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CFI NE Ohio News And Views

Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes and cartoons are welcomed. Submit in electronic format to editor Brent Bowen at bbowen1005@aol.com, or by mail to CFI NE Ohio News & Views, P.O. Box 2379, Akron OH 44309. Contributions for the July, 2019 issue must be received by Jun. 15, 2019.

Reason Works. Science Works. Know Better.

'Spirited' Programs In Store at Monthly Meetings

It can be said that the members of CFI Northeast Ohio have had many a "spirited" discussion! However, as we all know, the word "spirit" has a quite different meaning for most of humanity.

For our April meeting, we will be joined by longtime CFI (and American Atheists) member Linus Ogbuji, who will be providing us with a talk titled "The Persistent Myth of the Human Spirit." In his presentation, Linus will explore the inextricable link between the belief in a human "spirit" and religious belief in general. He will also be offering a critique of the oft-heard "spiritual, but not religious" position.

Linus is a retired professor of engineering and NASA scientist. A naturalized US citizen, he has lived in six countries on three continents (but longest in the USA). Linus is a CFI member and a life member of American Atheists, and he has three sons and 16 grandchildren.

The April CFI NE Ohio chapter meeting will be held on Wed., Apr. 10, 7 p.m., at the Independence Library (6361 Selig Dr., Independence). As usual, light refreshments will be served!

In May, the odd and often counter-intuitive sprit of our universe will be explored. As the famed English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) once quipped, "Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine." Since Eddington's lifetime, some "unimaginably" strange objects have been analyzed, photographed, and at least partially understood.

Join us on Wed., May 8, 7 p.m., at the Independence Library for a good dose of the strangeness of space! CFI NE Ohio VP of Programming Mark Tiborsky will be providing an overview of some of the weirdest known objects in our universe with his presentation "Celestial Strangeness." The program will focus on everything from bizarre objects in our own solar system to those located in the farthest known reaches of space. Casual science buffs won't want to miss this one!

In June, it will be time for the theme to come back to earth to explore the spirit of politics in our country. It may be hard to believe that by that month, the U.S. presidential candidate debates will already be upon us! Our CFI NE Ohio meeting for June will feature an open floor discussion with a self-explanatory title – "The Politics of Our Time." We'll be examining the current state of political affairs, and taking a look at the candidates (both official and potential) and dissecting the positions of the major political parties on important issues. The discussion will be orderly but essentially unmoderated – VP of Programming Mark Tiborsky will provide some materials to use as "jumping off" points for discussion.

An important side note – as it is a non-profit organization, CFI board members (and the CFI entity itself) are not allowed to coerce anyone into voting in a certain way, or officially "endorse" a candidate or political party while acting under the umbrella of CFI. We can, however, examine, dissect and criticize (or applaud) candidates and their positions on the issues, along with the political parties themselves. And these things, we will certainly do!

The Surprising Discoveries About Pluto

By Wayne Beckley



For the many decades since it was discovered, the distant solar system object known to us as Pluto has only been a tiny, blurry object at best, even with our best telescopes. Named for the god of the underworld from the suggestion by an eleven-year-old English schoolgirl after being discovered in 1930 by Clyde Tombaugh, Pluto was thought to be comparable to the other rocky planets in the solar system, about earth-massed. In 1948 that estimate was reduced to 10% of earth. In 1976, this was reduced to 1/100 of earth, and in 1978 to 1/650 of earth, after Pluto's moon Charon had been discovered and they could derive a more accurate mass, about one sixth the mass of Earth's moon.

All this shrinkage led to one conclusion: Pluto was too small to be considered a planet, and also had a far more eccentric orbit, at the inner edge of the Kuiper belt, an orbit that was shared by other orbiting objects. So in 2006, Pluto was demoted to the new designation of dwarf planet, to the dismay of many children and some adults.

That same year, a probe named New Horizons was launched toward Pluto. With a gravity boost from Jupiter, this probe arrived at Pluto in the summer of 2015. But even before its arrival, this mission sparked interest in finding out as much as possible about the dwarf planet. Starting in 2005, scrutiny by the Hubble Space Telescope led to the discovery of four previously unknown small Plutonian moons that were then given the names Nix, Hydra, Styx and Kerberos. Hubble's best photos also showed that Pluto has more large-scale contrast than any planet besides Earth. This stoked scientists' excitement at someday being able to see Pluto up close. What they finally did see up close was beyond their wildest imagination!

A NASA article written one year after puts it this way: "To say that New Horizons shook the foundation of planetary science is an understatement." What they expected to find was a dead, cratered world orbited by an ordinary cratered moon and four moonlets. They found a geologically active world. Pluto has a 600-mile wide craterless heart-shaped glacier made of frozen nitrogen - the largest known glacier in the solar system. It appears to be flowing around obstacles just like glaciers on Earth. When mission leader Alan Stern saw this, he was flabbergasted. And, what was this massive glacier flowing around? Mountains of water ice, some of which are up to 11,000 feet high! That's pretty impressive on a planet that is about 1,426 miles in diameter.

There are highly cratered regions on Pluto, which one would expect on a solar system object more than four billion years old. But in Sputnik Planitia, the western lobe of the heart-shaped Tombaugh Regio which has no craters, the surface may be no more than ten million years old, and possibly a lot younger. It has a peculiar surface of irregular polygons about 20 miles across bounded by troughs, which may be convection cells, slowly churning up the soft nitrogen ice. This is evidence of a heat source in Pluto's interior, probably from radioactive decay and tidal forces from Charon. It may also mean that Pluto has a subterranean ocean!

Pluto's atmosphere also surprised scientists, not because of its existence, which they knew about, but because it extends at least 78 miles above the surface, five times farther than expected, and is colder than expected. It was thought that Pluto would have lost more than half a mile of ice planet-wide over its lifetime, but now they think it's lost only a few inches. Pluto's sunrises and sunsets are distinctly blue as shown by a photograph taken with the sun behind the planet. Because there is methane in the atmosphere, UV light converts the atmosphere to hydrocarbons called tholins, which give Pluto its reddish hue.

Charon and the other moons also have their surprises. Charon has an enormous equatorial rift that suggests that it formerly had an interior water ocean that froze and expanded. Its dark red polar cap, which is unprecedented in other solar system bodies, may result from capturing atmospheric tholins that escaped Pluto. The small moons all spin far more rapidly than expected, given the gravitational influence of Pluto on them.

This body of new knowledge is more than enough to justify New Horizons' existence, but wait, there was a second act. The Hubble Space Telescope searched for, and discovered, another Kuiper belt object one billion miles beyond Pluto, that was reached by New Horizons on Jan. 1 of this year. Dubbed "Ultima Thule," it is a bizarre, two-lobed object, looking like nothing we've ever seen before. It is the remotest solar system object ever visited. Hats off to the NASA crew and Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory - their aim was astonishing. But wait. New Horizons still has enough fuel left, so there may well be a third act!

Is Atheism No Longer A Political Taboo?



(Excerpted from “Atheism is No Longer a Political Taboo,” at americanhumanist.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SurveyReport.pdf.)

The US Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office. However, being an atheist in politics has been a powerful political taboo in our nation. New research finds that this bias against candidates who don't believe in God has notably weakened. A poll conducted by Lake Research Partners for the American Humanist Association and the Center for Freethought Equality and funded by the Stiefel Freethought Foundation shows that being nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist need not be considered an impediment to a candidate's electoral success.

Talking with candidates running in the 2018 midterm election about the political cost of identifying as an atheist was the impetus for the poll. A candidate in a very red district, where the last Democratic opponent received less than 20 percent of the vote against the Republican incumbent, said he couldn't possibly identify as an atheist because he couldn't afford to lose any more voters. He said he automatically lost voters by identifying as a Democrat, more since he is pro-choice, and even more with his support of LGBTQ equality. This begged the question: Would the supporters of a pro-choice, LGBTQ equality Democrat care if their candidate was also an atheist? Reliable data was needed to answer this question.

The survey results show that a candidate's atheism is a non-issue—or even a plus—for pro-choice, pro-marriage equality Democratic voters, fully 74 percent of whom saying a candidate being “not religious” or “agnostic” would make no difference in their vote, and 72 percent saying a candidate's “atheism” would make no difference in their vote. Among those with a preference for a nonreligious/agnostic candidate, 14 percent are more likely to vote for him/her (including 10 percent much more likely) and 7 percent are less likely (including 4 percent much less likely); the difference is modest among those voters with an inclination toward an atheist candidate: 10 percent are more likely to vote for him/her (8 percent much more likely) and 13 percent are less likely (7 percent much less likely). Nontheistic, progressive Democrats in non-swing districts should no longer feel hesitant to be public about their religious identity. And while it still could be a challenging factor in swing districts, it's no longer the taboo it once was..

Although the bias against nonbelievers is diminishing, the Lake Research poll demonstrated that the bias

still exists. When asked to choose between a candidate who believes in God or a candidate who does not believe in God, respondents strongly chose the believer—with 60 percent supporting the candidate who believes in God and only 6 percent supporting the candidate who doesn't, while for 31 percent of the voters it made no difference (3 percent were undecided or did not know). These results were markedly different by political party affiliation: 46 percent of Democrats voted for the believer (10 percent supported the nonbeliever and 41 percent were indifferent) compared to 81 percent of Republicans voting for the believer (3 percent for nonbeliever, 15 percent no difference). For those independent respondents who did not identify with either major party, the results were more in line with Democratic voters (48 percent voting for the believer, 5 percent voting for the nonbeliever, and 42 percent having no preference).

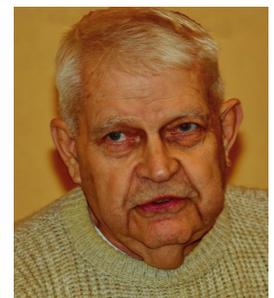
However, this preference for candidates who believe in God nearly disappears when policy stances are included in the question. Surprisingly, this holds true for Republicans as well. When asked if they would vote for a candidate who stood for most of the things they believed in but who didn't believe in God or who was nonreligious, versus a candidate who was religious but didn't stand for most of the things they did, 60 percent of respondents chose the nonbeliever and 24 percent chose the religious candidate.

Darwin Day 2019



Members enjoyed the birthday cake in honor of Charles Darwin for our annual Darwin Day meeting in February.

CFI NE Ohio member Vern Westfall presents “Darwin and the Other Half of Evolution” as the program for Darwin Day.



(Photos by Wayne Beckley)

Mark Your Calendars



Monthly Programs

“The Persistent Myth of the Human Spirit.”

By Linus Ogbuji
Wed., Apr. 10, 7 p.m.
Independence Library
6361 Selig Road, Independence

“Celestial Strangeness”

By Mark Tiborsky
Wed., May 8, 7 p.m.
Independence Library
6361 Selig Road, Independence

“The Politics of our Time”

Group Discussion
Wed., June 12, 7 p.m.
Parma Heights Library
6206 Pearl Rd, Parma Heights

Café Inquiry Socials

(All socials at Beef O’Brady’s,
3712 Darrow Rd., Stow)

Mon., Apr. 15, 6:30 p.m.
Mon., May 20, 6:30 p.m.
Mon., June 17, 6:30 p.m.

Long-Winded Answers Meetings

(All meetings at Panera Bread, 2855 W.
Market St., Fairlawn)

Tue., Apr. 9, 6:30 p.m.
Tue., May 14, 6:30 p.m.
Tue., June 11, 6:30 p.m.

(The Master says) “...when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say ‘I pray that God will help you.’ Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say ‘I will help you.’”

Martin Buber, Tales of Hasidim Vol. 2 (1991)

Spirited Programs in Store at Monthly Meetings

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We’ll be swinging out the west side of Cleveland for this one. The June meeting will be held on Wed., June 12, 7 p.m., at the Parma Heights Library (6206 Pearl Rd, Parma Heights). Hope to see you there!

(Editor’s note: The aforementioned programs will be the only ones offered by CFI NE Ohio for the second quarter of 2019. No meetings are scheduled for the Akron-Canton chapter at the Stow Library in this period. If any member wishes to step up and arrange programs for the Akron-Canton chapter to resume in July, please contact Monette Richards at mo@froglabs.com or Mark Tiborsky at sponyak@gmail.com.)

The Perfect Religious Creed To Teach Your Children

By Scott Kelly *(Excerpted from Endurance, astronaut Kelly’s book about his year on the International Space Station, excerpted on The Morning Heresy, 2/11/2019.)*

People often ask me whether I had any epiphanies in space, whether seeing the Earth from space made me feel closer to God or more at one with the universe. ...

I am a scientifically minded person, curious to understand everything I can. We know there are trillions of stars, more than the number of grains of sand on planet Earth. Those stars make up less than 5 percent of the matter in the universe. The rest is dark matter and dark energy. The universe is so complex. Is it all an accident? I don’t know.

I was raised Catholic, and as is the case in many families, my parents were more dedicated to their children’s religious development than they were to their own. Mark and I attended catechism classes until one day in the ninth grade, when my mother got tired of driving us. She gave us the choice of whether to keep going or not, and, as many teenagers would, we chose to opt out. Since that day, organized religion has not been part of my life. When Samantha was ten years old, she asked me at dinner one evening what religion we were.

“Our religion is ‘Be nice to other people and eat all your vegetables,’” I said.

I was pleased with myself for describing my religious beliefs so concisely and that she was satisfied with it.

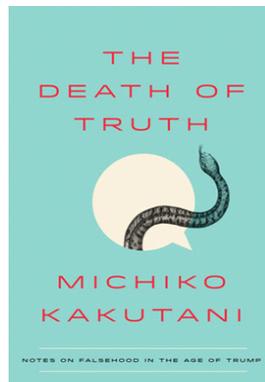
The Death of Truth

THE DEATH OF TRUTH by MICHIKO KAKUTANI

For what seems like forever, words and phrases like “incorrect assertion,” “fabrication,” “fib,” “untruth,” “distortion,” “political fiction” and others have been used by news media to describe, and soften what are intentional lies by politicians. Whether fear of legal action, misplaced courtesy or something else was the cause, the reluctance to use the word “lie” was almost universal, with the exception of right-wing media, which never blanched at calling truth a lie. But then a person was elected to be president who made a living by lying, and who was aided in his campaign by foreign lies and social media wanting only to make a buck. The resulting torrent of lies by the millions was overwhelming, causing legitimate media to quickly run out of polite synonyms; they had to call lies lies. The damage was already done, though. Millions of people began believing that the lies were true and that the truths were false.

This stunning transformation is chronicled and examined in a book, *The Death of Truth*, written by Michiko Kakutani. Her expressed purpose is to “examine how a disregard for facts, the displacement of reason by emotion, and the corrosion of language are diminishing the very value of truth, and what that means for America and the world...a world in which fake news and lies are pumped out in industrial volume by Russian troll factories, emitted in an endless stream from the mouth and Twitter feed of the president of the United States, and sent flying across the world through social media accounts at lightning speed.” This death of truth has resulted in what she describes as “an avatar of narcissism, mendacity, ignorance, prejudice, boorishness, demagoguery, and tyrannical impulses” in a president.

The situation we are now in was anticipated by the men who wrote our Constitution and planned for it by instituting a set of checks and balances in three separate branches of government. Alexander Hamilton wrote of “A man unprincipled in private life” and “bold in his temper” who might “mount the hobby horse of popularity” and “flatter and fall in with all the nonsense of the zealots of the day” so that he would control the government and “throw things into confusion that he may ride the storm and direct the whirlwind.” The language is quaint and colorful, but we can get the point and see how prescient he was. The question is whether the government, with all its safeguards, can withstand years of calculated, continuous, determined battering from someone who cares nothing for truth when lies work so well, swaying millions to follow him.



It is passing strange that conservatives, who object to moral relativism, should be so inclined to follow such a man. Kakutani quotes a 2005 article by David Foster Wallace: “Wallace observed that one of the ironies of this strange media landscape that had given birth to a proliferation of ideological news outlets (Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, etc.) was that it created ‘precisely the kind of relativism that cultural conservatives decry, a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which ‘the truth’ is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda.’” This statement is more relevant now than in 2005, since we live in a time when “truth increasingly seems to be in the eye of the beholder, facts are fungible and socially constructed, and we often feel as if we’ve been transported to an upside-down world...”

This “upside-down world” is very useful to people with an authoritarian bent. If you can appeal to people’s fears, you can disengage their ability to reason and calmly assess the facts. This is possible if you overwhelm them with frightening accounts of massive numbers of enemy invaders at the border coming to rape, pillage and murder citizens like them, if given a chance: “It is an emergency and no one else is doing anything about it; only I can save you, if you just give me the power to do so!” It is an old tactic, but it can work, if enough people believe it. “The sheer volume of [disinformation] unleashed by the Russian firehose system – much like the more improvised but equally voluminous stream of lies, scandals and shocks emitted by Trump, his GOP enablers, and media apparatchiks – tends to overwhelm and numb people while simultaneously defining deviancy down and normalizing the unacceptable,” writes Kakutani. And, it continues to this day.

The author concludes with thoughts from George Washington’s Farewell Address of 1796 in which he admonished “the young country must guard its Constitution and remain vigilant about efforts to sabotage the separation and balance of powers within the government that he and the other founders had so carefully crafted.” Washington warned of “cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men” who might “subvert the power of the people” and “usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion” and warned of “the insidious wiles of foreign influence” and “ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens” who might “betray or sacrifice the interests” of this country. Good advice then, and even better now!

Reviewed by Wayne Beckley