

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 5

May 2003

May Meeting

Ways to Help Recovering Alcoholics

A Presentation by John Salter

Alcoholism and other forms of addiction take a heavy toll, in wasted lives, missed opportunities, unnecessary costs. The best research indicates that alcoholics and drug addicts can recover and lead rich and productive lives. One important factor in recovery is choice - the recovering person's awareness that there are different paths to recovery, and that each person can choose the path that's best for his or her particular personality and circumstances. The Recovery Resource Center, Inc. (RRCI) was formed to help people involved with recovery to understand the choices that they have, and to make the best choices.

To most people, treatment professionals as well as the general public, the term "recovery" is synonymous with "Alcoholics Anonymous". AA has been a tremendous success for over half a century, and many people have found help in AA meeting rooms. But, as AA is quick to admit, it's not for everyone.

Fortunately, there are choices available - well-established, abstinence-based recovery programs with solid records of success. A major initiative by the Recovery Resource Center is to publicize four such programs and to provide support to them. RRCI provides a website at www.rrci.net.

John Salter, LISW, the founder of RRCI, will explain how these programs function and how you may be able to use them to help someone with an alcohol problem. Providing such help is truly a practical humanist activity.

John is a leading addictions care expert in southwestern Ohio. He is a social worker for Cincinnati Veterans Affairs Medical Center where he has specialized in addictions care. He also is a forensic substance abuse counselor.

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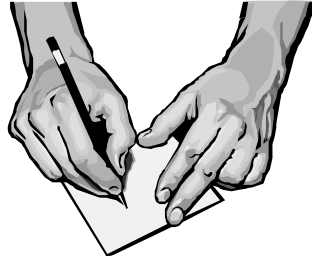
Tuesday, May 27th
at 7:00 p.m.

At the Vernon Manor Hotel,
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

May Potluck

Sunday, June 8th at 2:00

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



May 11, 2003

Well, we're finally going to have regime change closer to home, and well before November 2004.

This will be my last edition as Fig Leaves editor. After more than a year, I've had my say and am ready to pass on the stewardship of this publication. I am fortunate to have a worthy successor in Wolf Roder, who will take the editorial mantle and be fiercely vigilant to root out typos, incomplete sentences, and unworthy swipes.

Before I go any further, I want to thank and acknowledge the work of Martha Ferguson, who did all the really hard stuff, like putting everything into coherent form, not to mention folding and mailing. I tried to make friends with M.S. Publisher but the relationship was rocky, and Martha saved the day, every month.

I've appreciated the opportunity to put some of my thoughts into words, sentences and paragraphs. As many of you know, it is the actual writing, fingers on keyboard, which adds shape, form, and sometimes clarity to the jumble of thoughts circulating in the brain. In writing these columns, I've learned more about what I really think, and I thank you for the opportunity to allow me to do that; I hope that my writing was a stimulus for you readers, as well

I have little question about the toxic effects of religion on our society and the larger world. What I do wonder about is the role we can each play to preserve the boundaries of a secular life. Joining a group like The Free Inquiry Group is a positive step. Finding like-minded people is strengthening; carving out a place in the

community is invaluable. But for the most part we are still lingering on the sidelines. Fighting back has its place; protecting church-state boundaries is essential. What is missing, I believe is a proactive positive educational presence: taking a role to teach what we believe within the existing institutions in the community, the schools, community centers, senior centers, etc. The tenets of secular humanism are uplifting and inspirational. But they are our secret. If people are going to be mad at us and disagree with us anyhow, we don't have that much to lose.

I.D.

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Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 36, May 2003
On "being proud of"

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Lately I have been thinking about the meaning of "being proud of." It is hard to drive on a highway or walk down a street and not see a billboard or a bumper sticker that says "Proud to be American" or some variant thereof. So I started to wonder what do we mean when we utter or write such a phrase? To begin with, this isn't something that people do just for the fun of it. Few are patriotic enough to spell out their pride unless they mean it as a message addressing a particular situation. That particular situation, of course, has recently been provided first by the 9/11 attacks, and now by the war on Iraq and the controversy that it has generated, both nationally and -- more dramatically -- internationally.

Even so, I suppose there is no logical contradiction in, say, being proud of being an American and yet oppose preemptive wars because they violate international law. Indeed, many antiwar protesters have made it a point of displaying their patriotism with flags and slogans to reinforce the idea that they don't think of themselves as "anti-American," but simply anti-Bush foreign policy. So one can be proud of being an American for many different, sometimes blatantly contradictory reasons.

But more generally, and I don't mean to offend anybody by asking this question, whenever I see the slogan "Proud to be American" I want to stop the person and ask a simple question: why? Or, more precisely, "what do you mean by that?" Surely there are exceedingly good things that the nation known as the United States of America has done during the course of its history. To name but a few, it created

the first modern democratic state based on the principles of the European Enlightenment, it has successfully fought off Adolf Hitler, and has sent a human being on the Moon. Surely these are things to be mighty proud of.

Then again, that very same United States of America has done other things one would more likely be ashamed of, including exterminating entire indigenous populations in the process of building the new nation, engaging in racist policies that have been abandoned only gradually and painfully, and holding the record for being the only nation ever to use a weapon of mass destruction.

Should we as individuals be proud (or ashamed) of these things? Well, we certainly didn't do them (though we may be taking advantage of some of the outcomes). Let us remember that it is by a simple accident of birth that one is American as opposed to French, or Iraqi. And that most of us don't actually participate in our nation's civil life enough to claim any right to brag or be sorry about what that nation does during our lifetime (let alone what it did before we lived). From that perspective, being proud of being an American, French, or Iraqi is downright silly. It would be like being proud of supporting a particular baseball team just because one happens to live in a particular town (oh, right, people do that!).

And yet, I understand the feeling that brings people to cheer for a sports team or a nation. Heck, I religiously watch the soccer world cup, proudly recounting the past and present feats of the Italian team, even though I have made absolutely no contribution to it. Furthermore, despite the fact that I profoundly dislike any form of nationalism from a rational perspective, I have to admit that I feel at home when I enter a restaurant that serves good Chianti and pasta al dente. Indeed, I caught myself even at being somewhat boastful of the remote history of my country, from the absolute geographical and cultural dominance of the Roman Empire (take that, George Bush!) to the masterpieces of Renaissance artists! But, believe me, in my sober moments I realize that the Roman Empire wasn't exactly a political machinery to be proud of, and that Michelangelo did the Sistine Chapel completely independently of any help from me whatsoever.

What, then, does it mean to be "proud of" being associated with an abstract entity such as a team or

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FIG Leaflets

Contrast between Europeans and Americans:

Another problem is God. Americans are religious in ways that many Europeans find almost incomprehensible. "We could never imagine putting IN GOD WE TRUST on our money," says one Parisian intellectual. A series of surveys by the University of Michigan since 1981 suggests that on a spectrum of traditional versus secular values, with religious attitudes being a key test, Americans are closer to Turks, Indonesians and Iranians than to Italians or French, Belgians or Brits. In most societies, the survey suggests, affluence brings self-expression, and self-expression reduces religiosity. But less so in the U.S.A.

Why? Because in America religious faith is increasingly tied to freedom of choice. Europeans grow up in their Roman Catholic or Protestant cultures, and often feel free to ignore them. Americans search for a faith until it's a good fit. Some 200 years ago that prompted the legendary French bishop, diplomat and cynic Charles Maurice de Talleyrand's quip that "the states of America are a country where there are 32 religions, but there is only one course at dinner — and it's bad."

— Newsweek (24 February 2003) p. 37
Thoughts on Religion

The antipathy to religion of the DNA pioneers is long standing. In 1961 Francis Crick resigned as a fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, when it proposed to build a chapel. When Winston Churchill wrote to him pointing out that "none need enter [the chapel] unless they wish," Dr. Crick replied that on those grounds, the college should build a brothel, and enclosed a check for ten guineas.

Dr. James Watson described how he gave up attending Mass at the start of World War II. "I came to the conclusion that the Church was just a bunch of fascists that supported Franco. I stopped going on Sunday mornings and watched the birds with my father instead."

London Telegraph (22 March 2003)

Afterthought

Believers have suggested that children who are not comfortable with "under God" in the pledge of allegiance, can remain silent. Dr. Crick might suggest in

that case we could just as well substitute "under Satan."

Is morality rational?

Next Vogler considers morality, asking, how can we treat good as the object of human pursuits, as Aquinas suggests, "when any sane person knows full well that people sometimes knowingly and deliberately do bad things?" As a Christian theologian, Aquinas would answer ... One's relationship with God and hope for resurrection in paradise makes it rational to act morally.

But outside specific religious intellectual circles, contemporary ethics turns on secular work. Vogler's theory — like instrumentalism — proves to be morally neutral. Removing theology from Aquinas, she says, leaves no argument that acting immorally is irrational or philosophically erroneous. ...

Although she can't present a philosophical rationale for morality, Vogler believes there is one. "It might be that the most excellent thing you can be is a good person," she says. "That kind of life has its own rewards, and the only way to get those rewards is by being decent. The people who will do anything to get their way are missing out, but that doesn't mean they're irrational."

?? discussion of Candace Vogler, Reasonably Vicious (2002) in University of Chicago Magazine (Aug. 2002) p. 9

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the quotes.

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a nation? I suppose it is a reflection of the deep need for a sense of belonging that we all have, mixed with whatever imprinting we got from the surrounding environment when we were growing up. There is nothing wrong with that: it is fun to watch sports events with some sort of emotional involvement (not just as "spectators"), and it is even good to feel some degree of cohesion with the society with live in. What is not good is to forget to at least occasionally step outside of our feelings and take a look at the question from a more neutral ground. Then it shouldn't be difficult to realize that other people have just as much right to feel "proud of" being something else as we do, and that we are therefore not entitled to trample all over them with a condescending smile on our face. Is that too much to ask?

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FIG MEEETING, April 22, 2003

Speakers: Kimberly Blaker and Edwin Kagin

Topic: The Christian Right in America

Kimberly Blaker is the author/editor of *The Fundamentals of Extremism*, *The Christian Right in America*, and Edwin Kagin is a Northern Kentucky attorney, a FIG member and contributor of a chapter in the book. Most of the substance of the talks was taken in part from the book.

Edwin started off with a quote from Randall Terry the founder of Operation Rescue, an anti-abortion extremist group: "I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes hate is good...Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty; we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism."

Edwin also suggested that we need to know the Bible. It can be interesting reading even for atheists. It can also give an advantage in discussions with extremists because many of the people who "believe" in the Bible do not know or have only a vague idea of what it says.

He went on to ask, "How did we get in this fix?" America is the most religious country. It also has the highest rate of unsolved problems such as crime, teenage pregnancies, and drugs. He facetiously cited a simple reason: Australia got the convicts; America got the Puritans. He characterized these latter as the most repressive and vicious bigots ever to walk upon the surface of this planet.

The religious right claims that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. The justification for this claim is by reference to the Mayflower Compact. This document was signed by 41 persons aboard the Mayflower before they landed at Plymouth Rock.



There were 102 persons aboard the ship so a majority did not sign the document. The wording does mention

and say that they had undertaken this journey for the Glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith but that was then and this is now. The foundation of the United States did not take place until the adoption of the Constitution one hundred and sixty eight years later. The Mayflower Compact formed no part of the laws of the United States. Our constitution contains no mention of God and the omission was deliberate.



Photographs courtesy of Edwin Kagin

There were three phases in fundamentalist history. The first one was The Great Awakening beginning in New Jersey in 1730's and promoted by such preachers as Jonathan Edwards until the deists produced the Constitution after the Revolution. The second phase occurred during the mid -1800's and had its strongest impact in the South.

The third phase began with the publication of *The Fundamentalist* pamphlet series (1910), which emphasized the five points of fundamentalism which are still current today:

- The verbal inspiration of the Bible
- The virgin birth of Christ
- The atonement of Christ
- The bodily resurrection of Christ
- The second coming of Christ

At this point Edwin concluded his portion and turned over the presentation to Kimberly.

She stated that her portion of the discussion would focus on the effect of the fundamentalist agenda had on children –and not necessarily their own – women, African-Americans, and gays and lesbians. These groups suffer from violence, emotional trauma, violation of their civil rights, economic hardship and more. Society as a whole is also affected as seen by high poverty rates, recruitment into damaging sex

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and cults, crimes of violence, media control and the Christian right's involvement in the ADD-Ritalin scare. America is further affected by their attempts to dismantle the Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights, and to turn this from pluralistic democracy into a theocracy.

Children are affected by fundamentalism both in fundamentalist homes and in mainstream society. It is evident by high rates of physical abuse in fundamentalist homes and churches. Main stream children are affected by attempts to keep sex education out of our public schools as well as other types of information deemed evil or contrary to fundamentalist views. One such illustration of physical abuse occurred in Chicago in 2001 where a Jehovah's Witness family administered 157 cable lashes to the bare body of their 12-year-old daughter. They forced their two sons to participate. The daughter died on the way to the hospital. While not every fundamentalist engages in this severe type of physical abuse, it is not unheard of in fundamentalist families.

Religious affiliation is a better predictor of child abuse than age, gender, social class or size of residence. Belief in male dominance is also closely related to child abuse.

Fundamentalism also increases the likelihood of sexual abuse. According various professional studies (cited in the book), there are three family characteristics that pose high risk for sexual abuse. These are:

Patriarchal family structure

The belief that all sex is sinful

Sexual activity becomes a family secret.

Many children from fundamentalist homes are enrolled in either Christian fundamentalist schools or are home schooled. What happens is that some subjects are avoided (e.g., evolution) and history is sometimes distorted to give it a fundamentalist "spin."

The largest population affected by fundamentalism is women. In fundamentalist homes they may have little or no control over their own reproduction, little or no control over their personal life and may suffer from physical and sexual abuse. The health of women is controlled by Catholic hospitals. Other

efforts to limit abortions and the availability of contraceptives are seen as devices to control women. Another area of this type of control is the effort to limit the so-called partial birth abortions by promoting the notion that abortions are late term which is statistically inaccurate. The reasons for late term abortions are the health of the mother or serious fetal abnormalities.

She alluded to the fact that fundamentalism was used for many years to justify racism.

She quoted Bob Jones III as saying, "The Negro is best when he serves at the table. A Negro who does that is doing what he does best. Negroes who have ascended to roles in government have a lot of white blood in them." This from an official at Bob Jones University where many of our politicians have appeared as speakers and as recipients of honorary degrees.

It is fairly well known that fundamentalism has demonized the gay and lesbian population resulting in denial of their rights by legislation and crimes of violence against them.

The fundamentalists have also attempted to redefine the constitution by saying that there is no separation between church and state. Their obvious intent is to open up the public arena for the promotion of their agenda. This is one step on their road to a theocracy in this country.

George Maurer

Amazing Place

Amazing place, this world I find,
No gods nor creed need be.
I once believed, but now my mind
Unbound, at last is free.

A mind that's free to plan and build
For all humanity
Will find its life and dreams fulfilled
In true eupraxophy

I need not strive for heaven above
Nor fear no hell below.
So free to live in peace and love
In kinship I will grow.

No prayer of mine need e're be heard,
Just rationality,
For reason reigns o'er holy word
For all humanity

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BOOK REVIEW

Ciao, America! An Italian Discovers the U. S.
by Beppe Severgnini, trans. Giles Watson
(New York: Broadway Books, 2001)

Beppe Severgnini is the well known author of several books and a correspondent and columnist for the major Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. He is fluent in English and also writes for the highly regarded British magazine *The Economist*. As part of his work he spent a year, April 1994 to March 1995 in Washington. This book recounts his experiences of the capital city, his discovery of America, and his getting to know the United States. He has a light touch, the book is often funny, and his description of the American scene is friendly, only mildly critical, and most of all full of enthusiasm for life and people and experience of this new and “exotic” land.

His is not the description of the America of the famous foreign correspondent, of politics and Presidents, but of everyday experience. Finding a home in Washington means renting a house in Georgetown — which, as he well understands, is not America. It does require learning to read the newspaper rental ads, which requires a knowledge of a quite special English: “3br, 3ba, immac, lib,cac.lg gdn. Ph Ms Webb” which may give trouble even to the thoroughly native. Renting a house further requires interacting with that quintessential, can do, ebullient, no nonsense tolerated American character, The Real Estate Agent.

Your real initiation into American society, however, comes with buying a used car. Like the vulture a mouse, the salespersons can spot the innocent European as he comes through the door of the showroom. From there Severgnini describes the bargaining, the good guy - bad manager routine so familiar to us. He describes the experience of a friend, whose new used car ran exactly 17½ miles before breaking down. She did learn a new word though, he comments drily: “lemon.”

On the other hand, in some experiences Italians are ahead of their trans-Atlantic neighbors. Here is a description: (p. 13)

For Italians coming to live in the United States, the greatest satisfaction derives not from seeing films six months before they are released in Italy, or choosing from fifty different kinds of breakfast cereal, or reading two kilos of newspaper on a Sunday morning. What really tickles our epiglottis is grappling with American bureaucracy. Why is that? It’s because, having trained on the Italian version, we feel like a matador faced with a milk cow. It’s a pushover.

So he is almost disappointed with ordering a telephone connection, which in Italy can require bribes and take weeks. In the US the telephone company is “private and therefore efficient” (p. 14) so that the business is transacted over the phone, in minutes, and ends with having the actual number assigned.

In the US you have to get used to money, which is (1) all the same color, and (2) each bill the same size. Americans remain the only people who use feet and inches, and Fahrenheit temperatures while the rest of the world has long left these behind. Europe with its dozen major languages has to rely on signs to direct drivers. Thus the amazement of Washington parking directions posted in complex English — parking on alternate sides on odd and even days between sunup and sundown. It must be it’s intended to catch the unwary or perhaps middle-Eastern terrorists.

America has its spectacular aspects, the mountains and beaches, the forests and deserts and the sheer size of the place. It also has a predilection for the obvious. He never ceases to be amazed at the absolutely, stunning, identical motel rooms, fast food eateries, TV shows, and cities in general. There is no real difference between east and west, north and south. Americans “are convinced that anything good has also got to be over-the-top, in-your-face, and ear-splitting loud”. We might call it large-scale wanton tackiness. (p. 216) A light read, a quick read, and appealing for its insights into our character.

— Wolf Roder