone.' I only said, 'I want to be left alone.' There is all the difference."

Exposing herself to the intrusions of the tabloid press and the public, as Ulrika Jonsson and Edwina Curry have done, would have horrified Garbo, and I can't imagine anything worse either. When I was nine, one of the things that put me off religion, Christianity in particular, was my mother's warning that God and my Nana (who died in 1953) were watching me, and knew if I was being bad. There's no flipping privacy anywhere, I thought at the time, not even in the loo.

No one has a right to know all about me, or you, or anyone else – not even one's nearest and dearest – unless one's forfeited this right by committing some terrible crime. Some things ought to stay secret, not necessarily because you've anything shameful or dishonest to hide, but because this inner core of oneself is private, and privacy is a necessity. Even if you had nothing else – no home, no physical space of one's own – you'd still need to retreat into the inner space where you keep your private thoughts, private opinions, and private dreams. Lovers who ask "What are you thinking?" are in danger of over-stepping the boundaries of intimacy.

I wonder if, one day, those who sell their sensationalised stories to the press will regret what they did? Do they dream of finding themselves in public stark naked? Will their children disown them? It's bound to end in tears, and most of us are bored with it all anyway.

COMPLAINTS, CIVILITY, AND COMPLIMENTS

14 November, 2002

I once phoned up someone at my local council to thank them for sorting out a problem. "Oh!" said the woman at the other end of the phone. "Oh?" I said, "Why Oh?" "Sorry," she said, "I was just surprised. Not many people do that. It was nice of you to ring."

I don't believe that the reason why hardly anyone phoned to thank them was because they were lousy at their jobs. I think it's just that most people take it for granted that they should get good service, whatever the circumstances.

Most of us respond well to praise and encouragement. If we're doing a good job, isn't good to know that someone appreciates it? When I get a thank you letter, it makes me feel that I'm doing something worthwhile.

If you ask people who deal with the public face to face or on the phone at your council or welfare benefits offices, they'll tell you there's no shortage of complaints. Some may be justified, many are not. If you went into a cake shop and demanded to know why they wouldn't sell you a pork chop, it would be difficult to satisfy you. The demands made on some public services are sometimes just as unrealistic.

If you do have reason to complain and your expectations are reasonable, your approach may strongly influence the outcome. Firmly yet civilly

asserting yourself is more likely to achieve success than belligerence, for example.

The reason that some disputes tend to be prolonged and unproductive is a general lack of civility. Without basic good manners, communication breaks down. If we don't show respect to our fellow human beings, of any age, race, gender or colour, how can we expect them to respect us?

The Chinese sage Confucius, born in 551 BC, taught people how to behave. His teachings are as valid today, such as -

"Someone said, What do you say concerning the principle that injury should be recompensed with kindness? The Master said, With what then will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness."

Maybe we might all thank at least one person for something today, especially if we're not expected to. Thank you for listening.

SPOOKY

10 December, 2002

Years ago, in North Wales, I stayed at a Youth Hostel late in the season with a girl friend. It was a very basic hostel, without electricity or running water, near the edge of a forest. You had to go to bed early, when it got dark. We were almost asleep when the noises started - spooky, moaning, crying noises. "An owl?" I asked the other occupants of the dormitory. We'd all thought that someone was playing silly beggars, but after examining each other's faces by the light of a torch, we agreed that none of us was guilty. So what was it? Did the warden have a warped sense of humour? Whatever it was, it kept us awake. Next morning the warden told us we were imagining things - he hadn't heard anything.

Then there was the legless man of Topsham. Nearly forty years ago I lived in a riverside village in Devon, where several of the pub regulars fished for salmon at odd hours, according to the tides. Once I went out with a couple of them, just for fun. There were mud flats by the quay and you had to get out to the fishing boat in a small dingy. Late at night, after dark, we rowed back to see what looked like a man standing by the water. Someone called out, but there was no reply. The shape moved away, but we could only dimly make out a top half. There were no legs. Then one of the fishermen said that it looked as though the man was wading and what we saw was the part above the water. The shape disappeared into the shadows and we didn't see him again.

On both these occasions, I was stone cold sober. There must have been a perfectly reasonable explanation, but that would probably have been far less interesting than the spooky one.

I was thinking about these stories last night while wondering why there's a tradition of telling ghost stories at Christmas. The Victorians were very keen on them. The best known is probably Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*,

with Marley rattling his chains at the terrified Scrooge. My favourite is Oh, whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad by M R James, who died in 1936.

I'm looking forward to The Red Room, a collection of ghost stories on Radio 4 from 18th December. In the cold and dark of midwinter, what better excuse to huddle together with your nearest and dearest, and pour another drop of something comforting? But of course, I don't believe in ghosts – do you?

THE DEBT I OWE THE PANKHURSTS

3 January, 2003

One thing that struck me about Jane Austen, when watching a TV programme about her the other week, was that many of her possessions were sold without her approval when the family moved house. At that time, women had hardly any rights and were usually financially dependent on male relatives, as Jane was. She died in 1817.

In 1882, the Married Women's Property Act gave married woman the right to acquire and dispose of property as they wished. Until then, everything a woman owned automatically became her husband's property when she married.

It was almost impossible for women to do much about such inequalities when they didn't have the vote. Men made the law.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Women's Social & Political Union, or WSPU. Its founders – Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenny – gave up trying to politely persuade male MPs to give women the vote, and took direct action – demonstrating, chaining themselves to railings, even vandalising property – to attract attention to their cause. They were harshly treated. When they were arrested they went on hunger strike and were brutally force-fed.

I met a suffragette about thirty years ago through one of her sons, an eminent barrister – he and I were active in a civil rights organisation. I told her about making a speech proposing the appointment of a Women's Rights Officer. She understood my anger about a trades-unionist – a man – who told everyone that it was OK by him if his wife came to our meetings, as long as his dinner was on the table before she left.

In 1928, largely thanks to the Suffragettes' campaign, women were given equal voting rights. Thirty years ago, we were still campaigning for equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation. I owe the Pankhursts and Annie Kenny. I wonder how many of today's young women even use their vote?

EMOTING BY EMAIL

29 May, 2003

Funny how you don't appreciate how dependent you are on something until you can't have it. I've got a 20-a-day habit, and I'm suffering from withdrawal symptoms. It's not fags or drugs - it's emails. They're one of my primary forms of communication. But some fool of a lorry driver managed to break the phone line to my house a week ago and I haven't been able to email or fax since. I'm relying on an unreliable mobile phone and every time I phone the phone company, I have to tell the same story again because I never get to talk to the same person twice. The frustration is driving me mad, so I admit that I raised my voice yesterday to some poor man who was doing his best but knew no more about my problem than the last person I'd spoken to. Maybe it's as well that I can't send a terse email.

Opening a nasty letter or email is like being slapped. Without warning, someone's being horrible to you. It can ruin your whole day.

Email is quick. You can write something in the heat of anger and once it's gone, you can't get it back and revise it. Maybe one ought to think thrice before clicking "send" when you're cross.

Letters take longer, so there's less excuse for sending something offensive. A friend had a letter the other day which was written with malice. His wife said he should shred it, so he did, but he still felt upset. I've had anonymous letters written in purple felt-tip from bitter and twisted types, and wondered how long they've been nursing their nastiness - years, probably. Public servants get stuff like this, because they're often regarded as faceless bureaucrats. You can't see someone's face while they're reading what you've written, but if you could, would you say it? Would you care if they went home at the end of the day and told their nearest and dearest what a nasty person you were?

Anyway, I am trying to be patient with the phone people, and look forward to being deluged with two weeks' worth of emails soon. Some will be from family and friends who may have been wondering why I haven't replied yet. Quite a few will have been written in haste, sent with a quick click, and will make me smile or laugh. Anything unpleasant will be deleted. If only life was that simple.

ART & LIFE

19 June, 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.

ROBERT G INGERSOLL

13 August, 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."

LET IT RAIN!

5 September, 2003

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 Creeting 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.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

1 October, 2003

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 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 HUMANIST LOOK AT HALLOWEEN

30 October, 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 sweets to offer any scary creatures that turn up on my doorstep tomorrow night.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

1 December, 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.

SUGGESTIONS

If you're invited to do a humanist 'thought' on your local radio station, you might bear the following in mind:



- Read it aloud to check it sounds OK;
- Don't lecture;
- Maintain a natural pace – neither too fast or too slow – and don't allow your voice to drop at the end of a sentence;
- Stick to your time limit (very important, this);
- Bear in mind that when the red light's on the listeners can hear *everything*;
- It's OK to be downbeat on occasion, though you should avoid depressing the listeners and try to end on a positive note. Use humour when appropriate;
- Enjoy yourself!