

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists & Center For Atheism

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

How to Come Out As an Atheist

Atheist Pride Should be Our Theme

I had just seen the movie "Milk" a year or so ago when it occurred to me in a moment of inspiration that there is a parallel between Harvey Milk's strategy and goals and those of Atheists. Milk, an openly gay man, ran for office about eight times and lost each time. He came to the conclusion that in order to be elected, he needed to convince voters in his community that gay people are honest enough and trustworthy enough to serve on the San Francisco City Council. That meant, he reasoned, that more of the closeted, responsible gay people had to come out. Voters had to see that their community was filled with a large number of gay people—including their own sons, daughters and neighbors—and that these gay people were upright, responsible citizens.

And so Harvey took his megaphone and went into the gay community to persuade them of what he had become convinced of. His message was, "Come out, come out, wherever you are, and show the whole city that gays can be good citizens." It was about his ninth try, and Harvey Milk was finally elected to the City Council.

Harvey Milk made me realize that one of our major goals as Atheists is acceptance by our communities. We need to convince the rest of America that we are not a threat. We need to let American citizens know that Atheists are everywhere around them, delivering their mail, selling them shoes, directing their traffic, running their hospitals. We are their sons and daughters and neighbors and doctors and computer programmers. And just as Harvey Milk persuaded his community that gay people are good citizens, we need to show our communities that Atheists are respectable, dependable, hardworking, trustworthy and honest.

That means, my friends, that Atheists, too, must "come out." That means each one of us must tell the world that we are nonbelievers, non-churchgoers, agnostics, atheists, nonreligious, freethinkers, realists—whatever designation you are most comfortable with. We must wear tee-shirts that proclaim, "Proud to be an Atheist." We must wear our NYC Atheists baseball caps with pride. We must organize an Atheist Pride parade. We must demand that the Mayor issue a proclamation announcing Atheist Pride Day. We must disclose everywhere that we are Atheists—at school, to our families, to our friends, and yes, even at work. You may find out—surprise!—that you are not the only one in your workplace who is an Atheist.

Telling the World

You may be thinking, why would I want to "come out" when the image of an Atheist is so negative right now that a poll revealed that American voters will vote for a woman or a gay person, but they will not vote for an Atheist? There is only one member of Congress who has ever come out and confessed that he is a nonbeliever—and in a Congress that purports to represent 300 million people, you know that can't be true. You realize that there must be closeted Atheists in Congress.

Coming out needn't be an overnight thing. Some people may want to do it gradually, in steps. The first step might be telling friends and family that you are no longer a churchgoer. Months later, you might report that your doubts about religion have escalated to agnosticism. After more time has elapsed, you might announce that you are now considering yourself a secular humanist, freethinker, skeptic or Atheist. By that

time, your friends and family will not be surprised.

How to Answer Questions

I recommend that you get ready for your coming out by doing some preparation. Atheists who aspire to come out must be confident and comfortable with their decision and prepared to address the questions they will invariably get. They must be ready to answer questions about what they *do* believe in (I like to respond that I believe in “reality”), questions about evolution, how old the earth is, how they became Atheists, *why* they became Atheists, are they afraid of going to hell, what keeps them honest if they don’t think god is watching and isn’t being a disbeliever a negative way to live?

I like to answer that last question by telling people the advantages and joys of being an Atheist. As an Atheist, I tell them, I am free of the oppressive, restrictive delusions and fairy tales of religion. I’m living an authentic life that is not based on illusions like the belief that there is another life after death or that god is watching over you. If you wait to have a better life after death, you are missing the fullness and opportunities of this life.

As a believer in reality, I can focus on my potential, not the restrictions imposed by religion that keep people down. I am free from the irrational rules of religion that hold back progress. I do not consider it a “sin” to engage in stem cell research, restrict the size of my family or eat meat on Friday. I can focus on me, my potential, and try to optimize my time on this earth. I consider a religious life a suboptimal life that restricts the full enjoyment of the here and now.

Atheism Bestows Freedom

As an Atheist, I don’t follow the irrational concepts set up 2,000 years ago by people who didn’t have the knowledge we have now. If you read the bible, you will see that it condones slavery, incest, murder. I prefer to follow the precepts set out by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are principles and goals set up by mankind, not gods. This document advocates universal human rights that are keyed to achieving a good life for all of mankind, not just for some particular sect or cult that claims to have the exclusive “truth” or has an open line to god or a pathway to heaven.

The key word I use with people who question me about Atheism is “freedom.” Religion’s concepts of predestination rule out freedom or free will. If your life is already set out for you by some master planner in the sky, why bother developing yourself? There’s no hope, no incentive, your life is not your own, it belongs to that

puppeteer in the sky who is pulling the strings. When I first acknowledged to the world that I was an Atheist, there was a sense of great relief, a freeing from bondage, a dismantling of the burdens of original sin, a sense of being in charge of my own life, of a profound freedom from those institutions that would absorb me, freedom from those who would suck me into their agenda or brainwash me or weigh me down with their preordained needs and goals and history, or make me part of their long gray line of beaten-down conformists. When I became an Atheist, I realized I was free, free at last.

But how do we communicate the joy and freedom of Atheism to our still-benighted fellow humans? As mentioned, we must prepare before we “come out.” That means doing our homework, learning more, not only about what we are leaving behind but also more about Atheism itself. We need to read the new Atheist authors, keep up with the latest scientific progress (our monthly lectures are terrific for that). We need to organize, to develop ourselves and our minds, never stop learning and most important, we need to become confident and comfortable in being Atheist.

Street Tabling: A Learning Tool



Tabling at Columbus Circle, 2009

I recommend, for those who want to strengthen their confidence and skills in dealing with the public, that they consider joining our street tabling group on Saturdays. In good weather, we pitch our tent at Columbus Circle, hang up our banners, set out our chairs and prepare to meet the public. It is only recently that I realized that street tabling is probably the most valuable tool we have in learning how to deal with, and communicate to, the non-Atheist community. You can get experience in telling people that you are an Atheist and why; you can rehearse your responses while answering the questions of the people who approach our table. Oddly enough, we get many new members via our street tabling, which shows me that some of our regular tablers have gotten quite proficient. In any case, tabling is a good first step before dealing with your parents or work colleagues. Street tabling is, indeed, a mini-classroom for people who want to build up their confidence, communication skills or interpersonal skills. It makes you aware of

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Editor's Q and A

So Long, It's Been Good to Know You

Who Is Taking Away Our Effective Leaders?



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I recently read the sad “Open Letter” written by Paul Kurtz, former head of the Amherst, NY-based Center For Inquiry (CFI), in response to what has variously been called his forced resignation or his firing by the secularist organization that he founded some 35 years ago. The most poignant part of Kurtz’s “Open Letter” is when he says, “I have been shorn of all effective authority in these organizations and magazines and ‘shoved on an ice floe’ ...”

Kurtz is just one of nearly a half dozen very effective Atheist national leaders who have been forced out of their roles for some reason or other. I’m beginning to wonder: Could this be sabotage by some enemy within? Or is it a power grab by ambitious underlings? What is going on?

--Patrick from Park Slope

Dear Patrick,

We all want to know what is going on at CFI. But first, I want to share with our readers Paul Kurtz’s brief resignation letter exactly as he wrote it:

*“Amherst, New York, May 18, 2010
Open Letter to friends and colleagues in the Center for Inquiry/Transnational movement:*

“This letter officially announces my resignation from the boards of the Center for Inquiry, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism, all organizations that I founded beginning in 1976. It is with profound regret that I also wish to announce my resignation as editor-in-chief of *Free Inquiry* magazine, now in its 30th year of publication, and from the editorial board of *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

“I have already been shorn of all effective authority in these organizations and magazines and ‘shoved on an ice floe’ so to speak, so it is merely a formality to divest myself of any pretensions that I have anything any

longer to say within the organizations or magazines that I founded.—*Paul Kurtz*”



Paul Kurtz

I have known, for some time, Paul Kurtz’s reputation as an able leader, a forceful speaker, a deeply analytical writer with a cranky charm and enormous discipline. For 35 years, he led the Amherst, NY operation and Prometheus Publishing house, taking no salary and growing the organization, which became the first—and for many years, the only—worldwide secularist educational and publishing operation. He was a pioneer 35 years ago, doing the unthinkable: butting heads with the religious establishment. Only one other nationally renowned person—Madalyn Murray O’Hair—was his peer. He was Paul Kurtz the invincible, the courageous, the swashbuckling humanist (he preferred the word “humanist” to Atheist), the can-do person who showed that he actually could build a nonreligious world organization dedicated to truth, science, reason, logic. The nonchurch of the nonreligious.

Atheist Movement Blossoms

So what had happened? Well, for one thing, Kurtz got older, as we all do. There was, I think, an open-heart surgery, which he not only survived but emerged from with undiminished vigor.

There was also, around 2007, that sudden blossoming of the “new” Atheist movement, with the emergence of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (who were the best-selling Atheist writers Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris). In the summer of 2007, a media circus unfolded at the Washington convention of the Atheist Alliance International (AAI), a gathering that was dubbed “the Woodstock of Atheism.” It was suddenly chic to be an

Atheist. It also appeared to be a new road to fame and fortune, and if you didn't have any talent as a writer, never mind, you could still become a famed and authoritative organizer of an Atheist group.

Paul Kurtz already was the leader of an Atheist group in 2007; the newly awakened sizzle surrounding the Atheist movement did not affect him. But it did affect others, it appears. No outsider will ever know what went on inside the CFI headquarters in Amherst, NY in those years. But a long letter emailed to CFI members on June 14, 2010, by the Chair of CFI's Board of Directors, Richard Schroeder, professed to explain the changes in CFI. In that long explanatory diatribe by Schroeder, some words popped out: "reforms," "erratic," "arbitrary," "low staff morale," "rubber stamp," "resisted ceding control," "step aside," "hurling accusations," "bluster and rhetoric," "a shame." From these words alone, plucked randomly out of a letter, one gets a feeling of a palace revolt, resistance, chaos.

Outfoxing His Foes

And of course, Kurtz's age got blamed, though I don't know why, because his refusal to just fade away or give up his life work represented the strength and determination of a much younger man. Keep in mind that George Bernard Shaw did some of his best writing at age 94, Frank McCourt wrote "Angela's Ashes" after he retired, Georgia O'Keefe painted some of her best canvases in her 90s, and Congress is filled with 70, 80 and even 90-year-olds like Senator Robert Byrd, 92, who held his congressional seat for 57 years before expiring recently. Kurtz is in his early 80s. We really don't know what oldsters are capable of because only recently has medicine allowed us to live long enough to find out. For all we know, 80 is the new 50. Is Kurtz a victim of the rampant ageism in our society, which some contend is more widespread and virulent than racism and sexism? After all, everybody will eventually be a victim of ageism—black or white, male or female.

But in the end, Kurtz did outsmart his foes: When he left his beloved CFI, Kurtz took with him the biggest donor to the organization, an anonymous philanthropist who had donated a whopping \$800,000 a year to CFI. Without that income, CFI will have a hard time surviving.

And so, Kurtz outfoxed his denounciators. This reporter marveled: Only the inimitable Paul Kurtz could thrust a flag into an ice floe and sail off to new horizons, a feat worthy of Captain Bligh of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, who survived, after being kicked off his ship, by steering to safety a lifeboat barely bigger than an ice floe over an impossibly long ocean voyage.

What's going to happen next to Kurtz and CFI? Keep tuned. This story is still unraveling. Is Kurtz going to start a new organization? Is the Amherst, NY operation going to go down the tubes? What we have now at CFI is a Board of Directors sitting up there in a small town near Buffalo, twiddling their thumbs, hoping someone is going to rescue them.

What all this has brought home to me is the potential destruction of an organization by its own Board of Directors and how "groupthink" can sometimes be more damaging than democratic. Everyone worships on the altar of democracy, forgetting that leaders are supposed to lead, not follow a Board. Certainly a leader should not follow a minion of board members who, taken one by one, may have insufficient amounts of corporate smarts or street cred, or may harbor private ambitions or loyalties.

Ellen Johnson Firing

The other competent leaders forced out of their positions recently have all been women, and strangely, they have all been replaced by men. Could it be that women are perceived as easier to topple? Or is it that as leadership in an Atheist organization has become more prestigious, men are exerting their power-grab skills?



ELLEN JOHNSON

It was her Board of Directors that undid Ellen Johnson, former president of American Atheists (AA). True, women are generally not taught how to get along with Boards of Directors, since they are not expected to become leaders. But Johnson fell into a leadership position when she picked up the banner and managed AA after the disappearance of AA founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair in 1995 and the subsequent murder of Madalyn and her family. Unheralded and underpaid, (Johnson's salary was about \$34K a year, I've heard, less than your average garbage collector), she kept Madalyn's organization going for 13 long years, relocating the headquarters from Texas to New Jersey, protecting Madalyn's valuable library of historic Atheist books, publishing the AA magazine, managing the headquarters, organizing a yearly convention and representing the public face of American Atheists to the media. Then suddenly, in 2008, Johnson was summarily fired by her Board of Directors with no notice, no severance pay, no insurance.

Johnson was fired halfway through a civil rights march through several American Southeast states for defying her Board of Directors by continuing the march despite being told by the Board to stop and go home.

But nothing is ever totally black or white. Though Johnson has never publicly told her side of the story, we know more about it now. We know that the Board had originally approved the civil rights march and only changed its mind at the last minute. We know that the civil rights march was emotionally important to Johnson as a tribute to Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who had planned to do the march herself before she was murdered. We know that Madalyn is buried somewhere in the Southwest in an unmarked grave and there never has been a public tribute to her. We know that Johnson, who was “like a daughter” to Madalyn, never had an opportunity to express her grief publicly.

A Leak in the Ceiling

We also know that the relationship between Ellen Johnson and her far-flung Board of 12 members had been eroding for some time prior to the civil rights march. Board members who lived in Texas and California and Kentucky were evidently not in touch with the day-to-day administrative demands at the AA headquarters in New Jersey. They did not understand how Johnson juggled her miniscule operating budget or that she put meeting her payroll first because she felt her crew of three helpers was more important than, say, the leaky ceiling at headquarters.

In fact, a big complaint of the Board after Johnson’s firing was that she had not fixed that leaky ceiling. But had any help been offered to her? Was money raised for the repair? Apparently not. Nor did Johnson ask for help, either out of pride or because communication between her and her Board had broken down long before the ceiling did. And so she put a bucket under the leak and soldiered on, until that fateful day when the Board, via a conference call, fired her halfway through the march that, at least this reporter felt, was Johnson’s fulfillment of her promise to the deceased Madalyn.

Lost Leadership: Brown, Downey



Lori Lipman Brown

There are other such stories of lost leadership in the Atheist movement. For instance, what has happened to Lori Lipman Brown, the young, capable lawyer who founded the Secular Coalition for America, a lobbying

group in Washington? Lori Brown, a former Nevada state senator who was named Civil Libertarian of the Year by the ACLU of Southern Nevada, was summarily fired by her Board last year from the job from she had created. No reason was given publicly by the Board and Brown did not offer one herself. She is simply gone. Or as one Atheist put it, “she dropped off the face of the earth.”



Margaret Downey

Margaret Downey, the beautiful and regal doyenne of Atheist Alliance International, was not fired from her position as president of AAI, but instead, elected to step down, citing the difficulty of working with a large, scattered Board. Since Downey was the hugely successful organizer of the unsurpassed 2007 Washington convention, she left many disappointed Atheists, both inside and out of AAI. Downey next attempted to start a new organization called Unity, whose main purpose would be a unified secular convention in 2013, but she found the going rough and was finally persuaded to relinquish the idea.

Re-Open the Murder Case?

And last but not least, there is Madalyn Murray O’Hair herself, a martyr to Atheism if there ever was one. Cut down at the height of her effectiveness (she was 76 years old), just before her death she was about to picket the Pope during his visit to the U.S. and was initiating a lawsuit to force the government to start taxing churches.



Madalyn Murray O’Hair

Recently, Paul Kurtz has called for a reopening of the O’Hair murder case. Is he suggesting that Madalyn’s murder was a more complicated affair than we originally thought? Though the petty criminal David Waters, who had been briefly employed by Madalyn at the AA headquarters, in a plea bargain led the police to her grave on a remote Texas ranch, it is possible, Kurtz and others have implied, that Waters had merely carried out the murderous deed.

Kurtz, Johnson, Brown, Downey, O’Hair, all effective

Atheist leaders, all gone. At press time, we received information that yet another female secular leader has bitten the dust—Katherine Archibald, executive director of the American Ethical Union in New York. What does it mean? There is no evidence that the religious establishment is losing its top leaders so consistently or so frequently. Are we Atheists becoming paranoid? Or is the religious community, aware that they can't beat us in logic and debate, now using far more subtle and clever—

and sinister—means to be the victor in the battle between faith and science? How much undercover penetration has there been into our groups? Who needs to burn nonbelievers at the stake when planting an undercover saboteur is much more socially acceptable, more secret, more effective, easy to cover up and the blame is placed squarely on the Atheist community itself? ☐

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON" - **How to Come Out As an Atheist**

Continued from page 2

what people are interested in learning about Atheists, what reservations they have and how they perceive Atheists. Street tabling can prepare you for participating in panels, organizing events or volunteering for political candidates who respect our goals.

And truth be told, street tabling is an easy way to "come out." You are out there with a group of Atheist friends, chatting it up and having fun. You are telling non-Atheists, if they ask, why you are an Atheist and the wonderful delusion-free, self-determined Atheist way of life. You are actually out as an Atheist. Free at last.

So come join us on good-weather Saturdays, wear your Atheist tee shirt or cap, think about Harvey Milk and begin your life-long journey toward building a better society based on reality. ☐

god as the bogeyman

By Ron Widelec



Recently, while wasting time on YouTube, I happened on a video from Richard Dawkins' book tour for his [in]famous atheist manifesto, "The God Delusion." An audience member made the following statement:

"What do you have to say to someone who has met the risen living lord Jesus Christ, who has walked with god for over 50 years, received anointing of the Holy Spirit with the same consequences of the early apostles in the book of acts? Sir, what do you have to say, because I assure you, for my life, it has been no delusion."

To which Mr. Dawkins responded by telling the audience member that he was "hallucinating" and that if he had been born elsewhere he would have similar feelings about Allah, Thor, or some other deity.

While I recognize that it is incredibly difficult to get believers to question their beliefs, I am convinced it is possible. Here is how I would have answered that question:

"Somewhere there is a young child in bed trying to sleep, and failing. He is shivering, crying, hiding under the covers, or calling for his parents because there is a monster in his closet; a bogeyman just waiting to do terrible things. That child's fear is very real. His heart is pounding and his cheeks are damp and salty. I do not, for a second, doubt that his fear is a fact; but that real fear is not proof that a real monster lurks in the closet. You too clearly feel something and those feelings are real, but that does not prove the reality of the things you believe; it only proves that you believe them very strongly.

"Children all around the world turn on their night-light to drive away the fear. The light chases away the darkness in the closet and with it, the bogeyman. Let in the light of reason; you may find that there is less to fear than you think."

UPCOMING JULY EVENTS
CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

JULY 11, 2010 (SUN.) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker

SPEAKER: Roderdick Bradford on "An American Atheist Pioneer That You May Not Know About."



SUBJECT: D. M. BENNETT (The Truth Seeker)

DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett is a name unfamiliar to many, and given how much he fought for freethought, free speech, and a free press in the 1800s, that is unfortunate. Called the "American Voltaire" by friends and the "Devil's Own Advocate" by enemies, few fought as hard and suffered as much to promote American liberties we take for granted. If someone is unafraid to publish a criticism of religion, promote birth control, or advocate women's equality, they can thank D.M. Bennett for having paved the way.

Our speaker, Mr. Bradford, has written a book and made an outstanding video of the life of D.M. Bennett, which he will show. Followed by an Q&A.

LOCATION: Press Box
932 Second Avenue (49/50th) / 2nd Floor

COST: Brunch is \$20, which includes a selection of Buffet entrees and salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax, tip.
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JULY 14, 2010 (WED.) 7:00 PM
NYCA Living Without Religion Group

SUBJECT: When Your Loved Ones Are Religious

How do you handle the disapproval of loved ones when you come out as an Atheist? Is the lack of support from your family or from the greater society getting you down? Feeling misunderstood, excluded, pitied or blamed for not joining in the "God Delusion" causes emotional and social challenges for all Atheists. Sharing our experiences and feelings with each other is one way to become stronger.

GROUP LEADER: Linda Blaikie, L.C.S.W.



LOCATION: MOONSTRUCK DINER –
449 THIRD AVE. /31ST) -2ND FLOOR

COST: Free to members (can join at meeting if desired), but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their space.

JULY 20, 2010 (TUE.) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Meetup

GROUP LEADERS: Alexandra Sidiropoulos
Michael Dorian



SUBJECT: Our leadership team of Alexandra and Michael tackles subjects as diverse and controversial as blasphemy and suing the Catholic church. What will they challenge this month? It's a surprise, but rest assured that it will be fascinating, audacious and provocative. Come on Tuesday, July 20, and join the enthusiastic participants!

LOCATION: Stone Creek Bar and Lounge
140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)

COST: Free, but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for use of their space.

JULY 29, 2010 (THUR.) 6:30 PM
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

SPEAKER: A panel discussion is planned with exciting speakers to be announced.

SUBJECT: An exciting, timely topic that will be announced.

LOCATION: SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.

COST: We ask for a donation of \$5 to help cover the cost of room rental.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

JULY 2010

July	10*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling
July	11****	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
July	14**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
July	17*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling
July	20*	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
July	24*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling
July	29****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting
July	31*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling

AUGUST 2010

Aug.	7*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling
Aug.	14*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling
Aug.	21*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling
Aug.	28*****	Sat.	11AM- 6 PM	NYCA Street Tabling

NYC ATHEISTS IS ON VACATION DURING THE MONTH OF AUGUST EXCEPT FOR SATURDAY STREET TABLING

- * Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)
- ** Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31st) – 2nd Floor
- *** Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor
- **** SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.)
- ***** Columbus Circle – Broadway (59/60) – In front of Time Warner Building

NYCA CABLE SHOWS

Wednesdays:	5:30 PM	Atheism in History	(Manhattan Cable # 57)
	6:30 PM	This Week in Atheism	(Manhattan Cable # 57)
Thursdays:	7:00 PM	NYC Atheists	(Manhattan Cable # 67)
	7:30 PM	Atheists Book Club	(Manhattan Cable #67)

NYCA
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