

The Joy of Humanism: an Exercise in Humanist Narrative

David E. Schafer

*What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought
Since Jesus came into my heart;
I have light in my soul for which long I had sought,
Since Jesus came into my heart.*

CHORUS

*Since Jesus came into my heart,
Since Jesus came into my heart;
Floods of joy o'er my soul like the sea-billows roll,
Since Jesus came into my heart.*

RH. McDaniel, from Songs of Praise (1935)

They have told me I drew my first hesitant breath on the eighth of March, 1931 in Wichita, Kansas, and that within a week I was in bed with June Joslin, my future wife. Maybe so~part of me is deeply skeptical. My skepticism has gotten me into trouble sometimes, and sometimes out of it. But I also grew up terribly anxious, and anxiety and skepticism conspired to shove me over the brink into the Lake of Fire, where I nearly drowned. It took me more than ten years of pain and struggle to get from the terrors of Hell to the joys of Humanism. I'd like to tell you how this happened and how it has affected my outlook and my life. 1

My father, Glenn Schafer, came to Wichita to escape from Columbus, Ohio, and learned to be an architect from a correspondence school. He met my mother, Dorothy Kelley, in Kingman, Kansas. She was a worrier, so she needed a strong man to reassure her-and guess who she found?

Then I became flesh, and dwelt among them. It was the Great Depression, and my father went on the road all the time to find work. I flourished under my mother's doting tutelage. In my earliest memories of her, she was either singing or crying. We were Methodists, of course, and she sang dozens of hymns; I memorized all the hymns and sang little solos in church. I also learned hundreds of Bible stories, and won a prize for reciting the names of all the 66 (= 39 + 27) books of the Bible. Naturally the prize was a Bible. We moved from town to town, and when I was five I was ready for first grade, but the rules said you had to be six. My parents appealed to the superintendent, and when I read for him he stuck to the rules and put me in second grade.

In Wichita, when I was seven, my parents bestowed upon me a baby sister named Ruth. As consolation I received my first piano lessons. When I turned nine, I gave my first piano recital. One morning my father had to go out of town, and my mother got a phone call a while later that made her even more nervous than usual. She said that my daddy had been in an accident, but I should go on to school. A little later the teacher got a note from the office and told me to go right home. I ran home crying and stumbling and asking God not to let my daddy die. The moment I got in the house, my mother's face told me that the Lord of the Universe had declined to grant my fervent prayer.

After my father died things went steadily downhill. I felt I was being punished for being bad; this was confirmed when my mother began a year-long secretarial course and Ruth and I were banished to Kingman to live with our grandmother and Aunt Pauline and her husband, who were Baptists in the worst evangelical way. It was their mission to Save me.

Their church was a festering sore of seeping fundamentalism; they spent all the time reading *Daniel* and *Revelation* and talking about the imminent end of the world, with seven years of tribulation and all. There was a revival every few days. All too soon I found myself weeping on my knees at the altar, accepting

the Lord Jesus Christ as my Personal Savior and begging for my sins to be forgiven while the whole church prayed for me and praised God. Right afterward I felt much better, but a few weeks later, although they had told me that "once saved, always saved," I became terribly scared that the vaccine of salvation might not actually have taken and fervently threw myself on the altar again while everybody praised God and prayed for me allover. They all assured me I was now *really* a new person, and would never been the same again, but this only scared me more, because I didn't feel the least bit different. I had nightmares about dying and the eternal fires of Hell, and I was pretty miserable. I was nine and in the sixth grade, but at recesses I played with a first-grade class I was accompanying in a musical.

Between skepticism and anxiety I had the worst of both worlds. I wasn't sure that what the fundamentalists were telling me was the truth; but at the same time I could never be absolutely sure that it *wasn't*, and *if* it wasn't, I was headed for mighty scary trouble. Even when that awful year was over, the memory of it didn't let up; also, for the first time it began to sink in that my father was actually dead. I tried to bring him back, I think, by getting his books out and studying them.

Our house was a few blocks from Friends University, a Quaker college with a large library. I began to loiter around the professors of math and physics, who taught me trigonometry and calculus and introduced me to dozens of wonderful books about the joys of mathematics and the mysteries of relativity, cosmology, and quantum mechanics-and occasionally threw in a game of chess. I discovered the world's most beautiful equation, with all five fundamental constants of arithmetic:

$$e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0.$$

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At school my social adjustment left much to be desired. I had no friends and wanted none. The counselor told me that I should be able to do "anything I wanted to do." I thought she meant *everything*, so I went home and made a long list of impossible goals I would surely accomplish. I broke my right arm at home practicing to jump well enough for gym.

After two years in junior high I got permission to attend East High School, across town. The good thing about this was that I bicycled to school, and was in the best physical condition of my life. The vice-principal admired James H. Breasted, founder of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. He thought I should take an accelerated high-school program and get into the University of Chicago as fast as possible-even without graduating from high school. Again I broke my right arm, getting it caught in a freight elevator. My mother was terribly upset. "Your head could have gotten caught," she pointed out helpfully. Most of my time went to music. I wrote my first musical composition, "The Song of the Chattahoochee,"² and accompanied the glee club, the mixed chorus, and soloists, and played the high school organ.

I wanted to make money playing the organ, so I started studying at Friends with the "best organist in Kansas." He gave me a job playing at the West Side Baptist Church, where he was choir director. His tastes were much too modern for West Side, so he left, leaving me behind-the luckiest accident of my whole life. His place was taken by a gentle man who brought to the choir a daughter-the loveliest blonde vision I had ever seen! How could I know that this June Joslin was the beloved of my first days of existence, and my future bride? (Our parents had been friends when I was born, and June was born five days later, and they sweetly put us in the same crib. Now I was the organist, and she the choir director's daughter-clearly a relationship made in Heaven!) We saw a lot of each other, and she became my best friend-and still is.

The most important influence on me in those days was Prof. Cobb, head of English at Friends. At The Johns Hopkins

University he had written a massive Ph.D. thesis on *The Subjunctive Mood in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Almost every day for five years he spent hours tutoring me in everything under the sun-like the multiple evolutions of primitive Indo-European aspirated and unaspirated labiovelars in various *centum* and *satem* languages, and what "pizzle" means in Addison's *Tatler* #216.

Dr. Cobb helped make languages one of my three chief interests.³ Mathematics, music, and languages seemed almost like one and the same thing to me. The Quakers reinforced my growing passion for languages by making me an internationalist. There was an Institute of International Relations at Friends, where speakers came to promote peace in the world. My mother's older brother gave me money to attend an exciting series at the Institute. The library also had amazing books on comparative religion, higher Biblical criticism, and primitive beliefs.⁴ I was just starting to use intellect to quell my intolerable anxieties about the terrors of eternal damnation, but I still had a very long way to go.

Once, traveling alone to visit relatives in Columbus, I took the train to Chicago. Between trains I raced to the Oriental Institute; in those vast, silent rooms I was mysteriously transported to the ancient Near East. Roaming around the dark halls upstairs, I casually opened one door and was welcomed into Prof. Keith Seele's seminar in Middle Egyptian. He showed me around, invited me to join the Egyptological Association at half price (still too much!), and later sent me a hand copy of Middle Egyptian hieroglyphics hot from the current expedition.⁵

In Columbus I was saddened to discover my own cousins using a bridge deck to play card games, a thing m& Christians would never do. Worse yet, my father's brother actually said grace at dinner like this:

*Lord, make us able
To clean up the table.
I think we can do it*

If we just stick to it.

A few years later he was punished for this blasphemy; after he had his gallbladder out God caused a ligature to slip, and he bled to death.

Among his many accomplishments, Dr. Cobb had somehow become an ordained Christian minister, and augmented his income by "supplying" in vacant pulpits. Once he asked my mother if I could go along. She pelted him with questions about where we were going-in particular, "They believe in Hell, don't they?" Dr. Cobb shot back, "No intelligent person does." I had never heard anybody talk about Hell like that. And I had never heard anybody talk to my mother like that.

Lying was a sin, so Dr. Cobb tried to teach me how to equivocate.⁶ It was still disturbing to think that it might be all right to fudge the truth. He illustrated the art of equivocation with a story from his own ministry. A woman asked him what Jesus meant by "a camel" going through "the eye of a needle." Was the "camel" (kamelos) really a "rope" (kamilos), or was "The Needle's Eye" one of the narrow gates of Jerusalem-or what? He merrily told me how he soothed his questioner with the answer, "I believe Jesus meant exactly what he said!"

Entering friends at 14, I became an English major, to "learn about the Nature of Man." Great Truths were embodied in Great Literature because Great Writers are deeply sensitive to Great Truths. I wrote short musical compositions in the style of Hindemith and Schonberg, and a few songs. I accompanied some terrific musicians-especially a tenor, Bob Price. The high point came when Bob won a series of contests with me at the piano, and we flew to New York to perform in Carnegie Hall!

The college required two Bible courses. I took The Two [Hebrew] Kingdoms, and consumed R.H. Pfeiffer's secular *Introduction to the Old Testament*. The teacher, an amiable evangel-

ical, astonished me with his tolerance of "modernism" and the silly jokes he told about his own religion. I also took *The Life of Christ*, about the complex authorship of the gospels and variants of the Jesus stories-quite amazing to a 15-year-old anxious about Hell! It also helped me to take philosophy from old Quaker Prof. Mills, whose idea of the basis of ethics still sounds essentially Humanist to me: "What's *good...is* what's *goodfor folks!!*"

My religious emancipation under Dr. Cobb's guidance had gotten about as far as William James when it suffered a huge setback. Dr. Cobb left for another college, delivering me to a younger man, David White. David, a very serious Quaker, was a radical pacifist, having refused to register for the draft. After prison he had lived with some Vedantists in Southern California, typed the manuscript of *The Perennial Philosophy* for Aldous Huxley, and corresponded with Ananda Kentish ("Coomie") Coomaraswamy. Eagerly I devoured the *Perennial Philosophy*. The good news was that it drew me further away from Hell fire; the bad news was that I was just as unprepared to handle these "novel" ideas. At first they seemed empowering, but with time they became an increasing burden.

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had been formed to promote racial harmony by nonviolent direct action. With a friend, June and I started a Wichita chapter. We assembled around 30 members-blacks, Jews, Quakers, and Unitarians-and I was president. It was amazing how uninhibited and irreverent the Unitarians were, and yet how sincere. We picketed a Safeway store in the ghetto that had no black employees, and we petitioned the YMCA to let "Negro branch" members use the downtown YMCA swimming pool. Bayard Rustin came to town and played his lute and sang for us, and George Hauser also came to urge us on. We met with support from some community leaders, but great resistance from Safeway and the YMCA. We got one young black fellowa small job at Safeway, but it was years more before the YMCA changed its policy. We learned a lot.

During my last summer at Friends I took a course on the novel from Defoe to Dostoevsky from Maurice Friedman (later an authority on Martin Buber), expecting to "learn about the Nature of Man." Maury interpreted each novel in terms of Nikolai Berdyaev's idea of "the Demonic." All summer I kept asking him what "the Demonic" *meant* and he kept replying that everybody, including me, intuitively *knows* what "the Demonic" is.

That fall David and I hitchhiked to Minneapolis, where we both planned to pursue graduate study in English. I was Robert Penn Warren's teaching assistant in *The Interpretation of Poetry*—but first I had to take the course myself. It was great sport, and a huge privilege. I also chose the two-year sequence in Old and Middle English literature with John Clark, who reminded me of Dr. Cobb; so I had one foot in the New Criticism and the other in the Middle Ages. One day I sat at the piano in Clark's apartment playing "Ein feste Burg" while he, a beer in hand, sang in German at the top of his voice. "My God!" he shouted at the end, "It almost makes you want to be a Christian!"

I went over to the Methodist church with a friend to practice the Bartok *Sonata for Violin and Piano*; they soon tossed us out for making unpleasant noises. At the University Baptist Church we were welcomed by the Rev. John Saunders Bone, a keyboard man himself. For several years I would be organist, then also choir director, in his church. In May I played the premiere of the twelve-tone Piano Sonata by Glenn Glasow, a student of Ernst Krenek, for the Twin Cities Society of Composers.

I took Advanced History of Philosophy. "If epistemology is the basis of philosophy," I wondered, "what is the basis of epistemology?" Herbert Feigl's *Philosophy of Science* started my life on a 180-degree turn. Feigl was a terrific teacher and the first Humanist I ever met. He made the philosophy of science a Humanist narrative about three kinds of philosophy-of "Something More," "Nothing But," and "What's What." He explained that all philosophy starts from two questions, "What do

you mean?" and "How do you know?" Then he took off into the story of 20th-century scientific philosophy. When I discovered Schroedinger's *What Is Life?* I raced back to him to ask if he found it as exciting as I did—the inventor of wave mechanics tackling Life itself! He was gentle, as usual. "It is interesting," he agreed; "but a bit nebulous, perhaps."

But the year that started so gloriously ended up almost as awful as my year in Kingman. June was at Kansas University on a scholarship—everyone around me was at least five years older than I was. I was alone!! Just as bad, I had come to "learn about the Nature of Man," but everybody else was talking about English literature! Several professors suggested thesis projects, but none of them seemed worth the effort.

When my father died I had assumed the horrible yoke of Christian fundamentalism. When I lost my second "father," Dr. Cobb, I had come under the spell of the Perennial Philosophy, which was no better. In fact, they were a lot alike. You were intimately connected to the Ultimate Power in the universe. If you followed the rules you could summon up the Power on your behalf. If this worked it was great, but if you failed, it was your fault. If you got sick, you had made yourself sick. If you were hit by a truck, you must have decided to be hit by a truck. Like its successor, the New Age, the Perennial Philosophy did not accept human limitations. And there was no mechanism, no property of the universe, through which it could operate. And experience didn't support it. You could summon the Power, but "will it come when you do call?" I needed a much more intellectually convincing and emotionally satisfying world view, so when John Clark referred to Coomaraswamy as a "madman," I was shocked at first, but I soon understood what he meant.

When I went home to Kansas for summer vacation I had no firm plan. At length I asked June if she would marry me and come to Minnesota, and she agreed. She would have to give up her scholarship. We were 18. Our parents consented, and her wonderful fa-

ther put up her tuition. My grandmother came from Columbus for the wedding. A friend sang *Bist Du Bei Mir* and a setting of *Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds* that I wrote for the occasion. We made Wichita history by having a black friend as usher; "What's he doing here?" my grandmother asked. We were too young, some said, and horribly incompatible, but they underestimated our pigheaded determination.⁷ We celebrated every month, and recently reached anniversary #560. (Great is the power of Humanist love!).

With June in Minneapolis, life instantly improved~ before long we had some friends our own age. Six months later we went to Wichita for Easter vacation and were greeted as we got off the bus with the devastating news that June's little brother Stanley had died that very morning of a virulent interstitial pneumonia that had lasted only a few hours. His death hit June awfully hard; she was not consoled when people suggested that it was a part of God's mysterious plan, that God had wanted another flower for his garden, etc. To her such talk was stupid and cruel, and it made her so angry she lost her faith in a Christianity that could think like that. I believe she was better prepared for Humanism than I was, and not by any mere rational argument but by her intense feelings about Stan's death.

A wonderful volume fell into my hands, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, by Martin Gardner, a book of true stories about people who used "scientific" machines or ideas to gain power over others. It is required reading for anyone who hopes to distinguish science from superstition. It helped me eventually to junk the Perennial Philosophy, leave English, and seek "the Nature of Man" in the sciences. I applied for medical school, and a year later I was admitted, and June, moved by Stanley's death to enter elementary school teaching, got her first job.

I had envisioned medical school as a little like graduate school, but it was more like boot camp. It was hard to see how you could ever learn anything about the Nature of Man here. In bio-

chemistry, proteins and DNA weren't understood yet. Dick Dickerson hadn't yet written his classic introductionS to protein structure and function; in fact, he was still singing in my choir at the University Baptist Church. Once again I was in the wrong place! I had to wait until spring for a Revelation.

When it finally came, the heavens opened up and a light surpassing all other light shone forth in sudden splendor. It happened when Prof. Nathan Lifson began to layout his elegant and beautiful introductory lectures on general physiology, developing the classic thesis that the human machine is a highly organized colony of cells, whose environment ("*milieu interieur*")⁹ is held within narrow limits ("homeostasis")⁹ by regulatory mechanisms based on functions of the cells. As he wove his lovely tale of the fundamental oneness of all life and the primacy of the single cell as the unit of life, I was not merely transfixed-I was *hooked*. This poem sounded to my starved ears like a eulogy to life, a panegyric, a paean, an ode, a hymn-all those beautiful Greek words! I wanted to quit medical school on the spot and be a general physiologist, and learn more and more about the Nature of Man. At lunch I gushed to my unbelieving classmates about the miracle we had just heard. "Don't you know," they inquired, "that that was Black Nate?" Well, their "Black Nate" was my White Knight-I had accepted the Lord Nathan Lifson as my Personal Savior, and I finally knew with total inner certainty that "once saved, always saved." I was 21 years old; it was high time.

This epiphany of mine was so deeply personal that it might be hard for most to understand. It turned my life completely around, because it gave me a frame of reference in which to organize and answer **all** the questions I had been wondering and worrying about so long-the Terrible Questions about Life and Death and Sex and Religion and History and The World. Physiology was my key to understanding the whole universe, my bridge connecting epistemology to quantum mechanics to biophysics to biochemistry to neurobiology to psychology and back to epistemology. Instantly I understood the Nature of Man-better than

Schrodinger, whose ideas were, after all, "a bit nebulous."¹⁰ It might take a little while to work out the details, but the grand picture was immediately clear.

It was another year before I was finally able to reenter graduate school, in physiology. On Youth Sunday I was invited to preach a sermon at the University Baptist Church. I talked about what a joy it was to be young in those times: Science was just beginning to help us human beings understand who and what we are and what we can and cannot be; this is the very stuff of religion itself,... After the service I stood at the door to shake the hands of the congregation in efflux. Somebody remarked, staring, "I thought I was in the Unitarian church today." The *Minneapolis Tribune* recruited me to write for a daily Lenten series my thoughts on "What My Religion Means to Me." There on the front page I sat at the organ (where I was no longer playing), delivering a message intended both for physiologists and my Aunt Pauline, about the humanity and nobility of Jesus' teachings. I had a serious conversation with John Saunders Bone, saying that I no longer felt I belonged in his church. He argued that one of our members was an orthodox Hindu, that his church had no creed, and that as far as he was concerned anybody who believed in God could belong. "That's my problem," I answered.

In the fall of 1952 I became a graduate student in the department chaired by Maurice Visscher, distinguished physiologist, administrator, activist, and Humanist. One of his projects was the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, where Humanist John Dietrich had served years before. The Society was strongly Humanist, although its minister, Carl Storm, eschewed labels. Several of the faculty and graduate students in Visscher's department were members. The effect was to establish permanent associations in my mind: "physiology|Humanism|Unitarianism."

Not long after that someone invited me to become chairman of the music committee at the Society. "I'm not a member," I said. "That's not important," came the reply, and June and I joined the

Society. It has always been meaningful to me that my first formal connection with Humanism was through music. The Society had a lot of fine vocal and instrumental soloists, a splendid chorus and chamber orchestra, and a very gifted director of music; but the hymn-singing on Sunday mornings was pretty dismal. I set up a "hymnal committee" of myself and two others, who knew about both literature and music. We worked on the hymnal for almost a year, and ended up with several decent new "hymns."

One of the old songs had been Edwin Markham's "Earth Is Enough" with an ending to make it fit the tune of "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee." When you sang it, it came to a stop at the end of each line:

*We men of earth have here the stuff!
Of Paradise we have enough!*

I wrote a triumphal tune for these words, running the first two lines properly together ("the stuff/Of Paradise"), and we introduced it to the Society one Sunday. When a former colleague in English said after the service that he was "thrilled" by my song, I felt I was on to something.

Carl Storm was a fountain of Humanist narratives, though he didn't call them that. The first talk I heard him give, on Benjamin Franklin, exploded my illusions that I knew something about the subject. Maybe one talk out of four was a biography, often of a most unlikely person. When he spoke on John Scarne, "world's foremost gambling authority," I concluded that he was able to see a Humanist story in the life of *any* human being whomsoever, and this idea is still part of my concept of a Humanist narrative. What matters is the speaker's point of view.

In April 1957 we had our first child, a boy we named Martin. I was present at the delivery, and went home full of some of the strongest emotions I have ever felt, and sat alone at the piano with tears of joy flooding down my face as I wrote music for "Three Unitarian Hymns" to A. E. Housman poems that I had

studied with Warren: "On Wenlock Edge" (on the oneness of humanity); "From Far, From Eve and Morning" (on life's transitoriness and the need to help each other); and "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" (on the irony of being 'paid' to die saving the world).

Fatherhood was one of the great Humanist Revelations of my life. I did not learn what it was like to be a student until I began to teach, and I really discovered what I had missed as a child when I became a father. I had finally found the father I had been searching for-and he was myself! In the end, those Humanist values that are not purely private are about human relationships, from the most intimate to the most global. True, the Humanist world view offers a consistent rational framework for explaining, predicting, and controlling phenomena, and it's essential that we get it right; but human relationships involve, in addition, value judgments and behavioral skills that do not inevitably flow from that world view. Having grown up a loner, I learned a lot of what I know about human relationships from watching June; human relationships came "naturally" to her, and in that respect I would call her a "natural" Humanist.

Once somebody phoned to ask me to present the atheist position for Religion in Life Week at Macalester College. I was willing, but June warned me, "Those people will eat you alive!"- so I asked him whether I could present the Humanist position instead. "I don't know~" he hesitated, "what's a Humanist?" "A Humanist," I reassured him, "is an atheist who shaves." I gave the talk and got out in one piece.

To flesh out my conception of physiology as a bridge from one end of science to the other, I took theoretical physics, atomic physics, quantum mechanics (three versions), and mathematical physics~ and under Ernst Gellhorn, a Unitarian Humanist whose magnum opus was *Physiological Foundations of Neurology and Psychiatry*, I studied neurophysiology. My doctoral research was an indication of the kind of research career I would have in physiology. I was never particularly good with my hands, and while I

could do first-rate benchwork I was slow and inefficient. It took me five years to choose a thesis project; I kept looking for something short on benchwork and long on theory and concept. After Martin was born I got serious about the thesis and was rescued by another Humanist Unitarian in the department, Jack Johnson, who gave me the problem of measuring and interpreting the movement of inert solutes out of heart capillaries into heart tissue. This was perfect; I knew an analysis of the problem, using partial differential equations and Laplace transform, and shortly I got some data and started writing.

My research had gotten the attention of Homer Smith, physiology chairman at New York University, and in 1958 we left Minnesota and moved to New York. Homer was known to physiologists as the world authority on the kidney, and to Humanists as the author of *Kamongo* and *Man and His Gods*. He was nearing the end of a distinguished career. Besides teaching medical students I explained mathematical models of kidney function to him, and translated German and Russian articles for his research. One year he asked me to take his place in an interview over radio station WEVD on Easter Sunday entitled "Poets Without God." I was also translator and translation editor of two complete Russian journals, working closely with Gregory Razran, who had studied with Pavlov. I liked to think this was a contribution to international understanding.

In 1961 June and I completed our family with Margaret. Again it was astonishing to realize how powerfully a helpless new life could focus my outlook and reinforce my Humanism. With my own troubled childhood before my mind, raising little children as anything other than Humanists struck me then, as it does now, as a terrible form of abuse. Today Martin and Margaret are enjoying Humanist lifestyles with careers in computers and electronics, respectively, and it comforts us to know that they are happy and free of traditional religious baggage!

After more than five years in New York, we moved together to South Asia, where I spent four years altogether in teaching and research on the fascinating and terrible disease cholera. For the first two and one-half of these years we lived in Calcutta; about India I can only echo the sentiments of Salman Rushdie:

..India is an assault on your senses...India is a country with the volume control turned up to maximum...with the smell control turned up to maximum. Everything is excess...India overwhelms you-the sights of it, the sounds of it, the smells of it, the taste of it, the touch, the feel of it...And people who are not Indian...either loathe it,...have a really strong revulsion against it, it's too much for them, or they fall in love, and they can never see the world the same way again.

June and I were among the incredibly lucky ones, and we fell passionately in love with India. We felt that this was what the real world was mostly like, and we had "joined the human race."¹² Growing up, I had learned about Christian missionaries to India, and now I imagined myself as a physiologist/Humanist missionary. Once I even spoke on intergenerational Humanism to a group of mystified middle-aged male Radical Humanists in Calcutta. June taught at the International School and I was its president for a while. We got the school off the ground morally and financially, offering a summer school with scholarships for Bengali children (advertising in Bengali) and obtaining State Department support. We liked to tell Indian friends that ours was an "arranged" marriage since our parents had brought us together at birth.

From Calcutta we moved first to Bangkok, taking six of my Bengali graduate students, and then back to the United States, extending our own family by bringing along two of those students, both of whom eventually took Ph.D.'s in physiology. June entered special education and has remained there. For a decade I focused on research; Humanism was always on my mind, but I kept it mostly to myself. We moved to New Haven and joined the Unitarian Society of New Haven, where I was organist for several years and June was the Director of Religious Education. After another period as a research administrator, helping other people with their research, I eventually came to my present position developing new

DNA assays for the clinical laboratory, using the almost unimaginably sensitive method known as PCR, "polymerase chain reaction."

In the early 1980's, people we knew began to talk about something they called "spirituality," and one Sunday Bernie Siegel, M.D., promoted "miracles" from the USNH pulpit! We felt a responsibility to counter growing antirational tendencies in our midst. Stirred from our torpor, we became Humanist missionaries to New Haven. We started teaching Humanist classes in the Tanakh, the New Testament, and the Qur'an at the Society, and conducting Humanist forums on Sunday. I chaired the Social Responsibility committee for three years, and June for several more; she is now chair of the Task Force on Poverty and Economic Justice.

In 1989, with help from the American Humanist Association's Fred Edwards, we joined with Bob and Joan Rafford to organize a chapter of the AHA, the Humanist Association of Central Connecticut. Bob, June, and I were elected vice president, secretary, and president. Seven years later the group is quite active, and more cohesive than ever. Our members are fond of two types of Humanist narrative. Talks on "Humanist Heroes," a theme introduced by Rev. Doug Peary and imitated by some of the rest of us, cast us into the presence of giants-awesome examples who inspire us and make us wish for more like them. "Why I Am a Humanist" and "What Humanism Means to Me" give us all an opportunity to share our own comparatively humble experiences and learn more about the role Humanism plays in each others' lives. These stories have become very important to us, and the Association is stronger because of them.

As a new leader of this AHA chapter I applied for admission to the Humanist Institute. Eventually I graduated with the fourth class, with Howard Radest as our mentor. For me, as a student and now as an adjunct member of the faculty, the Institute, with its opportunities to study and collaborate with other dedi-

cated Humanists, has been far more than a mere training school; it has been a source of pure joy.

In the 80's I also began to write music again, almost all of it on Humanist themes, for the excellent Unitarian Society chorus. Some of these compositions were occasioned by the departure or arrival of ministers of the Unitarian Society, emotional experiences shared by many persons. Some were inspired in part by deeply personal experiences like the deaths of my mother, June's mother, and one of our closest friends, another Humanist physiologist. People have often said my pieces evoke strong feelings, and I confess that has been my intention. In May, 1993, the Unitarian Society chorus performed 16 compositions of mine in a concert, giving me a profound sense of fulfillment and yes, of joy.

For almost ten years now, and again this year, the Society has invited June and me to organize the Sunday morning programs for all ten or so weeks during the summer, roughly a hundred in all. These are as varied, interesting, informative, and Humanist as we know how to make them, with lots of music, poetry and other readings, videotapes, and discussion. In April 1987 I scheduled a talk entitled "Same Old New Age" for Sunday, August 16-which turned out to be the very same day as the quintessential New Age event, the "Harmonic Convergence," the "Hummer Bummer," about which we had known nothing in April! One recent program was a Humanist examination and appreciation of the intense human feelings some describe as "spiritual." Another, "How I Wonder What You Are,"¹³ explored the emotions we all feel at the birth of a new baby or when we look at the stars-and the way these feelings can be enhanced by breathtaking discoveries from the Hubble Space Telescope and by exciting knowledge of the molecular embryology of a worm, *Caenorhabditis elegans*.

I am keenly aware of my extraordinary good fortune in a long series of great teachers. It is always gratifying to pass liberating knowledge on to others in our summer programs and in talks other groups invite me to give from time to time. The grand

Humanist vision of a humanity freed from the vicious bondage of "creeds outworn" drives me to invoke my love of languages in an effort to understand and explain the cultures that languages represent. I seek new opportunities to immerse myself in less familiar traditions so as to discover potential bridges to Humanism. They are always there! The real obstacles to surmounting cultural differences are not those formidable-looking demons erected to guard the temple gates, but poverty, slavery, ignorance, and ill will}4

One of our happiest summer programs presented a song cycle I knew from high school days: *In a Persian Garden*, a setting of Fitzgerald's version of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, the skeptical 12th-century Khurasani philosopher-astronomer. I studied Persian so as to render two quatrains in faithful English and recite them in faithful Persian. The singers were brilliant, the music was glorious, and we all loved it; we were asked to give it again in a Unitarian service the following May.

Evangelical Christians sing songs like the one at the top of this essay, about the "wonderful change" and the "floods of joy" that Jesus has brought into their lives. Millions of people long for a "wonderful change" and for "floods of joy," and I can believe that the story of Jesus makes that possible for many who are lucky-or unlucky-enough to believe the impossible, the absurd. Songs like this may even play an important role in making them into believers. For me, though, there is a powerful irony here. Whatever change Jesus brought into my life made me utterly miserable, and it was not until years later, when I found Humanism, that "floods of joy rolled o'er my soul." It's also ironic to me that we Humanists rarely if ever sing songs of gladness to celebrate the joys and beauties of Humanism. Don't we know how lucky we are?

Each of us is unique; some are more unique than others. The key to my own Salvation, my conversion to Humanism, was finding a credible belief system-the physiologist's understanding of the nature of human beings. I'm sure that's not how most people order their priorities. Most people are unmoved by rational argu-

ments about reality, and it's futile trying to reach them this way. The questions I most often hear from non-Humanists, and many Humanists, boil down to two: "How can we be good without God?" and especially "How can we be happy without God?"

Recently I heard Mario Cuomo (no Humanist!) answer both questions at once: "You will find your own good in the good of the community." Maybe not, but that's the way to bet. This is the ~ of Humanism. In the end most Humanist values, and most good Humanist stories, are about discovering fulfillment in mutually fulfilling human relationships.

*In the trillium beneath
the hickory grove on our ridge
my son and I find a few morels
and drop them into a brown paper bag
Our small talk worn thin
we walk back to the house
through the dew wet pasture
without speaking.*

*Here, miles from town, without
his friends to see, he reaches
across our silent striding
in the bright spring morning
and grasps my hand with all
the strength of his ten years.*

Each of us holds On.16

¹ This essay is based in part on two talks, "Why I Am a Humanist," and "What Humanism Means to Me," originally presented to the Humanist Association of Central Connecticut (explained in the text).

2 A poem by Sidney Lanier.

3 In these years I wrote a research paper on the Semitic languages; got interested in Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, Chinese, and any other language I could find a book on; read and reread Bodmer and Hogben's *The Loom of Language*; clung to Hans Jensen's visually beautiful *Die Schrift in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, translated an Arabic grammar, *Kleine Arabische Sprachlehre*, into English; and studied Pedersen and Spargo's *Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century*. I also discovered the "Bobbsey Twins" of elementary Sanskrit study-Whitney's *Sanskrit Grammar* and Lanman's *Sanskrit Reader-and* tried to decipher a Bengali *Life of Christ* I bought at a second-hand bookstore.

4 Particularly impressive were the Babylonian parallels to *Genesis* in E. Schrader's *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*.

5 Seele also told me about a nearby bookstore where I could find the library of the late Assyriologist Prof. Olmstead for sale. There I bought two little books on cuneiform inscriptions relating to Assyrian history. As I was about to leave the store I snapped up Creel's "inductive" Chinese text of the *Hsiao Ching (Treatise of Filial Piety)* and *Lun Ya (Analects of Confucius)*, bound together with some scholar's abundant, neat handwritten notes on alternating blank pages!

6 He took as his text the infamous Note G, "Lying and Equivocation," from John Henry (Cardinal) Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.

7 June thinks I ought to be able to come up with a gentler term than "pigheaded," and she's probably right.

8 R. E. Dickerson and I. Geis, *The Structure and Action of Proteins*, Addison-Wesley, 1969.

9 These two terms, due to Claude Bernard and Walter Cannon, respectively, underlie the physiology of multicellular animals.

10 According to Schrödinger's biographer Walter Moore (*Schrodinger: Life and Thought*, Cambridge, 1989), the physicist was attracted to the very Vedanta that I was so happy to escape, and espoused the view that mind is prior to the world of matter/energy, rather than the reverse.

11 Transcribed from an interview with Charlie Rose, January 18, 1996.

12 This otherwise unremarkable phrase had a special meaning for me because it recalled a little book that had made a big impression on me in high school, Stringfellow Ball's *Let's Join the Human Race*.

13 We used videotaped excerpts from *Nova* programs.

14 Here are contrasting illustrations from two of my talks. (1) The classic *I Ching (Yi Jing)* is a pseudo-Confucian manual of binary divination by straws, with short and simple but obscure oracles covered by multiple layers of increasingly "proverbial" commentaries. It is gobbledygook to most Chinese academics but has a powerful hold on millions of less educated Chinese. I studied the original text and translations by Legge and Wilhelm, and the recent beautiful version of Richard John Lynn (Columbia,

1994). In *Science and Civilization in China* Joseph Needham compared the associational logic in this book to that of much Western pre-science. Carl Jung saw in the *I Ching* his own antiscientific idea of "synchronicity," and some in my western audiences were eagerly carried away by the coincidences they thought they saw in their own "readings." In both East and West, only scientific education can obliterate such indifference to fact.

(2) Islam, viewed in historical context and shorn of theological paraphernalia, has important humanitarian elements that appeal mightily to the poor and oppressed; study of my own 19-foot shelf on Arabic and Islamic cultures convinces me that despite current bluster and genuine danger Islamic traditions are no less congenial to the slow evolution of Humanism than Judaeo-Christian traditions have been; the key to such evolution lies in ameliorating not only ignorance but also historical conditions of poverty and external domination that have created profound anger toward the West and its ideas. From the beginning Islam has assimilated extra-Islamic influences and accommodated to local conditions. The concepts of *iftihad* (creative interpretation) and *ikhtilaf* (diversity of interpretation); the spread of English and French education during the colonial period; and the modern rise of capitalism and Marxism within opinion-making circles have together created a great diversity of "Islams." Given time and more favorable social conditions plenty of historians, anthropologists, scientists, engineers, doctors, artists, feminists, Arab and other nationalists, and leaders of business and industry, etc., within the "Islamic" sphere are perfectly capable of creating their own transitions to Humanism (Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*; Halim Barakat, *The Arab World*; Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*; Issa Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*; La Decouverte, *Pour Rushdie*; Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of Gebelawi*; Hisham Sharabi, ed., *Theory, Politics and the Arab World*; a host of feminist writings by, e.g., Nikki R. Keddie, Leila Ahmed, and Fatima Mernissi; and recently, Paul Salem, "The Rise and Fall of Secularism in the Arab World," *Middle East Policy* IV(3), March 1996).

¹⁵ Creative transfiguration of a line from the prophet Jeremiah. In a letter from Jahweh to the Jews in Babylon, Jeremiah wrote (*Jer.* 29:7), "And seek the welfare of the city [Babylon] to which I have exiled you and pray to Jahweh in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper." Welcome pre-Humanist ideas wherever they can be found!

¹⁶ From "Morels," by Dan Powers, in Joshua Blwn et al., *The United States of Poetry*, New York: Hany N. Abrams, Inc., 1996. Originally from *Kameleon* magazine.