

# The North Texas Church of Freethought BULLETIN

A Fellowship of Unbelievers

Founded 1994

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Sunday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY NTCOF !!!



OK, so it's just a measure of how many times our planet has revolved around the sun, but birthdays are special! The NTCOF has been around now for 15 years, a remarkable feat. Brook Farm, the 1840's utopian community experiment, only lasted about 6 years. NASA's Apollo program only lasted 14 years (1961-1975), and Skylab flew only 6 years (1973-1979).

15 years is enough time for families to form, children to become adults, and all of us to learn and grow a lot. Sadly, we have also lost friends and loved ones during this time, or just seen others retire and move away. But a birthday is a special time to celebrate past successes that can never be taken away and the simple fact of having made it through yet another revolution around our closest star.

Quite a few notable unbelievers and religious skeptics have birthdays in February including:

Ayn Rand, Feb 2  
Jules Verne, Feb 8 (OK, he was nominally Catholic but his writings suggest strong currents of religious skepticism!)  
Thomas Edison, Feb 11  
Charles Darwin AND Abraham Lincoln, Feb 12, 1809  
Galileo Galilei, Susan B. Anthony AND Matt Groening, Feb 15  
Nicolaus Copernicus, Feb 19  
George Washington, Feb 22

And here are some little-known, food-for-thought facts about birthdays:

Until sometime in the 4th Century CE, Christianity opposed the custom of celebrating birthdays, considering it a pagan tradition.

In a group of 23 randomly-chosen people, the probability is more than 50% that some pair of them will share the same birthday. For 57 or more people, the probability is more than 99%!

One's "Decimal Birthday" falls every 1000 days, or about every 2.74 years. The idea is old one but has attracted attention in the modern, digital age. Calculating from February 5th of 1995, the NTCOF is now 5,481 days old with its next "Decimal Birthday" of 6,000 days due in 519 days, on July 11th of 2011.

## COMING IN MARCH: "Behaving Ourselves"

Other religions promote codes of behavior consisting of lists of "shalls" and "shall-nots" said to have been laid down by a deity. Of course, there are a million and one exceptions to each of them. The exclusions and qualifications of "Thou Shalt Not Kill" alone fill volumes. Not that any of it matters when sins can be erased by rituals and incantations.

Unbelievers, by contrast, are accused of wanting to justify doing whatever they want "because it feels good." Well, but what else can justify doing things? Even when we do things that don't "feel good" it's almost always a means to an end of "feeling good." What else is heavenly bliss supposed to be?

The truth is that Freethought is really the only approach that breaks us out of the "feel good"/"feel bad" moral dilemma because it puts the focus on our moral obligation to be reasonable. Applying this principle often seems no less easy than the complicated rule-making of theologians. It is easier, but only because it need not make allowances for the contradictions of an "ultimate might makes ultimate right" approach. The only ultimate might, after all, is reality.

On March 7th we will take up the daunting – and immensely interesting – subject of "Behaving Ourselves." Where are the lines we should not cross in our behavior? And what of the linkage between our behavior and our emotions, those "feel good/feel bad" elements of our daily lives that seem to drive us? Join us next month for another unique and fascinating program that you just can't get anywhere else!

**All Donations To The NTCOF Are  
\$\$\$ TAX-DEDUCTIBLE \$\$\$  
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**DFWCOR**  
Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

**LETTER TO KINGSLEY:**

**14 WAVERLY PLACE, SEPTEMBER 23, 1860**

By Thomas Henry Huxley

Being T.H. Huxley's response to a long letter of sympathy sent by the Anglican cleric Charles Kingsley on the occasion of the death of Huxley's four-year-old son, Noel. Kingsley, in his letter, had set forth the grounds of his own philosophy as to the ends of life and the hope of immortality.

My Dear Kingsley -

I cannot sufficiently thank you, both on my wife's account and my own, for your long and frank letter, and for all the hearty sympathy which it exhibits - and Mrs. Kingsley will, I hope believe that we are no less sensible of her kind thought of us. To myself your letter was especially valuable, as it touched upon what I thought even more than upon what I said in my letter to you. My convictions, positive and negative, on all the matters of which you speak, are of long and slow growth and firmly rooted. But the great blow which fell upon me seemed to stir them to their foundation, and had I lived a couple of centuries earlier I could have fancied a devil scoffing at me and them - and asking me what profit it was to have stripped myself of the hopes and consolations of the mass of mankind? To which my only reply was and is - Oh devil! truth is better than much profit. I have searched over the grounds of my belief, and if wife and child and name and fame were all to be lost to me one after the other as the penalty, still I will not lie.

And now I feel that it is due to you to speak as frankly as you have done to me. An old and worthy friend of mine tried some three or four years ago to bring us together - because, as he said, you were the only man who would do me any good. Your letter leads me to think he was right, though not perhaps in the sense he attached to his own words.

To begin with the great doctrine you discuss. I neither deny nor affirm the immortality of man. I see no reason for believing in it, but, on the other hand, I have no means of disproving it.

Pray understand that I have no a priori objections to the doctrine. No man who has to deal daily and hourly with nature can trouble himself about a priori difficulties. Give me such evidence as would justify me in believing anything else, and I will believe that. Why should I not? It is not half so wonderful as the conservation of force, or the indestructibility of matter. Whoso clearly appreciates all that is implied in the falling of a stone can have no difficulty about any doctrine simply on account of its marvelousness. But the longer I live, the more obvious it is to me that the most sacred act of a man's life is to say and to feel, "I believe such and such to be true." All the greatest rewards and all the heaviest penalties of existence cling about that act. The universe is one and the same throughout; and if the condition of my success in unraveling some little difficulty of

anatomy or physiology is that I shall rigorously refuse to put faith in that which does not rest on sufficient evidence, I cannot believe that the great mysteries of existence will be laid open to me on other terms. It is no use to talk to me of analogies and probabilities. I know what I mean when I say I believe in the law of the inverse squares, and I will not rest my life and hopes upon weaker convictions. I dare not if I would.

Measured by this standard, what becomes of the doctrine of immortality?

You rest in your strong conviction of your personal existence, and in the instinct of the persistence of that existence which is so strong in you as in most men.

To me this is as nothing. That my personality is the surest thing I know - may be true. But the attempt to conceive what it is leads me into mere verbal subtleties. I have champed up all that chaff about the ego and the non-ego, about noumena and phenomena, and all the rest of it, too often not to know that in attempting even to think of these questions, the human intellect flounders at once out of its depth.

It must be twenty years since, a boy, I read Hamilton's essay on the unconditioned, and from that time to this, ontological speculation has been a folly to me. When Mansel took up Hamilton's argument on the side of orthodoxy (!) I said he reminded me of nothing so much as the man who is sawing off the sign on which he is sitting, in Hogarth's picture. But this by the way.

I cannot conceive of my personality as a thing apart from the phenomena of my life. When I try to form such a conception I discover that, as Coleridge would have said, I only hypostatise a word, and it alters nothing if, with Fichte, I suppose the universe to be nothing but a manifestation of my personality. I am neither more nor less external than I was before.

Nor does the infinite difference between myself and the animals alter the case. I do not know whether the

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| The North Texas Church of Freethought<br>A Fellowship of Unbelievers                         |  |
| <b>Presenters:</b>   | <b>David Burgess, Dr. Tim Gorski,<br/>Don Lewellyn, Erin Taylor</b>                      |
| <b>Operations Coordinator:</b>   | <b>Don Lewellyn</b>  |
| <b>Music Coordinator:</b>  | <b>Jay Purrington</b>  |
| <b>BAND: "THE SPLINTERS"</b>   | <b>Edward McGuire, Jay<br/>Purrington, Cathy &amp; Kevin Smith, &amp; Scott Williams</b> |
| <b>Videographer:</b>   | <b>John Gauthier</b>   |
| <b>Exalted Creator of the Birthday Cake:</b>   | <b>Ginger Watson</b>   |
| <b>Equipment Wranglers:</b>  | <b>John Hendricks &amp;<br/>Ginger Watson</b>  |
| <b>Ministers:</b>  | <b>Dr. Tim Gorski &amp; Lu Whipple LPC</b>   |
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animals persist after they disappear or not. I do not even know whether the infinite difference between us and them may be compensated by their persistence and my cessation after apparent death, just as the humble bulb of an annual lives, while the glorious flowers it has put forth die away.

Surely it must be plain that an ingenious man could speculate without end on both sides, and find analogies for all his dreams. Nor does it help me to tell me that the aspirations of mankind - that my own highest aspirations even - lead me towards the doctrine of immortality. I doubt the fact, to begin with, but if it be so even, what is this but in grand words asking me to believe a thing because I like it.

Science has taught to me the opposite lesson. She warns me to be careful how I adopt a view which jumps with my preconceptions, and to require stronger evidence for such belief than for one to which I was previously hostile.

My business is to teach my aspirations to conform themselves to fact, not to try and make facts harmonise with my aspirations.

Science seems to me to teach in the highest and strongest manner the great truth which is embodied in the Christian conception of entire surrender to the will of God. Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing. I have only begun to learn content and peace of mind since I have resolved at all risks to do this.

There are, however, other arguments commonly brought forward in favor of the immortality of man, which are to my mind not only elusive but mischievous. The one is the notion that the moral government of the world is imperfect without a system of future rewards and punishments. The other is: that such a system is indispensable to practical morality. I believe that both these dogmas are very mischievous lies.

With respect to the first, I am no optimist, but I have the firmest belief that the Divine Government (if we may use such a phrase to express the sum of the "customs of matter") is wholly just. The more I know intimately of the lives of other men (to say nothing of my own), the more obvious it is to me that the wicked does not flourish nor is the righteous punished. But for this to be clear we must bear in mind what almost all forget, that the rewards of life are contingent upon obedience to the whole law - physical as well as moral - and that moral obedience will not atone for physical sin, or vice versa.

The ledger of the Almighty is strictly kept, and every one of us has the balance of his operations paid over to him at the end of every minute of his existence.

Life cannot exist without a certain conformity to the surrounding universe - that conformity involves a certain amount of happiness in excess of pain. In short, as we

live we are paid for living.

And it is to be recollected in view of the apparent discrepancy between men's acts and their rewards that Nature is juster than we. She takes into account what a man brings with him into the world, which human justice cannot do. If I, born a bloodthirsty and savage brute, inheriting these qualities from others, kill you, my fellow-men will very justly hang me, but I shall not be visited with the horrible remorse which would be my real punishment if, my nature being higher, I had done the same thing.

The absolute justice of the system of things is as clear to me as any scientific fact. The gravitation of sin to sorrow is as certain as that of the earth to the sun, and more so - for experimental proof of the fact is within reach of us all - nay, is before us all in our own lives, if we had but the eyes to see it.

Not only, then, do I disbelieve in the need for compensation, but I believe that the seeking for rewards and punishments out of this life leads men to a ruinous ignorance of the fact that their inevitable rewards and punishments are here.

If the expectation of hell hereafter can keep me from evil-doing, surely a fortiori the certainty of hell now will do so? If a man could be firmly impressed with the belief that stealing damaged him as much as swallowing arsenic would do (and it does), would not the dissuasive force of that belief be greater than that of any based on mere future expectations?

And this leads me to my other point.

As I stood behind the coffin of my little son the other day, with my mind bent on anything but disputation, the officiating minister read, as a part of his duty, the words, "If the dead rise not again, let us drink and eat, for to-morrow we die." I cannot tell you how inexpressibly they shocked me. Paul had neither wife nor child, or he must have known that his alternative involved a blasphemy against all that was best and noblest in human nature. I could have laughed with scorn. What! because I am face to face with irreparable loss, because I have given back to the source from whence it came, the cause of a great happiness, still retaining through all my life the blessings which have sprung and will spring from that cause, I am to renounce my manhood, and, howling, grovel in bestiality? Why, the very apes know better, and if you shoot their young, the poor brutes grieve their grief out and do not immediately seek distraction in a gorge.

Kicked into the world a boy without guide or training, or with worse than none, I confess to my shame that few men have drunk deeper of all kinds of sin than I. Happily, my course was arrested in time - before I had earned absolute destruction - and for long years I have been slowly and painfully climbing, with many a fall, towards better things. And when I look back, what do I find to have been the agents of my redemption? The hope of immortality or of future reward? I can honestly say that for these fourteen

years such a consideration has not entered my head. No, I can tell you exactly what has been at work. Sartor Resartus led me to know that a deep sense of religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology. Secondly, science and her methods gave me a resting-place independent of authority and tradition. Thirdly, love opened up to me a view of the sanctity of human nature, and impressed me with a deep sense of responsibility.

If at this moment I am not a worn-out, debauched, useless carcass of a man, if it has been or will be my fate to advance the cause of science, if I feel that I have a shadow of a claim on the love of those about me, if in the supreme moment when I looked down into my boy's grave my sorrow was full of submission and without bitterness, it is because these agencies have worked upon me, and not because I have ever cared whether my poor personality shall remain distinct for ever from the All from whence it came and whither it goes.

And thus, my dear Kingsley, you will understand what my position is. I may be quite wrong, and in that case I know I shall have to pay the penalty for being wrong. But I can only say with Luther, "Gott helfe mir, Ich kann nichts anders."

I know right well that 99 out of 100 of my fellows would call me atheist, infidel, and all the other usual hard names. As our laws stand, if the lowest thief steals my coat, my evidence (my opinions being known) would not be received against him. [The law with respect to oaths was reformed in 1869.]

But I cannot help it. One thing people shall not call me with justice and that is - a liar. As you say of yourself, I too feel that I lack courage; but if ever the occasion arises when I am bound to speak, I will not shame my boy.

I have spoken more openly and distinctly to you than I ever have to any human being except my wife.

If you can show me that I err in premises or conclusion, I am ready to give up these as I would any other theories. But at any rate you will do me the justice to believe that I have not reached my conclusions without the care befitting the momentous nature of the problems involved.

And I write this the more readily to you, because it is clear to me that if that great and powerful instrument for good or evil, the Church of England, is to be saved from being shivered into fragments by the advancing tide of science - an event I should be very sorry to witness, but which will infallibly occur if men like Samuel of Oxford are to have the guidance of her destinies - it must be by the efforts of men who, like yourself, see your way to the combination of the practice of the Church with the spirit of science. Understand that all the younger men of science whom I know intimately are essentially of my way of thinking. (I know not a scoffer or an irreligious or an immoral man among them, but they all regard orthodoxy as you regard Brahmanism.) Understand that this new school of the prophets

is the only one that can work miracles, the only one that can constantly appeal to nature for evidence that it is right, and you will comprehend that it is of no use to try to barricade us with shovel hats and aprons, or to talk about our doctrines being "shocking."

I don't profess to understand the logic of yourself, Maurice, and the rest of your school, but I have always said I would swear by your truthfulness and sincerity, and that good must come of your efforts. The more plain this was to me, however, the more obvious the necessity to let you see where the men of science are driving, and it has often been in my mind to write to you before.

If I have spoken too plainly anywhere, or too abruptly, pardon me, and do the like to me.

My wife thanks you very much for your volume of sermons.

-Ever yours very faithfully,  
T.H. Huxley

From the Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley, by his son, Leonard Huxley, D. Appleton and Company, New York and London, volume 1 (of 2), pages 233-239, 1909.

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**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or through our page at [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought). Please check these locations regularly, and RSVP through meetup.**

**Social Luncheon:** Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills shopping center, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Wyndham, take the SOUTH exit from the parking lot (turn your head left as you walk out the main entrance to see it), the drive across Esters Blvd onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114). From there, just take the first exit to the RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then take the Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, and continue on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

**Game Night:** The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

**Women's Group:** Come on out to the newly-formed NTCOF Women's Group, where there will be knitting lessons, conversation, and lots of female freethinking fun! Details at the [meetup.com](http://meetup.com) page including the appearance of astronaut Sally Ride at UTA the evening of Feb 15.