



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

Why Atheism Needs a Voting Bloc

What is a voting bloc and why do we Atheists need one? If you are asking this question, it proves how far ahead of us the religionists are. They have had an organized voting bloc for years, called the Christian Coalition. Gun lovers have one too—the National Rifle Association. So do the anti-abortion people, who very cleverly frame their “anti” stand by calling themselves Pro-Life. (More about this tactic later.)

Voting blocs came on the American political scene some decades ago because legislators care more about votes and getting re-elected than they care about anything else. An organized voting bloc is just a large number of people who have formally come together on a single issue so they can approach legislators as a group and say “You should pay attention to our cause because we’ve got four million voters behind us who can re-elect you—or replace you.”

In U.S. politics, various groups have developed single-issue voting blocs on issues such as same-sex marriage, the environment, abortion pro and con--you name it. But we atheists have been remiss. When it comes to wielding political clout, I think we still have a lot to learn.

The Time Has Come

It hit me, during the last election, that atheists must organize a single-issue voting bloc centered on the issue of separation of church and state. I wondered why--even though our numbers are creeping up, even though atheism is becoming more respectable and more accepted, even though we can commandeer a lot of votes (more than any other minority in the nation)--we still do not have the organized strength of the powerful voting bloc that we could be.

The truth is, our secular issues are still marginal in the

corridors of Congress. Legislators seem to yawn at our issues—despite the fact we have a moral and constitutionally correct issue to advocate, despite the fact that we’ve won plenty of separation-of-church-and-state cases in court (think of the recent Dover case, where a *Republican* judge decided that teaching creationism in public schools was a bad idea).

Sure, we have a few lobbyists pleading our cause in the corridors of Congress, including the Washington, D.C.-based Secular Coalition for America, which is a group of nine secular organizations committed to lobbying Congress. But do these lobbyists feel comfortable that they've got the power of a large number of votes behind them?

We've Got the Numbers

It occurred to me that if all the secular organizations got together to form a voting bloc, we would have the numbers, the will, the funds and the moral imperative to form a powerful organized voting bloc. I was so sure that this is the way to go that I went out and purchased, before someone else could claim them, three potential Internet web site names for our future voting bloc organization:

LeagueOfSecularVoters.org
NationalCouncilOfSeculars.org
SecularVoters.org

Call me visionary, but I saw the handwriting on the wall. I knew we needed to get our people together someday—sooner rather than later—to form those voting blocs because by the time the next election comes around, it will be too late. And note that I focus on the word “secular” rather than on “atheist” in these web addresses. That’s because, as I have already pointed out, I feel

strongly that all the secular groups will need to combine our resources in order to achieve the powerful voting bloc we need.

Four Things To Do

How will our combined secularists achieve a solid, glacial, unstoppable secular voting bloc? Basically, we need to concentrate on four stratagems to achieve this:

- Speak out in the public area and in the media
- Train leaders for effective social and political action
- Inform voters about timely issues and legislation
- Protest bigotry against secularists and defend our rights

Leadership is probably our most a priori requirement. We will need secularists who are good at organization and leadership. We'll need a national coordinator plus state affiliate coordinators. These coordinators will need to go out and present our viewpoint before local councils, school boards, state legislatures and Congress. I see a once-a-year convention as a given.

To speak out in public, our voters' movement will need web sites, videos, speakers and meetings in cities nationwide. We'll also need to include tried-and-true political actions such as demonstrations locally and in Washington. Demonstrations are significant because they give a visual image to the public of our voting bloc, its strength in numbers and in action.

A lot of our more-sedentary members do not see the necessity for demonstrations, but I can assure you that demonstrations have worked miracles for the gay movement and the women's movement in changing public opinion and swaying legislators.

We'll also need a Secular Action Network or a Secular Watch network—an alert system to marshal our activists.

Line up Our 'Heroes'

Additionally, we will need our secular heroes to come forward and speak out in public. By "heroes" I mean those secular activists who have already come out and done something public to advance our cause. We'll need our Dawkinses and our Hitchenses, yes, but we'll also need our Matt LaClairs—Matt taped his teacher illegally preaching religion in class—and our Michael Newdows, who fought in Supreme Court to get "under god" out of our pledge of allegiance. We will need these secularist

heroes to go out and tell their stories, to be recognized in the folklore of atheism and to inspire others to come out and fight for their rights.

But to speak out publicly and frequently about our cause is not enough. We must also frame our cause in positive terms, as the religionists do. For example, take the phrase commonly used to describe the federally funded charity programs operated by churches, "Faith-Based Initiatives," which has a positive ring to it. Let's change that to "Faith-Based Tax Money Giveaways," which shines a totally different light on these programs.

Or, instead of talking about the churches being "exempt" from taxation, which has nuances of this somehow being agreed upon, let's talk about how churches "aren't paying their share" or, even stronger, are "sponging off the taxpayers." It's all in how you present your cause, and unfortunately, the religionists have, so far, beaten us at this game.

Voter Guides Essential

To inform our voters about timely issues, we need to put out voter guides as other voting blocs do. To prepare such a guide, we will need to ask questions of legislators to find out how each one feels about five key areas under the basic umbrella issue of separation of church and state—that is, where does each legislator stand on: (1) taxing churches; (2) science education (are they for pristine science or are they for mixing it up with creationism?) (3) Faith-Based Initiatives (4) religious displays in public spaces and (5) prayer and religious statements in public places.

Do not underestimate the importance of this voter guide! It becomes a public document, for all to see, where the legislator cannot equivocate or, to suit his audience, give a different slant on his outlook. Such a guide has become crucially important in many single-issue causes.

What Are We Waiting For ?

Let's go! The religionists are already preparing for the next election. We secularists cannot wait until election time. We've got to start now, today. We need someone to volunteer to be the leader of this organization and we need volunteers to lead the state groups nationwide. If you've got leadership qualities or aspirations and are convinced that a secular voting bloc will be a major factor in helping us become the responsible powerhouse we must be, contact me. ☐

**ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION
NOT A BELIEF**

How Do Atheists Handle Grief?



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

How do atheists handle grief? We don't believe in a heaven where we will meet the deceased some day. We don't believe in an afterlife. So how do we come to terms with the fact that a loved one is gone?

--Greta from Greenpoint

Dear Greta,

I don't know the answer to this question. I'm sorry to say that we atheists have no tried-and-true way of handling grief after the death of a loved one.

Though it may be comforting for a religious person to think that he or she will meet their loved one in the afterlife, it is not comforting for an atheist because we know it isn't true.

I recently had to confront my own feelings of grief after the death of my daughter, April, from pancreatic cancer. I'm sorry to tell you, I did not handle it well. A few years ago, my daughter and her husband had moved to the Catskills area where they built a log home near a lake. She had a Master's degree in fine arts and her dream was to set up the upstairs area of the log home as a studio where, looking out at the woods and the lake, she would paint. The empty canvases are still there, leaning against the wall, a testament to a dream that she never had a chance to fulfill.

The diagnosis came about 18 months before her death, but she did not tell us that. She spared us the worst. We did not know until the end that she was dying. She didn't want us to suffer through the five hospitalizations, the painkillers, the ebbing and shutting down of her body. Still, there were signs, if I had known enough to recognize them: loss of weight, giving away her things, wanting to have her beloved puppy, Hamlet, adopted. And that mysterious phone call to her brother one night asking if he thought there could possibly be

something eternal in those galaxies above us.

My Stages of Grief

The death of a child is undoubtedly harder on a family than any other death. There are the memories of the child's first steps, her first word, little arms around one's neck, the first drawings magnetized to the refrigerator. My daughter, like me, loved to read, especially Pippi Longstocking. Even as a toddler, she had a large vocabulary, sometimes amusing: She thought the word "cemetery" was "summer territory." Say "cemetery" fast, and you'll see that it does indeed sound like "summer territory."

My grief at her death came in stages, probably different from how others have experienced grief, but if it helps, I will share my stages of grief with you:

My first reaction to news of her death was denial: No. No, no, no, no. *Say it isn't so.*

Then: a reaching out to my family and friends for support in my grief. My family, especially my two other children, were my rock and my strength. They grieved with me, yes; but (only later did I realize) I looked to them for support because they were proof of life, tangible evidence that life went on.

The third stage, for me, was letting the pain hit. A wrenching letting go, of wanting to cry out, "Wait, don't leave us, it's too soon." And then, the traumatic realization of the finality of death, the land from which no one returns. This is the dark time when, alone, in the middle of the night, you let go with wrenching cries railing against the unfairness of fate. It is anger, too, anger at the randomness of death, at doctors for being ineffective, at yourself for being powerless to help your child.

The next step I experienced, a kind of pulling away

from death, takes time. I can't say one develops "acceptance" of death because I will never "accept" my daughter's death. It is, rather, an acceptance of the inevitability of life's passages.

What aided me in the acceptance of death was a simple little experience. I was staring out of the window on the day after my daughter's death when I noticed a big, spread-out maple tree outside, whose leaves were just barely turning golden in the early autumn of the Catskills. As I looked at the tree, one golden leaf detached itself from a branch and floated gently, gracefully, to the ground. Ah, I thought: that is like April. She has fallen off the tree of life, but the tree stands, it goes on, it will still be there in the springtime. She is gone, but the tree of life goes on.

No Atheist Rituals

On the way home from the Catskills, my son said something that gave me further consolation: "It is said that we borrow molecules from the earth when we are born," he told me, "and we return them to the earth when we die." I liked that: the eternal oneness of ourselves with the earth.

Much later, I was to recognize that we atheists have no institutionalized rituals to give emotional support at the time of a death. It occurred to me that in religion, an authority figure—a priest, minister or rabbi—helps mollify one's grief: They take the burden off the mourner, they assure the mourner that he or she is doing the right thing, they give an overall feeling of smoothing life's passages. I realized that we atheists need to somehow do this for our constituents too.

As for me: these days, I feel heavily the brevity of time, the shortness of our stay on this planet. I feel the ubiquitousness of death. I look out of the window in my high rise apartment and see throngs walking in the street and I think: in 100 years, everyone walking down there will be dead. The point, I realize, is to really LIVE when you are alive. We have only so much time on this earth and it's up to us to make the most of it.

And I have accepted the fact, at last, that my daughter April is in her summer territory now. ☐

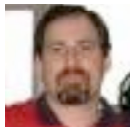
ATHEISM: A NON-PROPHET ORGANIZATION

ATHEISTS ARE NOT JUST NONBELIEVERS, WE ARE REALISTS

LIVING BETTER WITH ATHEISM

The Mezuzah Repo Man and Me

Or, Why It's Hard to Get Away From Your Past in Brooklyn



By Harry Graber, PhD

In the neighborhood I just moved to, Orthodox Jews, many of them immigrants from Russia or elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, are a substantial percentage of the population—so much so that most of the businesses in the local business district close before sundown on Friday and remain closed all day Saturday.

I was not surprised, then, when I moved into my new apartment and found a mezuzah attached to the door frame, left behind by the previous resident. (A mezuzah, for those who don't know, is a small talisman, about two inches long, that holds a tiny scroll with verses from the Torah. It is supposed to confer a blessing on the household.)

It did surprise me, however, when I entered and found three more mezuzot *inside* the apartment. When I was growing up, my parents had found that a single mezuzah, attached to the front door frame, was adequate for the entire split-level house. But now I discovered that three were needed inside a simple one-bedroom apartment, one at the entrance to every single room except the bathroom.

A colleague who helped me move my belongings into my new apartment is Orthodox himself (while also being a recipient of a PhD in neuroscience and an MD, a radiologist, and a gifted amateur mathematician, physicist, engineer and inventor. Go figure). His face brightened noticeably when he saw the mezuzot, and he explained that it is customary for the people moving out to leave them behind for the next residents. A sort of housewarming present, I guess. One less thing to worry about. One thing you can check off the to-do list right away.

Blessing Overkill

“But one for every room!” I protested, “Isn't that overkill?” My friend confidently assured me that the more mezuzot one has, the better, because THEY BRING GOOD LUCK AND KEEP EVIL SPIRITS AWAY! (Did I already mention that this fellow is supremely rational in every other aspect?)

Those are benefits that I had never heard of about mezuzot while growing up, and I guess my parents never

did either, or they never would have settled for a single mezuzah for an entire house. I asked my friend if it was necessary for me to believe in the mezuzah's salubrious effects in order to experience them and felt a great rush of relief when he told me it is not. “In that case I will keep them up on the walls,” I said, “because I certainly want as much good luck as possible and to keep those evil spirits at bay.”

And that was the end of that until one weekend less than a month ago, when I heard a knock on the door. An earnest-looking orthodox man stood there. He pointed at the mezuzah by the apartment door and asked me, “You Jewish?”

My first inclination (one moral of this story is that you should go with your first inclinations) was to tell him, “I'm not interested in talking to you, go away,” and close the door. Instead, I decided to tell him the truth without flinching, explaining or apologizing: “No, I'm not,” I told him. He then proceeded to pull the cover off the mezuzah and take the rolled-up parchment inside.

“Hey, what the [censored] do you think you're doing?!” I protested. “You don't get to decide who's worthy of having that!” It transpired that he really did not speak very much English, and he withdrew to try find another building resident who could act as an interpreter, I later learned.

Frei as a Bird

Another knock on the door, and there was the original fellow and the one he had conscripted. The second man explained that the first one was collecting mezuzot for Jewish families who didn't have one and couldn't afford them (*how expensive can they be?*) and couldn't I part with mine since they had no role in my religion?

But he must have been suspicious: He asked if I really was not Jewish, and this time I said, “Not anymore, although my parents were.” He turned to the mezuzah repo man and said “Yes, he *is* Jewish, just not *frum*” (*frum* means devout and pious).

I have since learned that the opposite of *frum* is *frei*, and so I agreed with the second half of his explanation but

not the first, but had no luck in getting him to agree with my own characterization. To the two of them, Jewishness was a matter of birth, not choice—and isn't that exactly the point of view taken by the Nazis and every other anti-Semite throughout history unto the present day?

In any event, when the first gentlemen heard the other's explanation, he immediately stopped trying to repossess my mezuzot, and turned to leave, all smiles.

I had encountered people like the repo man on my neighborhood sidewalks many times, but this was the first time one had tried to invade my home. Their usual MO is to stand on a street corner holding a bagful of "inspirational booklets," and to accost men as they walk by with the "You Jewish?" question. If you answer in the affirmative, or even pause too long or acknowledge

their existence too much, they shove a bunch of booklets at you with one hand, while saying that they are *free*, and then immediately hold out the other hand and ask for "Tzedakah?" (charity)

After the repo-man incident, I made a new resolution: I'm going to carry baskets of books by Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens with me whenever I'm walking around my neighborhood, and if the tzedakah-man thrusts his booklets at me I'm going to give him a bunch of mine in return. "*Here's your tzedakah!*" I will tell him, "Please share them with your friends." □

Dr. Harry Graber is a research assistant professor at the College of Medicine at Downstate Medical Center at the SUNY campus in Brooklyn, and a longtime member of New York City Atheists.

NYCA Couple Wed



Merillat Ann Staat and Manuel Ernest De Leon were married on October 17, 2009, at the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman, Oklahoma. The bride is originally from Oklahoma. The groom was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The bride and groom wrote their own wedding vows, which, during the ceremony, were simultaneously translated by the groom's brother into Spanish for the groom's family, who had traveled from Santo Domingo for the occasion.

The couple, who honeymooned in the Aegean, will reside in Brooklyn, NY. The bride and groom first met at a New York City Atheists meet-up at the Stone Creek Lounge in November, 2007.

NYC ATHEISTS FORUM

NYC Atheists has established a "forum" section on our website www.nyc-atheists.org

Participate in interesting discussions.

Forum coordinator:

John Wagner (jawagne@med.cornell.edu)

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST

NYC ATHEISTS TWITTER & FACEBOOK

NYC Atheists has established Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Take a look and enroll.

http://twitter.com/nyc_atheists
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-York-City-Atheists/187304681037>

Twitter & Facebook Coordinator:
ALEXANDRA.SIDIROPOULOS@GMAIL.COM

NYCA Launches City's First Spanish-Speaking Atheist Meetup

The group, led by NYCA member Juan Castro, (JRCASTRO608@yahoo.com)

meets on the last Tuesday of the month.

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

DEC 9, 2009 (WEDNESDAY) 7:00 PM
NYCA Living Without Religion Group

SUBJECT: How to Deal With Families Who Are Believers at the Holiday Season?

Group Leader: Linda Ford Blaikie, LCSW, a New York psychotherapist and an atheist.



NYC Atheists announces a new atheist self-help group, LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION, that will help participants deal with emotional, religious, family and job problems.

Because a small group seems to work best, the LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION group will accept twelve participants.

Location: Call Jane Everhart, at 212-879-2687

Cost: Participation is free, but you must be a member of NYCA to apply.

DEC. 13, 2009 (SUNDAY) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker

Speaker: Sean Faircloth - Executive Director of the Secular Coalition for America, Wash., DC



Subject: "Moving Ahead in 2010 to Rescue Our Nation From Religion's Grasp"

Location: Press Box Restaurant & Pub
 932 Second Ave. (bet. 49th & 50th Streets)

Cost: Brunch, \$20 (includes selection of Buffet entrees and salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax, tip.)

DEC 19, 2009 (SATURDAY) 1:00 PM
NYCA Solstice Party

We will have an Open Mike (called a Toasting Mike) at this party so participants can toast friends, recite poems, tell jokes, sing a song, play an instrument or just mouth off to their heart's content! Have a talent? Come and show it! You don't have to be perfect, or even good, you just have to put your heart into it, and share your warm feelings and holiday cheer with atheist friends and colleagues. Whatever you do or say, you'll be applauded by cheery, ebullient, supportive friends!

Location: Les Sans Culottes Restaurant
 1085 Second Ave, (57th St.)

Cost: \$35 (includes includes appetizers, main course, dessert, one soft drink, tax and tip.)

DEC. 22, 2009 (TUESDAY) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Meetup

Group Leaders: Alexandra Sidiropoulos
 Michael Dorian



Subject: To be announced

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 room.

DEC 29, 2009 (TUESDAY) 7:00 PM
NYCA "SPANISH SPEAKING" GROUP

Location: TBA

Cost: Free

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

DECEMBER 2009

Dec.	9*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Dec.	13**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Dec.	19****	Sat.	1:00 PM	NYCA Solstice Party
Dec.	22****	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Dec.	29*****	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA "Spanish Speaking" Meetup

JANUARY 2010

Jan.	10**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Jan.	13 *	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Jan.	19***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Jan.	26*****	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA "Spanish Speaking" Meetup
Jan.	28*****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Annual Meeting

- * **Location: Call: Jane Everhart – 212-879-2687**
- ** **Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor**
- *** **Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)**
- **** **Les Sans Culottes Restaurant – 1085 Second Ave. (57th)**
- ***** **TBA**
- ***** **SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.)**

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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