

ASHLEIGH BRILLIANT – SPEECH TO SANTA BARBARA HUMANIST SOCIETY,  
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Fellow Humans,

(I won't say "Fellow Humanists," because, as I will explain, I'm not even sure if I am one myself – but we are definitely all Human, and we come – if you will excuse the religious overtones of the expression – with all the blessings and curses of that condition.)

When, about a month ago, I received an email letter inviting me to speak here today, there were several things that struck me about it. First was the lovely name of the sender: Clover Gowing. I had never met, or even heard of, this lady, but just her name put me in a very receptive mood. Then, in the letter, she spoke of "the rampant religiosity abroad in the land," and I thought, "rampant religiosity," -- this lady not only has a poetic name, but she's a poet herself.

But what really grabbed my attention was that she said her idea of inviting me to speak had been sparked by an article of mine called "Astronomy and Angels," which she had seen in the Montecito Journal. I've been writing a weekly column in that paper for more than 2 years. I get \$35 apiece for my 750-word articles – but alas! I get very little feedback. So, to think that I had reached Clover Gowing in this way was very gratifying. But of course, it immediately had me digging up that column, to look at it again, and see what I had said that might have tweaked the interest of the Santa Barbara Humanist Society's Program Committee. So, I'll share a little of that article with you now, and see what you think.

Here are the first two paragraphs, which are about what I called the "almost irresolvable dichotomy" between the world as we experience it, and as we know it really is:

"Do you ever long for the good old days, when the Sun went around the Earth, and we were really the center of everything? Science keeps discovering new ways in which we are less and less significant, and the world more and more strange. Not many eras ago, if I were to quip 'They told us to get out of the Galaxy before sundown – but they didn't say which sun,' nobody would get the point. Now we understand that it's something more than a silly joke.

How to live in a world like this? One approach is not to take any of it too seriously. Even the astronomer, who spends his (or her) days (or nights) in realms almost inconceivably immense and remote -- or the nuclear physicist, who studies the interior vastness of atomic particles -- has to come home, take out the garbage, and tell the children bedtime stories. It's as if there are two separate realities – the one we live in from day to day, and the one we know of, but can safely ignore (if we wish to retain our sanity.)"

Then the article went into discussing the way some poets had tried to deal with this problem by maintaining that there is no "out there" out there, that it is all really in here -- with us, and within us. And I quoted a stanza that has stayed with me ever

since I learned it in my London school-days. It's from a poem called "The Kingdom of God" by the English poet, Francis Thompson, and I pointed out that Thompson died in 1907, just two years before Einstein published his first paper on Relativity.

Thompson speaks about what he called "the wheeling systems," like our solar system, out in space, but he insists that true heavenly reality, as symbolized by the beating of angel's wings, which he calls "the drift of pinions" is right here, beating at our very physical selves, which are in his words "our own clay-shuttered doors."

Here is that whole stanza, as it's always stuck in my memory:

*Not where the wheeling systems darken,  
And our benumbed conceiving soars!—  
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,  
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.*

But you weren't expecting an English Literature lesson today, and I hardly think this can be what your Program Committee, with its concern about "rampant religiosity," was looking for.

Well, my article then goes on to talk about Angels, including the Angel of Death, and Hells Angels, and it even gets into "Angel Dust." Somehow, I did forget to mention a famous speech given in 1864, by Benjamin Disraeli, who was later to become the British Prime Minister, at a gathering of clerics, chaired by the Bishop of Oxford, when Darwin's book on the "Origin of Species" had just recently been published. (Incidentally, Disraeli was born a Jew, but just when he was about to turn 13, his father, after a dispute with his synagogue, had his children baptized in the Church of England. This prevented Benjamin from having the traditional Bar Mitzvah at age 13. But it also, later on, enabled him to enter politics, which would otherwise, at that, time have been impossible for a Jew.) Anyway, what he said, referring to Darwin, at this big gathering was this:

"What is the question now placed before society? The question is this -- Is man an ape or an angel? My lord, I am on the side of the angels."

I myself didn't offer any opinion in the article about the divinity, or otherwise, of Man – but I did wind up with a reference to Copernicus – tying it in with my nostalgia at the beginning of the piece, about the good old days, when we thought we were really the center of everything. Here is my final paragraph:

"All these perturbations of our previously placid world view help us sympathize with the reluctance of the Polish Renaissance astronomer, Copernicus, to publish his almost literally Earth-shaking book, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*. It is said that a copy of the first printing was placed in his hands in 1543, just before he died. . . . What a way to go!"

Well, that was my article on “Astronomy and Angels.” (Just in case you’re not clear about Copernicus, he was the man who upset everything by claiming it was the Earth that went around the Sun, and not vice versa.) But quite honestly, I wouldn’t rate my own whole piece very highly as a piece of Humanistic literature. But I must also admit that this is why, although I keep being identified, and even celebrated, as a Humanist – I have never been comfortable with that designation. It’s because, from what I’ve observed, so much of your time in these meetings, and in your publications, seems to be devoted to bashing organized religion, and to pouring scorn upon those of our pathetic fellow mortals who still want to believe in something, and who sometimes, in their misguided frenzy, try to impose their beliefs on the rest of us.

I have published 10,000 epigrams on all kinds of subjects. It’s true that many of them mention God, but usually in a sort of friendly way -- for example:

*“God doesn’t make special reports to me - I just have to assume the universe is running properly.”*

And of course, there’s the one you have already seen, which I thought would make a good title and promo for this event, “SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL GOD.” As far as I know, this expression can be traced back to the 1950’s or 60’s, and it was originally “Support your local police.” Of course, there’ve been many variations since then – but I thought my version made a sort of friendly mockery of the idea that, wherever you go in the world, there are different religions and different gods. It might even remind you of that much older piece of advice, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Anyway, although I try to avoid stepping too hard on anybody’s toes, there is always somebody somewhere who’ll take something I say the wrong way. Whenever I get a letter from some indignant person who implies that I’ve offended their religious feelings, and sometimes encloses a tract, or in some other way tries to sell me on their version of the truth, I always say, “thank you for sharing your light with me,” and I send them my Pot-Shot #717, which says, “SCIENCE MAY SOMEDAY DISCOVER WHAT FAITH HAS ALWAYS KNOWN.” Thank God, that always seems to sooth them.

And indeed, one of my nine books of Brilliant Thoughts – in fact, the last one published so far, has Faith as its theme. I don’t deride people who have faith. Actually, I have to admit that sometimes I envy them. The title of that 9<sup>th</sup> book is, “I’m Just Moving Clouds Today – Tomorrow I’ll Try Mountains.” This is of course a reference to the Biblical concept that Faith can move mountains. Specifically, that idea comes from the New Testament Book of Mark, in which we are told that Jesus healed a boy who had some kind of seizures -- and when his disciples asked how he did it, when they had already tried unsuccessfully, he told them rather superciliously that it was all a matter of faith, which, he implied, they obviously did not have enough of. And he is quoted as saying “If you have faith as small as a

mustard seed, you can say to this mountain ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

But the Muslims have a very different take on this whole idea of mountain-moving. You have probably heard the expression, “If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain.” This is based on an Islamic legend in which Mohammed is asked to prove his greatness by moving a mountain. He goes ahead, and orders the mountain to come to him -- but, when it doesn’t, he rationalizes this failure by saying that, if the mountain had obeyed his command, it would have destroyed them all. So he thanks Allah for his mercy, and instead, he gratefully goes to the mountain.

This is somewhat reminiscent of the story about a legendary British King named Canute, who grew tired of being praised by his courtiers. To demonstrate the limitations of his kingly powers, and his own mere humanity, he had himself and his throne taken down to the beach, and sitting there, facing the sea, he commanded the tide to stop coming in. Of course, his commands had no effect.

Anyway, since I mentioned my book, about moving clouds and moving mountains, whose whole theme is Faith, I thought you might like to hear a little of what that book says about Prayer. This is from the introduction to the chapter called “Diverse Devotions:”

*“Prayer is still a popular, and, in most societies, a socially approved activity. Controversies do, however, periodically erupt concerning the time, place, and manner in which it is performed. For example, in America, it has been found better not to pray in such a way as to interfere with business, or to require summoning of the Fire Department or the Vice Squad.*

*Religious freedom [it goes on] does seem to have become more widespread in recent times – but perhaps only because people no longer consider such matters as important as in the good old days, when a debate as to how many angels could dance on the head of a pin might trigger widespread violence. (For what it’s worth, I personally have always felt that one angel per pin would be quite enough.)”*

Well, all this talk about the power or otherwise of belief and prayer still leaves open the question of what kind of a Humanist I am. In terms of combating Rampant Religiosity, am I, so to speak, a “Good Humanist Man,” or am I not more like the “Good Humor Man,” going around peddling little sweet morsels of my own brand of enlightenment?

In trying to settle this vexed issue, let me confess that I do sometimes watch what are known as “televangelists.” One I particularly like is Joel Osteen. Joel Osteen is a young man with a beautiful smile and a lilting voice, and a very engaging personality -- and he has a very positive message of hope, and also of encouragement in dealing with your own personal problems. He does mention God occasionally – and he seems to know what God wants and doesn’t want – but the important thing is that, according to him, God is always on your side. It’s

really the same message as taught by all the great religious leaders – the Power of Faith. If you can't move the mountain, have faith that the mountain wants you to move.

My 10,000 Pot-Shots epigrams try to cater to many different viewpoints, and among them you will find some which are very pro-faith, like these:

*The active ingredient in many very effective home remedies is called faith.*

*There is always room in my faith for you and your doubts.*

*The only truly solid foundation there can be for anything in this world is solid faith.*

*When it's my faith against your statistics, your statistics haven't got a chance.*

But just to level the playing-field, I do have Brilliant Thoughts more in favor of Doubt, such as these:

*We sometimes have to behave as if life were serious and important, even if we doubt it.*

*Hold on to what 's necessary -- let go of what's not -- and when in doubt, let go.*

*In some minds, there's no room for doubt -- in mine, there's hardly room for anything else.*

But if you want some out-and-out non-religious messages, the very first of my Pot-Shots, Number One of the Ten Thousand I've so far published, says "LET'S KEEP THE CHRIST IN CHRYSLER." I got that idea from seeing a bumper sticker that said, "Let's Keep the Christ in Christmas." Thinking about that message being stuck to a car somehow just naturally conjured up the pairing of Christ with Chrysler.

And I can also offer you such critical epigrams about Religion as these:

*I don't know much about religion, but I know what I don't believe.*

*Whatever became of eternal Truth?*

*Where can I put my hatred while I say my prayers?*

*I want eternal life, or something just as good.*

But I told you that I have been identified, and sometimes celebrated, as a Humanist. And you, no doubt, want some evidence to support that claim. Just what are my Humanistic credentials?

Well, I don't know if you've ever heard of Raymond B. Bragg. He was a long-time minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Kansas City, Missouri, and was considered to be a leading

Humanist of his day. He was an initiator of the first Humanist Manifesto, which came out in 1933, and which, you may be interested to know, considered Humanism a religion. It was signed by 34 people – all men. He died in 1979, but his Church wanted to establish a living memorial to him, so they created what they called the Raymond B. Bragg Award for Humanism in Entertainment and The Arts. And guess who they chose to be the first recipient of this Honor. Yes, it was Yours Truly!

Why did they choose me? To tell you the truth, I was afraid to ask, in case it had somehow been a mistake – and to this day I have no clear explanation. I had no connection with that Church, and very little with Kansas City, and I had never heard of Raymond Bragg. Probably, as often seems to happen, somebody had come across some of my work – just as Clover Gowing happened to see my article – and they saw how this could fit in with their agenda. Anyway, the award was worth \$2000 in cash, plus a free trip for my wife Dorothy and me to Kansas City – so I had no hesitation in accepting.

All I had to do was give an acceptance speech, in which I told them, as I'm telling you here, that I wasn't sure if I qualified as a Humanist at all. I talked about prizes, and how they had sometimes helped to make history. (This couldn't have applied in my case, because I hadn't even known about the Raymond Bragg prize.) But, for example, it was the \$25,000 Orteig Prize for the first non-stop flight between New York and Paris which motivated Lindbergh to make his triumphantly successful attempt in 1927.

I also suggested, (to quote that speech) that if I were going to offer a prize, it would be "for the one activity that nearly everybody agrees is worth encouraging: THE ACHIEVEMENT OF STAYING ALIVE. Surprisingly, this is one area in which prizes are so far quite lacking. Although we are all supposed to stay alive as long as possible, the way things are now, instead of INCENTIVES for longevity, we get PENALTIES. Beyond a certain age, life for many of us becomes more and more of a burden, and, by the time you're getting near 100, if you make it that far, all you have to look forward to is a little birthday party in the nursing home, and maybe your picture in the local paper, and a mechanically-signed letter of congratulation from the President. Hardly worth the trouble, is it?"

"But let's say we all knew that, if you could just hang on till you reached 120, you could collect, say, ten million tax-free dollars. Don't you think that would be a real inducement, not only to stay alive until then, but to stay healthy enough so that you could still enjoy spending it? Anyway, I think the idea is certainly worth trying, especially since it's the kind of experiment you just can't perform on rats and mice."

Well, I hope you'll agree that that was an idea in the best traditions of Humanism. Another idea I have had more recently for a large publicly-offered prize is for a cure for the Common Cold. Frankly, I can't understand why there have been dramatic breakthroughs in so many other areas of science and medicine, yet this contagious disease continues to plague us, with

enormous costs, in work-days lost, not to mention sheer human suffering.

OK, you may say, that's all well and good, but you want more proof of my Humanist credentials. Well how about a song? Humanism surely equates in many ways with Brotherhood. As you may or may not know, one chapter in my speckled career included a Hippie episode, when I lived in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco during the now-legendary "Summer of Love," and wrote a bunch of songs which were published as the "Haight-Ashbury Songbook." Of course, being a Hippie was all about brotherhood, and in one song, to the tune of "Home On the Range," I tried to echo that feeling, especially in a sort of mystical second stanza. The original second stanza said:

*How often at night, when the Heavens were bright  
With the light from the glittering stars  
Have I stood there amazed, and asked as I gazed,  
If their glory exceeds that of ours.*

My version, like Francis Thompson's verse about the "wheeling systems," and the angels' wings beating, not out there, but in here, reflected the feeling that smoking pot together made all people feel closer to each other. But here is the whole song, which I called

#### HOME IN THE TREES

*Oh give me a home, where the Hippies all roam,  
In a Park, where the people are free,  
Where there's plenty of grass, and some cute Hippie lass  
Only wants to have plenty of me.*

*Home, home in the trees,  
Where all people can do as they please,  
Where seldom is heard a middle-class word,  
And reality's just a disease.*

*How often at night have I asked for a light  
From a stranger whom I could not see,  
And beheld, in that place, my own brother's face,  
Who had always been looking for me.*

But something tells me I still haven't satisfied those of you who really want me to go after "Rampant Religiosity." I gather that you want to tear down the idols. But I'm not sure what, if anything, you want to put in their place. Well, I can at least offer you another song, which makes some gentle fun of Catholicism, by imagining what it would be like if a priest somehow got bitten by the Hippie bug. I named it in honor of the Catholic chaplain we had on the Floating University on which I was a teacher, back in the 60's, and sailed twice around the world. It's just called:

#### FATHER FALLON

*I wonder where old Father Fallon has been –  
Such curious behavior I never have seen –  
He says there's a brand-new Salvation from Sin,*

*And that Man's only got to turn on and tune in.*

*He's made a new surplice, all dappled with flowers,  
He talks about Love now for hours and hours,  
He says, "If to crucify people is wrong,  
Well, I really have crucified myself too long!"*

*He's given up shavin' – he's growin' a beard,  
He says there's no Hell but the Church to be feared.  
He'll drink no more wine, sure he turned down a glass –  
But he served chocolate brownies last night at the Mass.*

*The whole congregation has thrown up its hands,  
But the Father says "I'll surmount their reprimands –  
If the Bishops and Cardinals offer no hope,  
It will be my life's purpose to TURN ON THE POPE!"*

Now let's talk about Atheism. One of my epigrams, which I particularly like, says that "For obvious reasons, Atheists have to take very good care of themselves." The illustration shows a man in a strong wind wearing a big heavy overcoat, which I hoped might remind people of that cautionary song:

*Button up your overcoat  
When the wind is free  
Take good care of yourself – You belong to me.*

You can tell how old that song must be (actually, it goes back to 1929) because I don't think overcoats have buttons any more – it's all zippers, or Velcro – or both.

Anyway, my own feeling about Atheism is that it's a kind of faith in itself, and I just don't have enough faith to be a good Atheist. As for being an Agnostic, I think, if you'll pardon the expression, that that's just a cop-out. If you don't know, why is there any need to put a label on yourself as a Don't-Knower? Some of you may remember that there was an American movement, about 200 years ago, whose adherents actually called themselves the Know-Nothings. But, rather than being in any way religious, they were political, in the now-familiar pattern of being anti-immigrant, as well as anti-Catholic, since most of the immigrants in those days were Catholics,

My own personal prejudices may, at least partly, be traced to a Jewish background, which was pretty strongly religious, to the extent that, for example, "keeping Kosher" really meant something where food was concerned. And strangely enough, to this day, for no conscious reason, although I eat ham and bacon, I still can't eat pork. In my family, we always lit candles on Friday, the eve of the Sabbath. And for five years I was sent to Hebrew School, several days a week after regular public school. And when I turned 13, unlike Disraeli, I actually had a Bar Mitzvah.

But to me, there was very little in being Jewish about believing in anything. Despite all those years in Hebrew school, I never even learned to understand Hebrew, much less did I learn anything of a theological nature. And years later, when I was 19,

after spending a whole summer in Israel, I came away with even less religious consciousness that I'd ever had before.

Ironically, the big religious crisis in my family came some years later. It was over what was considered the ultimate sin – even worse than eating pig -- “marrying out of the faith.” To satisfy my parents, the two non-Jewish women, with whom I became involved at different times, both had to take special lessons from a Rabbi, and both officially became converted to Judaism. To me, this was a ridiculous pretense -- but it was also a matter of staying on good terms with my parents, which was still important to me, even if religion wasn't.

Anyway, Clover Gowing's suggestions to me about possible topics for today also included “uncensored intellectual inquiry,” which I gathered she was in favor of. My only problem with that is, what if it leads to truly dangerous thinking, and the wrong people get in power, as has happened in my own lifetime in Nazi Germany and other places? Ironically, some of the most prominent freethinking German Humanists, such as Martin Heidegger, who is still considered one of the world's great philosophers, supported Hitler, stayed in Germany all through the Second World War, and often said positive things about Naziism. I'm sorry to say it, but I'm just not sure how totally free and uncensored all thinkers should be.

Clover also sent me what she called “a factoid to ponder.” It was about a study by the Pew Research Center in 2014, in which they set up what they called a “Feeling Thermometer,” to see how warmly or coldly the American public felt toward different religious groups. And guess who came out at the very top of the scale. Surprisingly (to me anyway) it was the Jews! And who finished up right at the bottom? Yes, the Atheists. Muslims were also at the bottom, but I think politics and terrorism are too much mixed in there to make that part of the poll very meaningful

But you can't say that Atheists are in any way associated with suicide bombings, or cutting off people's heads, or condemning women to an inferior status. So why should people feel so negatively about them? How can such a warm-hearted Nation which feels so positively about Motherhood and Apple Pie, feel so coldly towards a small harmless scattering of their fellow-citizens who simply prefer to leave religion out of their lives?

I have a theory about this, but you'll probably consider it too far-fetched. I think maybe the trouble lies in the sound of the word “Atheist.” That long “A” sound at the beginning of such words as Atheist, Atheism, and Atheistic, reminds people of unpleasant things, like Ailments, Aging, Alienation, Aches and Pains, Aimlessness, AIDS, and Anal Examinations.

If the Pew Research people had used some other more innocuous-sounding word, like “Freethinkers,” I bet they might have got a less negative response, because Freedom, to most Americans, is a word that always puts a warm glow in their hearts, no matter what their religious background or affiliation.

Anyway, what do you or I care about what ignorant people think about us, so long as they leave us alone? But obviously Clover Gowing, who was kind enough to invite me here today, doesn't feel that they are leaving us alone. In her email signature she has the boldly stated motto: “CHURCH/STATE – KEEP THEM SEPARATE.” And, besides the “rampant religiosity” mentioned in her letter, she also spoke of what she called “the invasive properties of religion in America.” Well, I can only say that, in my own experience, those invasive properties haven't yet affected me personally. As I told you, I write a weekly column for the Montecito Journal, which I believe is owned by a very conservative family, with whom I have had very little direct contact. But in the more than 2 years I've been writing for them, on all kinds of subjects, including religion, they've never once changed or edited anything I've said.

Then, as some of you may know, my Pot-Shots epigrams also appear daily in the Santa Barbara News-Press, which also has a very conservative owner, whom I've never met. And it's the same story there, although once recently I did feel I was taking a chance, and I might get in trouble for hurting somebody's religious feelings. It was my Pot-Shot in which the illustration is just a bunch of flames – and the message says, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING, AFTER THE HOLOCAUST?” Well, what do you think the reaction was, from anybody at the newspaper, or from any of my readers? The answer is: nothing, nada, no reaction from anybody. And for all I know, nobody here is going to react either. Nobody will protest, as I feared they might, that I was being outrageously flippant, making light of one of the most horrible episodes of human history, one so recent as to be still in living memory.

I did have a good excuse, if anyone had complained. The fact is that, when I wrote that line, years ago, the term “The Holocaust” had not yet come to be applied, as it has since then, almost exclusively to the Nazi program of exterminating Jews -- and I wasn't even thinking of that, but of the older meaning, of any great fire or other disaster.

But if you still want to put my own beliefs in some pigeonhole, I've written a poem which may or may not help you decide whether or not I qualify as a Humanist. I thought it might make a nice conclusion for my remarks here today. It's called,

“THE ATHEIST'S PRAYER.”

*God, who does not exist,  
Help me to deny thee;  
Lord of the lordless,  
Give me faith to have no faith,  
Give me the wisdom not to understand – And the power to  
doubt.*

*Amid the world's mysterious griefs and pleasures,  
Where each enigma breeds a cult of dreams,  
Where Reason yields to empty explanations,  
Preserve my mind from blind, believing schemes.*

*And let me not look upward from affliction,  
Nor, drugged with love, declare my joy divine –  
Between the flowers and the sky, defend me from the Demon  
Why;  
From Cause and Purpose keep me free -- confine my sight to  
what I see --  
Lest I too bow before thy sheltering shrine.*

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