

Some Thoughts on the Atheist Future

Toward a Culture of Reason

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*Red Neck, Blue Collar, Atheist: Simple
Thoughts About Reason, Gods & Faith*

Thoughts on the Atheist Future

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Dedicated to
Atheists & Freethinkers
Everywhere

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CHAPTER 1:

Self Defense on the Planet of F— You

Say there was this place you could live—call it FairWorld. It would be a place where businesses and government officials always dealt with you honestly and openly. Where no merchant or government official would think of deceiving you, and where every deal was transparent and fair, with no unpleasant surprises built into it, so you'd know exactly what you were getting, what you were paying for, what you were agreeing to. Where you were neither lied to nor manipulated by business, but dealt with as a partner and an equal.

Would you like to live there? I know I would.

Because say there was this other place—a place

where every deal was suspect, where there were nasty little surprises hidden in every purchase, every business transaction. A place where you were lied to and manipulated as a matter of course, a place where the lies and manipulation were so constant and so expert that you were used to it, that most of the time you didn't even notice it was happening. Where unfair, predatory treatment was so much the norm that when you did notice, you expected to have to wage a prolonged fight to get fair treatment, a fight you knew you'd often lose. A place where none of it was exactly illegal—usually, anyway—but where, if you really paid attention, you'd feel cheated on an almost daily basis by the dishonesty, the trickery, the chicanery that regularly came your way.

Call this place FuckYouWorld. Would you like to live there? I know I wouldn't. But we sort of do.

Here's a little slice of FuckYouWorld:

I bought a new cellphone from Boost Mobile not long back. I wanted a new one to take on vacation with me, because I was having some problems with the battery in my old one. I thought I'd try a refurbished phone to save money, counting on Boost to live up to their promise that it was fully restored, the equivalent of factory-new.

But when I got the thing and tried to activate it, I couldn't make it work. I contacted Boost and asked for help, and got a terse note back: The phone was still hooked up to the account of the previous owner. I would have to contact the guy and get him to release the phone.

I laughed about it in grim humor, then emailed back to them, telling them I'd bought the thing with certain expectations, none of which was that

I'd have to contact the previous owner and dicker with him. The phone was either fully refurbished or it wasn't, and which was it?

Meanwhile, the date of my vacation arrived, and I had to take the old phone with me and hope the battery would hold out. It didn't; I ended up having to use emails and texts through my tablet rather than having a working phone.

When I got back, the previous-owner problem had been worked out and I was able to connect the phone. Except the speaker on the thing wasn't working. It was a week or so before I discovered I couldn't use speaker mode at all. There were some other problems with it—it wasn't "like new" at all.

I emailed Boost again. This time I got back a short note saying I'd have to contact the manufacturer for any repairs. I was past Boost's warranty date.

What? No way. "I expect Boost to make good on this phone. I paid for a working phone, and this one doesn't. I want to return it for either a replacement or a refund."

Nope. Sorry. We have a policy on returns. You're past the date and it's no longer our baby.

"I expect you also have a policy of selling equipment that works."

Silence. Why? Because Fuck You.

I have since ordered a new Samsung from another provider, but I still have the \$200-or-so paperweight Boost Mobile sold me, sitting useless atop my file cabinet.

Second vacation: I'm flying to San Antonio with United. Everything's peachy until the return trip, when one of my flights is canceled. The nice lady at the help desk hooked me up with new flights—

rather than flying San Antonio to Chicago to Albany, I'd be flying San Antonio to Houston to Newark to Albany.

Problem was, the Houston connection gave me fifteen minutes to get from my arrival terminal at one end of the airport to the departure terminal at the other end. Given the time it takes to actually get off a plane and out into the terminal for a frantic run, not even Usain Bolt could have made the dash from one end of the Houston airport to the other. Besides which, the flight I came in on was delayed. I missed the connecting flight by more than half an hour.

And here's the thing. The "nice lady" at the help desk knew there was no way I could make that connecting flight. Nor could my luggage.

I got another later flight to Newark, arriving long after any flights would be departing to Albany. I had the choice of staying the night – paying for a hotel out of my own pocket – or renting a car on my own dime and driving the three hours to Albany. Since I had to be at work the next day, I rented the car and drove, eventually getting a total of four hours sleep.

Hey, United, you paying for this rental car?

Nope, sorry. That flight you mentioned that was "canceled"? It wasn't canceled. It was just delayed two hours. (Fuck You.)

Fuck You from companies that make home computer printers. You go into the office supply store and find 175 different ink cartridges, and it never occurs to you that there could be seven industry-standard cartridges, or nine, that fit in every maker's printers. "Oh, but that's how they make their money!" you protest. "They couldn't sell the printer so cheaply if they didn't

make money on the ink!” Yeah, but funny how so many of our battery-powered flashlights and toys manage to use industry-standard batteries—D cell batteries, C cells, AAs, AAAs—and none of those manufacturers seem to be shutting their doors. Besides which, printers offered by the same company often use proprietary ink cartridges for *each different model*. Why? Because Fuck You.

My previous printer had a “draft” print mode that allowed me to print out sheets quickly, using about half the ink. I bought a new printer from that same company, and was surprised to find draft mode no longer exists. I’ve looked and looked through the documentation, and it appears they just quietly deleted it. Further, this printer is the kind that has four ink cartridges—Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black—every one of which is necessary for the printer to work. I almost never use the color—I only print text documents—but even with a fresh, full black ink cartridge, and even if set to “Print in Black Ink Only,” the printer will stop working if any of the color cartridges are exhausted. Because Fuck You.

I have an app on my phone that includes the following permissions: take pictures and videos, full network access, receive data from the Internet, view network connections, modify system settings, and control the flashlight.

Another app includes: read phone status and identity, take pictures and videos, GPS and network-based location, read, modify or delete the contents of USB storage, find and use accounts on device, read Google service configuration, full network access, receive data from Internet, view network connections, view

Wi-Fi connections, control flashlight, control vibration, control microphone, and prevent phone from sleeping.

Any guesses what they are? The first is a flashlight app, which I use for nothing but turning the phone flashlight on and off. The second is a banking app, used only for accessing my online checking account.

How many of those permissions are there for me? Very goddam few of them. How many are there because Fuck You? Most of them. Why does my flashlight app need to be able to take pictures and video? Why does my bank need to control the microphone? And here's the rub: I either agree to those "permissions" or I can't use the app. In the case of my banking app, there is no "lite" alternative that doesn't give them almost full control of my system every time I sign on.

The entire field of marketing is based on the Fuck You business model. If you're a marketer, you exist to get people to buy things they wouldn't otherwise want, probably don't need, and might be better off without. Put the candy next to the register, and Fuck You mom on getting through that line without your kids pestering the hell out of you to buy them something.

Pharmaceuticals: The cost to U.S. consumers for a certain cholesterol drug is four times the cost of that same drug in Canada. A drug for depression, almost six times more, an arthritis drug, four times more, an asthma drug, four times more. Why? For absolutely no other reason than, "Hey, you're sick? Awww. But Fuck You."

Fuck You from phone companies. I got on the Do Not Call list the very day I heard of it, yet I

still get a dozen calls a week from marketers. The caller ID will say they're calling from Houston, Texas, or Tallahassee, Florida, but the voice on the other end, pitching web design, or auto warranties, or any of a dozen other goods and services I don't need and don't want—or scare-tactic scams such as “You own money to the IRS! You need to pay right now or the police will be at your door in 45 minutes!”—will be direct from New Delhi. Despite the fact that some part of the telecom system has to know the call is not coming from Houston or Tallahassee, callers are allowed to lie to me even before I answer.

Moreover, isn't it funny how you can get calls every day from people who want to sell you something, but if YOU want to talk to a live person about a faulty product or service, it's almost impossible to get through? Some large companies don't even publish their phone numbers.

Fuck You on the car lot: When you go out on the dealership lot and look at new cars, each one will have a federally-mandated sticker on the window that will tell you, among other things, the fuel efficiency. That sticker might say 31 MPG Highway. If you buy the car and drive it off the lot, there will not be a day you own the thing that you will get 31 MPG. You'll get 28 or 29 at best. Why? Because Fuck You. Not only by the manufacturer, but by the federal government, which allows them to fudge the numbers in their favor instead of yours.

Speaking of government Fuck You, let's talk state-sanctioned Lottery, one of the most transparent Fuck Yous of the modern age.

One of my Wise Old Sayings is “There is no

place you can get to in life, no matter how low, that there isn't someone down there ready to suck a little more life out of you."

In FuckYouWorld, as long as someone can make money off you and people like you, and as long as it was carefully engineered to be "legal," it's all good. Millions and millions of people will give money—GIVE money, hundreds or thousands of dollars a year—for nothing but the carefully engineered and entirely illusory hope that their miserable lives will be bettered by some fantastic stroke of blind chance.

It's like paying an electric bill every month, not for actual electrical service, but for the promise you might someday win free electric service for life. With, meanwhile, little dribs and drabs of power flowing your way every couple of weeks.

The ugly hidden truth of the Lottery—the same truth that holds sway in the casino industry—is that the game is rigged so you and millions like you will lose their money. Even if you win, you don't win the casino's money, or the state's money, you win the money of those legions of other poor suckers, the losers you are now helping convince to allow themselves to be screwed by crowing about your "win." Meanwhile, the state and the private company that runs the thing rake in a percentage of the take that leaves Las Vegas casinos green with envy.

And Fuck You, you poor sap, every time you say "If I won the Lottery, I would ..." or "When I win the Lottery, I will ..." —No, screw that "working hard and saving money" thing; gambling is your only way out of the pit. As long as you believe that, neither you nor your entire gullible class has

a chance in hell of ever getting free.

The idea of glorious rescue via Lottery ticket was in part sold to you by your very own government, and nobody involved thought that was a bad thing. They could have instead sold you the idea of saving and investing, but where's the profit in that?

As to Las Vegas itself, Fuck You in spades. You might argue that the entertainment value of gambling is just the price of admission to this glowing predator of a city, but you can get that much and more entertainment from Disney World without the Fuck You. At Disney, the worst you have to do is wait in lines. There are no victims at Disney World—nobody goes home broke, desperate or addicted. Nobody loses their life savings or their retirement money. Nobody commits suicide. But in Las Vegas, and because of Las Vegas, they do. How many does it happen to? Like the body count in a bad war, Las Vegas is the last place on Earth that would publicize that information.

Fuck You in the job market. I once worked in the bakery department of a big supermarket. For more than two years I did a bang-up job, but I was a part-timer the whole time. Which means no benefits, no vacation for more than two years, nothing but that low hourly wage. My schedule also rotated unpredictably—mornings, afternoons, evenings—so I couldn't plan anything else, much less get another part-time job to make ends meet.

Most of the employees were part-timers. They had a few full-time department heads to keep things together, and a lot of low-paid fill-ins to actually do the work. Why? For good economic

reasons, obviously—so they could employ their vast workforce and yet never have to pay benefits—but also because Fuck You to most of the people who worked there.

Fuck You is such an accepted part of modern business, it probably doesn't even occur to fledgeling companies not to build in a good big serving of Fuck You.

How about another government/political Fuck You? The strategy of today's GOP—whether gerrymandering voting districts, eliminating the reproductive rights of women, or disenfranchising minority voters, not to mention wasting years in Congress voting for bills that had no chance of passage while important business languished like ugly orphans—is pure Fuck You. Not just to every voter who doesn't happen to be a rich Republican, but to every American. Half of our government is in the hands of people who will stop at nothing to eliminate health insurance for millions and block economic progress for all but bankers and the superrich.

Once you start thinking about it, Fuck You is everywhere. Banks. Advertising. Insurance. Cars. Mortgages. School loans. Software. Computers. The Internet (yeah, I totally want something to pop up in front of an article I'm trying to read). Phones. Cops and courts, judges and lawyers. Fox News. The History Channel (Ancient Aliens? Ice Road Truckers? Really??).

Not to mention the utter horseshit of television in general, including more than 50 phony ghost hunter shows: Ghost Adventures, Ghost Hunters, Ghost Hunt, Ghost Hunters Academy, Ghost Lab, Ghost Trackers, Ghost Stalkers, Paranormal Witness, Paranormal Lockdown,

Ghost Hunters International, Ghost Asylum, Deep South Paranormal, Ghost Detectives, Phantasmic Ghost Hunters, When Ghosts Attack, Ghostly Encounters, Girly Ghosthunters ... to name a few.

Of course, life is not all Fuck You. My own social universe is made up of a great deal of kindness and generosity. As to business, oh boy, I do appreciate being able to go into a supermarket and buy foods from all over the world. I love being able to use my charge cards. I like my smartphone. I love the Internet. Hell, I even like government—the part that holds things together, fixing the streets and so forth. But even these indispensable services and conveniences are often designed to contain just enough useful features that the Fuck You can be slipped in quietly so as to appear to be just part of daily life.

When I bought a house a few years back, I signed my name seventy-five times. What was I signing? Mostly, I had no idea. I signed because I wanted the house, and because there were seven other people in the room using up their valuable time. Every contract you enter into today, every agreement you enter into online, I'd bet good money you don't bother to read the whole thing, or understand it, before you click Okay. Why? Because 1) you'd have to be a lawyer with unlimited personal time to actually read and understand all of them, but 2) you know you have the choice of agreeing or simply being denied access.

Off the top of my head, one of the few things I can think of right this minute that isn't at least partly based on Fuck You is public libraries.

I'd have to admit the level of overt Fuck You is down in some ways over previous eras. After

all, churches can't burn you to death for being a witch or an apostate, Mississippi cotton farmers can't buy and sell you, children aren't forced to work in factories at the age of 8, and the government can no longer conscript you into the military to die in some useless foreign war. Certainly we're not forced to buy Lottery tickets.

But in some ways the Fuck You level is way up ... because the techniques of Fuck You are so much more sophisticated now that most of us feel confident we're free and in control of our lives. That being Fuck You'd by the bank, or by student loans, or software companies, or a televangelist, or the Lottery, is all voluntary, and by our own choice.

Of course it never occurs to most of us that we voluntarily carry around—or place in our homes—a convenience which might also be the most powerful personal surveillance device ever invented, a gadget potentially able to track, record and reveal our movements, conversations, purchases, banking transactions, even capture realtime audio or video of our most intimate private moments.

What to do? Most of us do know Fuck You is out there. Given a chance to think about it, we hate it. A lot. We just think we have no choice.

Sadly, that belief, that grim conviction that we have no choice, no power, is yet another Fuck You, but it's a Fuck You we do to ourselves.

I suggest there's a solution staring us in the face. Something like, but more than, a union.

Wait, what?

Most of my early life, I never cared much for unions. Healthy and male, young and bright

and adventurous, I had no need for them. If something in my work environment made me unhappy, I could just leave. And so I did. I switched careers like some people change outfits, happily digging into new endeavors or moving to new places at will.

I was a pastry chef, an entrepreneur, a property manager, a sign maker, a graphic designer, a truck driver, a cowboy, a draft horse teamster, a wilderness guide, a chauffeur, a carpenter, a roofer, a magazine and newspaper editor, a freelance writer, a blogger, an author, a photographer—in Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona and New York.

If I had a job that required me to belong to a union, I grudgingly accepted the dues taken out of my paycheck, but I never attended a meeting, or voted in union elections. Eventually I always moved on to something freer, something—as I saw it—less forced.

Even better, I was self-employed more than once. The boss who made the rules, that bastard slave-driver I worked for, was me. I had to work damned hard at times, but I also got to enjoy the profits. It gave me one more way to whack at unions: If a doofus like me could start a business, anybody could.

But as life goes on, I'm seeing more and better reasons to favor unions.

The basic reason is this: A wolf can eat a mouse and there's not a damned thing the mouse can do about it. But a wolf faces another wolf only with great caution.

Likewise, a corporation can screw you over—legally, financially, physically, medically, emotionally—can eat you alive, little mouse,

when you try to get fair treatment.

But if you band together with others of your same small stature, you can become big enough together to present a counter-force to large-scale organizations. Thousands or millions of individuals combining their small allotment of personal power into a wall of determination can approach the status of equals with the corporation. As one wolf to another, such an organization can pose a threat to the corporation, a threat that has to be carefully and diplomatically dealt with.

This is not to say individuals can't make big differences. It is to say that it's never a bad idea to have a supportive team around you. Hey, corporations have their team—law firms, bankers, pet Senators. Why shouldn't you have one too? Why should it be the rule that only individuals are allowed to battle large corporations, government, or other powerful forces in society?

After all, every organization people create is just people. Get enough other people together, with the same organizational model, and your people can do anything those other people can do. Anything one large collection of people can do, another large collection of people can do. You can resist, change, reverse—or start!

Being atheists, we're already doing some (nowhere near all) of that in the field of religion. But we lack greater heft in the larger social sphere, mostly because we see ourselves in this one way: We're atheists—that and nothing more.

The truth is, we're more than that, if only we decide we are.

We're a People, with a great mass of shared

values. What we don't have, because we've never grasped it, is a great mass of shared power. But there's a way to remedy that.

We could have our own member-owned non-Fuck-You bank, our own non-Fuck-You insurance company, our own non-Fuck-You computer and printer manufacturers, our own non-Fuck-You phone company.

If 30 million people suddenly decide not to deal with any bank but their own, or phone company but their own, or software company but their own, things would change. Fast.

The power of nations is in our hands, if we only first realize we are a nation.



CHAPTER 2:

The Power of Nations

[PART 1]

The day I left home to go to Reason Rally 2016, a friend—who knew I’d be driving 8 hours to get to Washington DC and another 8 hours to return that same night (!)—asked me “Why are you going to this thing?” I gave him a flip answer as I stepped out the door: “Hey, it’s the Atheist Woodstock!” Thirty seconds later, I poked my head back in and answered seriously: “Because when I went to the one in 2012, it was the first time in my life as an atheist I felt welcome, and free, and home.”

If our one desire as atheists is to be a loose

body of free individuals, nothing more need be done. We're there and getting more there all the time. But if we want to have our own place in the world, a permanent place, a home, we need something bigger than atheism. Something sturdier. Longer-lasting. Self-perpetuating. Because atheism alone can't get us there.

Here's why I think so, and what I think that 'something' is.

Three Boats

Think of the future as an archipelago of possibilities, with all the things-to-come each on its own island. One island might contain a future of clean, beautiful cities and unspoiled wildlands, a future of education and wealth; another might present a future of grit and poverty, overpopulation and starvation; a third might lack humans altogether; a fourth ... you get the idea.

Every one of us will eventually arrive at one of those islands, to live in some sort of future. But most of those futures will be, in broad terms, of someone else's making. In that future, whichever one we reach, we'll pay whatever they charge us for our student loans. We'll dress in what they sell in the stores. We'll listen to the music and see the movies and read the books they provide. We'll vote for the candidates they offer us. We'll eat the foods—and the ingredients in those foods—they put on the shelves, in stores they own. We'll celebrate their holidays. We'll receive the medical care, or lack of it, offered by their hospitals. We'll tread lightly under the scrutiny of their cops. We'll obey their laws, or go to their prisons.

Because the only boats going to that distant

archipelago are theirs.

Who are the owners of those vessels? Who are they? Government. Corporations. Religion.

Government: Organized and powerful, government can and does direct money, labor, and planning toward large-scale projects that can span decades or longer. Supposedly created to serve its citizens, it can have goals that have nothing at all to do with long-term benefits to ordinary people. It can create laws, operate police forces, courts and prisons. It can interfere in the lives of its citizens in ways large and small. It can even engage in wars, sending young men and women off to die in some scorching hellhole, for no good reason.

Business: Large corporations plan for their own future, a future of survival and profit in an environment of competition and scarce resources. Corporations have goals to benefit themselves first, customers second. Yes, they have to keep customers happy in the short term, but that doesn't mean they actually have to benefit—or even keep from harming—those customers in the long. If there's more money in sugary carbonated soda than in fruit juice or tea, guess which product will get the advertising budget? If lottery tickets are a more profitable sell than savings accounts, what's going up on all the billboards? Which will be available in every convenience store? If a profitable product like tobacco actually harms the customer, but nobody can prove it without a protracted legal fight pursued over decades, will they sell it? You bet they will.

Religion: Not just people in random Brownian motion, but tens or hundreds of millions gathered together with common beliefs and

goals—dictated, supposedly, by an actual god—operating out of one or more churches in every city, town, hamlet and neighborhood in the U.S. Religion can set and enforce social mores with real consequences that might range from public censure to shunning—in the past, even to death—and it functions across generations.

None of these “boats” travel alone. They rope together to smooth the journey. The boat of business sails in close touch with the boat of government. Considering there are something like 15,000 lobbyists in Washington DC, allegedly spending \$3 billion a year to influence legislators, and most large corporations pay little or nothing in taxes, the corporate boat is not only well-fueled and -powered, it is avidly assisted by the vessel of government. Government, in turn, leans heavily on business for navigational cues.

The boat of religion gets all sorts of perks from the government, and does everything it can to reflect influence back into government. It succeeds: Government officials pay constant homage to religion, treading carefully on any issue that even remotely relates to it. Case in point: The Catholic molesting travesty was out in the open for years before law enforcement slouched into action.

So where’s the boat that has room for atheists, or atheist goals? Say we want to reach the island where schools—all schools—teach evolution. Not as some also-ran topic covered in a day, not as a suggestion given no more weight than creationism, but as the rock-solid heart of every discussion of Earth biology. Who’s going to make that happen? Who’s going to get us there?

Government? Uh, no. They’re going to waffle

and test the air, veer away and carefully not get involved. Corporations? Nope. They're gonna sit this one out too, kids. Churches? Ha! Not on your life. They're the ones who got us to this island, the one where teachers are afraid to teach.

How are we going to get those actual science classes for every kid in America—the ones that explicitly say creation didn't happen but evolution did? Answer: We're not. It's not going to happen. There is no boat going there. Generations of schoolkids will come and go with inferior science education.

There's this island we want to get to, but there's some whole other island—another future entirely—we'll arrive at. We'll get the future that government, business and religion will take us to.

You and I might want a cure for Alzheimer's in five years, but if government won't help fund the research, if universities, hospitals and pharma companies won't do the research, and if religion blocks the research, or owns the hospitals that might otherwise apply or test the treatment, there will be no cure for Alzheimer's in five years. Not here, anyway.

But isn't it enough just to be atheists? If we free ourselves and others from the grip of religion, won't good things automatically follow? No. Atheism alone isn't going to get us to any particular future because, beyond the bit about individual freedom (no small thing!), it has no built-in direction. Atheism by itself isn't even a thing. It's a non-thing, an opposed-to-this-other-thing thing. It can work immense changes on individuals, but as a larger social force, a force aimed at some particular future, it is dramatically rudderless.

If atheism isn't going to get us there, and the three boats aren't going to get us there, what can we do?

How about we build our own boat? To have any hope of creating a future of our choice—possibly any hope of having a future at all—we pretty much have to.

So let's talk about this imagined boat of ours. Let's talk about culture.

Culture

In simplest terms, culture is all the things you learn from your parents, peers and elders, and then pass on to your own children and grandchildren. Culture is just about everything you do. Your culture is the unwritten handbook on how to live life on scales both large and small.

It's what you eat, the utensils you use to eat it. What to wear and how to wear it, what language you speak and the regional accent with which you speak it. Where to live, how to relate to your fellow men and women and children, what to learn and what to do with it once you've learned it.

It's the haircut you sport, the songs you sing, the dances you do, the way you court and wed and cohabit, the way you welcome children into the world and bid farewell to departing elders. It's the games you play, the slate of acceptable careers laid out before you, the type of jokes you tell, even the words you're allowed to use. It includes your ceremonies and holidays, the things you read and don't read.

It presents you with life goals—a lion skin, a sheepskin, an eagle feather, a position of respect and honor within your tribe. Ways to deal

with strangers and outsiders. Entertainments, contests, rules for interpersonal conflict. Women's ways, men's ways. It offers something for every social and psychological need humans have. For some of us, it's the protective underwear we don at night, and even the short list of positions acceptable for (married-only, heterosexual-only) intercourse!

The substance of culture is taught to each new generation, but culture itself is probably automatic. Drop a group of ignorant kids on an island, isolate them for a hundred years or so, and their descendants would emerge possessing a complete culture, containing every possible thing they needed to live day-to-day—every ceremony, recipe, song, and article of clothing.

At its best, culture provides you a Home, a place of acceptance, support, and stability. It gives you an identity, an automatic sense of self. At its worst, it acts as something of a cage, trapping its people within it, oppressing them, offering the threat of punishment or ouster to those who don't stay in line. But to most of us throughout history, the price has apparently been worth it.

Here in the U.S., it seems to me culture comes in three general "grades"—which I label Full Culture, Fractional Culture, and U.S. Overculture.

Full Culture

Already described above, full cultures cover every aspect of life, providing both game and gameboard for living. They present an elaborate social framework with all the details worked out.

In Upstate New York where I live, full cultures include the Amish and Hasidic Judaism. However confining or silly they might look to those of us

outside them, from the inside they provide a place of warmth, safety and familiarity, which most would only reluctantly leave.

But other than these, which make a deliberate attempt at island-like isolation and purity, few of us have anything even close to a complete culture. Here in the United States, they're actually hard to come by. Instead we have the other two types.

Fractional Culture

Harley Davidson culture, gamer culture, NASCAR culture, Star Trek and Star Wars fan culture, Renaissance Festival culture, countless others. They contain certain rules and traditions, but those rules address only that one small part of life. Everything else has to be borrowed.

Fractional cultures, it seems to me, arise because they satisfy the yearning for a tribal home-place, a sense of inclusion with 'My People.' You and yours have a team, a band, a sport. But they fall apart on the rest of life. Science fiction fandom might provide you with the details of how to conduct yourself during late-night filking, but it's mostly silent on funeral traditions, or what to wear to work. As an avid Yankees fan, you might attend all the games, go to after-parties with fellow Yankees fanatics, wear Yankees caps, and for all I know drink Yankees beer and dance the Yankees dance. You might even be enough of a Yankees fan to have a Yankees-themed wedding—all the while feeling included and safe in the cherished Yankees traditions—but you're not going to ask for the Yankees meal on an airplane. You're not going to confine yourself to exclusive Yankees

positions for sex (I'm guessing catcher's mitts and face guards are involved), or send your kids to Yankees school every day.

U.S. Overculture

All of us outside full cultures live in a huge, blended mess of subcultures I call U.S. Overculture. Overculture provides guidance for every aspect of life, but it does so in fractured, massively oversupplied form, presenting us with many different models for weddings, scores of courtship rituals, diverse ways of bidding goodbye to the departed, a dozen traditions for observing holidays—including distinctly different holidays—and countless potential suggestions for every other aspect of life.

You can have a cowboy wedding, a Catholic funeral, a Hello Kitty birthday party, Goth hairstyles and makeup, biker clothing, Montessori schooling for your kids, Wiccan holidays, any of thousands of other traditions, ceremonies and activities ... without actually belonging to any specific home culture. All of us in fractional cultures, or no culture at all, call on this overculture every day of our lives in order to fill sociocultural needs.

Overculture provides ton lots of traditions and foods and clothing, songs and dances and everything else, but the one thing Overculture fails to provide is any sense of belonging. It gives you no Home, instead leaving you adrift on a choppy cultural sea. Most of us manage only some vague identification as “American.”

The Worm in Overculture

We might think living in U.S. Overculture is

perfectly fine, and miss a home culture not at all. We might even interpret the lack of a home culture as the ultimate freedom. After all, we don't have to wear a beard and work a farm our entire lives. But that freedom comes with a degree of exposure and vulnerability. Because a great deal of U.S. Overculture arrives as purely predatory marketing. Rather than socially-useful traditions, this culture—largely supplied by corporations—is an extended sales pitch aimed mostly at profit.

On the streets of any large city, some large percentage of the faces you see will have a cigarette stuck in them. This pricey, health-destroying social practice wasn't something that got passed down by generations of wise elders, it was relentlessly advertised into existence by tobacco companies.

We might imagine "A Diamond is Forever" to be cherished, ageless tradition, but it arose out of an ad campaign begun in 1947, before which sensible brides-to-be much preferred future husbands to spend limited household money on washing machines or cars. Yet today, the central element of a "proper" proposal is a diamond engagement ring, the pricier the better—even to the point of crippling debt for the couple just starting out. Do either of these customs truly benefit the people who follow them? Not in any way. People trade money for illusion.

Full cultures serve as guardians for the people within them, but those of us living in U.S. Overculture have little or nothing to perform that function. An active ad campaign can be projected at us or our children, and there is no social mechanism, no equally active protective force,

to oppose it. Left to evaluate the thing as lone individuals, many of us simply adopt whatever it is because it is new, different, and briefly entertaining. For every new thing presented—lottery scratchers or vape sticks, Beanie Babies or fidget spinners, hot yoga or K-2, anti-vaxxing or brain piercing (any day now)—large numbers of us are right there, sucking it up.

Even if you as an individual detect the falsity, the uselessness, the actual physical harm of something, any public show of resistance will meet with instant unthinking opposition from those already under the spell. “Hey, vape pens are awesome, man! They’re way healthier than cigarettes!” “But Beanie Babies are a great investment!” “Oh, but fidget spinners relieve tension and improve concentration!” “But vaccines really do cause autism! I read about it on Facebook!”

—No, new things are not automatically bad. But they’re not automatically good, either. Having a home culture with a collective of smart, trusted advisors helps you breast the daily flood of marketing, huckstering, and outright lies.

Religion and Culture

Speaking of the Amish and Hasidic Jews, note that both cultures are rooted in religion. In fact, every tribe, city-state and nation I ever heard of throughout human history had religion at or near its heart. Every culture had holy men, monuments, temples, gods, complex myths of afterlives and paradises and places of eternal punishment, plus numerous everyday rules and injunctions about how to relate to the supernatural—some of which you broke on pain

of death.

Except for the part about death, that very much includes the society we live in here and now. As every atheist knows, you can't sneeze in public without a chorus of god-bless-you—often from complete strangers. The U.S. is well-salted with Ten Commandments monuments, many of them still on public land, police vehicles in some jurisdictions defiantly carry goddy bumper stickers, some military leaders pressure subordinates to attend religious services, goddy signs and billboards are everywhere, biology teachers are nervous about using the word “evolution” in science classes, and there is a never-let-up insistence across the nation to say prayers at public meetings. Every disaster has people giving thanks to God for their survival, no matter how many others died in the event. With “In God We Trust” on every bill and coin, even we atheists hand out religious tracts with every cash transaction.

A few years back I drew an imaginary 2-mile-diameter line around my house in a town of 60,000 people, and discovered close to 80 churches and church-owned properties inside it. More than schools, more than libraries, more than gas stations and convenience stores!

Where has that left atheists? Out in the cold. There has never been a time or place we could truly feel welcome. If you're an atheist, probably most of the people you know—including your own family—tolerate rather than welcome you. In some countries, being an atheist can be a death sentence. Even here in the United States, there are places you're wise to hide it. There is no place we fit. Non-god-believers are not safe, or free, or

home in much of the “civilized” world today.

We even take part in borrowed holidays. Those of us who enjoy Christmas do so only by resolutely telling ourselves it’s a *mostly* secular occasion. You know, with the gift-giving and Santa and all. And yet, as we are frequently reminded by goddy neighbors, it remains *Christ-Mass*.

It doesn’t have to be that way. We could have our own holidays. We could have our own everything.

Culture, Rebooted

Religion itself is cultural. Draw a Venn diagram of Religion and Culture, and the circle of Religion would be wholly contained within the circle of Culture. It might occupy only one small area of the Culture circle, as it does in U.S. Overculture, or it might almost completely dominate it, as it does in conservative Christian, Jewish and Islamic sects.

Culture is not religion; culture is the container religion comes in. There might be a lot of things people think are religious, but which are only cultural, things that can be teased out and considered separately from religion. A perfect example, understandable by just about any atheist, is morality, which might be presented as specifically religious, but really isn’t. You no more have to be religious to care about others, to attempt to be a good person, to not lie and steal and kill, than you have to be able to ride a bicycle in order to get to work.

There’s nothing that says the Venn circle of culture must contain a circle of religion. It’s just that we’ve never tried it. Maybe never even been

in a position to try it. Until now.

Imagine a specifically, emphatically non-religious culture, created—for the first time ever in the world—by newly freed and connected atheists. Imagine a culture founded in reason and science rather than superstition and mysticism. A culture that reveres education, excellence and careful thought, that has as its champions teachers and intellectuals rather than ridiculously costumed priests and jingoistic uniformed “heroes.” Something that helps guard us from the lies and silliness projected at us daily via TV, radio, Internet, magazines, newspapers and billboards.

Give it a working title: Take all the religious cultures collectively, past and present on Planet Earth, all the tribes, city-states, kingdoms and nations, and call that Alpha Culture—Alpha because it came first. Call this new non-religious culture Beta Culture. “Beta” not because it comes second, but because it comes *next*.

(Yes, there’s already a ‘beta culture.’ Doesn’t mean the term can’t be re-purposed. If it’s a problem, think of them as Culture 1.0 and 2.0.)

So what is this Beta Culture? It is, or could be, a crowd-sourced, deliberately-constructed culture with the specific aim of providing a permanent socio-cultural home for reason-minded people—atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and secular humanists.

In the islands-of-the-future metaphor, it would be a new boat aimed at that far archipelago, a cultural tool to carry us to a future in which we have a place. It might not get us there directly, but it could influence the courses of the other three boats, a lot more than

a demographic of rootless individual atheists who currently have no choice but to catch a ride with others.

Beta Culture would be a first in at least two ways: First in that it contained no religion or mysticism. Second, it would be the first culture deliberately constructed by the (hopefully) rational people who were to live within it.

Built up one piece at a time from within, it would presumably possess an important third difference: It would be a culture that deliberately sought to empower and strengthen its members, rather than to control and limit them.



CHAPTER 3:

The Power of Nations

[PART 2]

Culture's Gifts

The home-feeling—which I call “Place”—is only one of the assets of a home culture. Cultures also offer Values, Ways and Goals.

Values serve as the guides and arbiters of good behavior: Honor your mother and father. Be generous to the less fortunate. Never lie to a child for any reason (which apparently is not a widespread cultural value!).

Ways are all the outward physical displays of culture: Wear a cowboy hat and a big silver belt buckle. Quit school at 14 and work the family farm. Never eat pork.

Goals are the menu of personal aims, careers and benchmarks of success: Raise a big family. Go to college. Kill a lion all by yourself.

What would Beta Culture include?

Values

Every culture has a set of core values—its basic concepts of who and what “we” are. What we hold dear, what we’re proud of in contrast to all other, lesser cultures. In building Beta Culture, the easy part would be finding things to include. The hard part would be making it work, deciding on the various traditions and values and making them stick.

Of course its most basic value is atheism. Rationality. A reason-based lifestyle and view of the world.

In attempting to create a fully non-religious, non-superstitious, non-mystic-woo-woo culture, this is something on which it could not afford to compromise. Loosen that rule and you end with just another religio-mystical culture, and damn, *it’s been done*.

In Beta Culture, there would simply be no place for the faithful, the superstitious or the woo-woo mystical. Prospective members would be either firmly convinced the universe works by physics and chemistry—that there are no such thing as gods or ghosts, spirits or mystical forces—or not. Only one of those positions gets you through the door.

There are values that flow out of reason. I picture Beta as powerfully oriented toward education—not just school and college, but some degree of permanent, ongoing studiousness throughout life. This educational emphasis would

be one part of a broad push toward empowerment and support for its individual members.

I see Beta as equalitarian, as post-racial and, necessarily, as futurist. It would also be basically activist—including a muscular humanism aimed at making the world a better place. I imagine it as very much an international thing—not just in the culture itself, but in those who chose to be members. Every Beta—while legally remaining a citizen of his/her home country—would first consider himself a ‘Citizen of Earth’ rather than of historic tribes and nations.

I see it as a champion of evolution, not just the subject, but the broader implications—the inter-relatedness of all life on earth. I also see it as a strong proponent of real sex education—including contraception, safety and *permission* from an early age.

I would expect it to be oriented toward health, fitness and longevity for all its members. Considering the opposition it will face, every member will be something of a warrior. Being healthy and strong helps not just us as individuals, but everyone around us.

Ways

In the U.S., we have two national holidays—Veterans Day and Memorial Day—honoring soldiers, nothing at all to recognize some of the other heroes of civilization. Allow me to float the idea of an international SALT Day, a day to honor Scientists, Artists, Librarians and Teachers.

How about Conscience Day to recognize the warriors of conscience and justice—the whistleblowers, war protesters, and fighters for social justice who have carried us forward into

betterment, but who've been treated like traitors and criminals for their labors? —Hell, we could honor people who *choose* not to have children.

Superhero Day would remind us annually (quarterly?) to devote time to volunteering, cleaning up neighborhoods, assisting the elderly or handicapped. Memory Day would be an annual event to come together for remembering friends and relatives, sharing with each other the stories and pictures of the otherwise unheralded people who have shaped our lives and communities. I can even see some merit in a just-for-the-hell-of-it Aunts, Uncles and Cousins Day.

In place of Christmas, why not Krismas? Jokingly devoted to the fictional Kris Kringle, it could be a weeklong celebration at the end of each year, with gift-giving, visiting, gathering, singing, dancing, performing, formally honoring the accomplishments of friends and family over the year, with lots of eating and drinking included.

Speaking of joking, maybe humor should be a part of any deliberately-designed rational culture. The Flying Spaghetti Monster could be a permanent 'patron saint,' a gently sarcastic counterpoint to god-belief. To poke fun at the pompousity of priestly costumes and other church frippery, there might be a tradition of Big Funny Hats worn on at least one annual occasion. Rather than Easter we could observe Wester, a western-themed dig at the religious holiday, held on the Saturday preceding Easter Sunday.

More seriously, we would have our own ways to observe births and deaths, graduations and other milestones of life. We could have all sorts of daily and annual and special-occasion Ways that were

not just secular, but that celebrated reason.

Place

A sense of Place, the homey feeling culture provides, would happen simply by Beta Culture existing. But I'd like us to also have our own meeting place. Inevitably, the idiots will call it the "atheist church." I call it the Nexus.

If my own small town can have nearly 80 churches, many of them occupying pricey downtown properties, there's no reason why there can't be one permanent meeting place for Beta Culturists. Every city and town of any size should have a Nexus—untaxed just as churches are untaxed. It might contain a freethinker library and reading room, a networking center and coffeehouse (free coffee for math and science majors!), plus rooms for meetings, discussions and classes. I picture a media center and computer lab, maybe a room for a visiting speaker to stay the night, or even safely secular child care for working Beta parents.

Goals

Addressing the theme of empowerment, I'd want the Nexus to offer regular classes in leadership, public speaking, bargaining, persuasion and assertiveness, not only to advance the atheist cause but to enhance and strengthen individual members in their own personal lives.

Considering what I said earlier about asking for a Yankees meal on an airplane—when it comes to Beta Culture, I *do* want a Beta meal on an airplane. For myself I want a sandwich made in the past two hours, with whole-grain bread and a couple of slices of fresh-roasted free-

range chicken breast. I want it to have a fresh salad alongside, with unwilted lettuce, crunchy croutons, tasty avocados and fresh, flavorful tomatoes—all of it made with no artificial ingredients.

That meal would be an assertion that Beta Culture must have at least the same sort of determined impact on the world as Jews and Muslims, with their kosher and halal demands. Such assertions are a public statement of “We exist, we demand others honor and respect our customs and traditions.”

There would be both initial and ongoing World-Café-type sessions to iron out details and values of the culture and the goals of the people within it, including gender ethics, dietary observances, the focus of activism in broader society. Beta Culture might include integral side projects such as media watch-dogging or issue activism—possibly a flatly-stated opposition to genital mutilation for both girls *and* boys.

I imagine a Book of Good Living collected online with non-religious guidance for daily life, for anyone who chose to read and consider it. It might include tidbits such as “Take pictures of your parents, lots of them, something to keep you company in the long years alone.” Or perhaps “Live your life in such a way that nobody has to pick up after you.” Or maybe even “Never leave your dog in a hot car.” But definitely, “Hey, dummy, if you’re on the freeway and people are passing you on the right, get the hell out of the left lane.”

I’d like there to be deliberate efforts at recruiting and youth outreach, at least as aggressive as that done by churches in every city

and town in America. I go further in picturing religion-superstition detox classes for young and old, for those interested in discovering and removing the last remnants of religious unreason out of their heads. I'd like to see such things as Reason Rangers (like the Girl Scouts/ Boy Scouts)—possibly arising out of Camp Quest—and Reason Riders (a motorcycle group originating in Arizona and already in the process of going national) as public aspects of the culture.

Beyond local efforts, I want us to undertake a worldwide push for increasing the numbers of “out” atheists— 10^9 by 2029—one billion atheists by the year 2029.

More than any other goal, I'd like it to be a culture of strength, empowerment and independence rather than one of weakness, fear and whining.

The Way of the World

In the era of mass communication, which has pretty much reached maximum saturation with the Internet, most of what we and our young people internalize comes from someone else—corporations, pundits, professional liars and manipulators. The persuasive pitches are everywhere. And everything in them, every word and musical note and motto, is aimed at gaining profit or power. Helping anyone live a better life is a distant second.

Which means: If you don't teach your kids your culture—your values or ideas or wisdom—someone else will come in and teach them theirs. If you don't *have* your own culture, other people will decide the way you and yours live large parts of their lives, often to the very thoughts that

occupy your mind.

With no home culture, you yourself won't be immune to it. Sooner or later you'll fall for one of those seductive pitches for inclusion and coolness and victory. If you do this thing, buy this thing, wear this thing, you will win, you will succeed, you will belong. Living in a constant surround of these pitches, you may not even realize you're doing it.

I might feel fewer reservations about all of this if the world was full of good people, generous and compassionate, interested in your welfare and the welfare of your kids, but the fact is, much of the content of U.S. Overculture is exploitative rather than supportive.

Already in the Pipeline

To repeat, there's the future we *want*, and the future we'll *get*. As literally nobody but freethinkers give a damn about a specifically rational future, the future we most want ...

Will. Not. Happen.

Churches, other cultures, broadcast media, corporations, and even governments will pursue their own self-interests, with no concern for your needs and desires, but worse, no long view of human survival on planet Earth.

For those of us in science fiction or tech fandom who happily imagine the Technological Singularity, that moment when advances take place so rapidly the rising curve of change goes completely vertical and all predictive models break down, let me present this alternate concept—The Dark Singularity: The curve of negative change accelerates until it goes vertical in the other direction—downward to chaos.

Human population continues to rise; human appetite and carelessness finally outstrips the ability of our planet to recover; all the elephants and rhinos, lions and wolves, whales and dolphins and mountain gorillas vanish; shortages of energy, food and clean water spark riots; war breaks out pretty much everywhere; martial law is declared everywhere; and those few sitting pretty in an ugly, diminished world are either government officials and billionaires in fortified retreats, or survivalist fanatics dug in with guns and Bibles.

You think that can't happen? Point to one coordinated worldwide social force aimed at preventing it. Hell, the main issue causing a lot of this—still-rising human population, with something like 80 million extra people per year, *a city the size of Los Angeles arriving on Earth every 3 weeks*—is a subject about which we can't even have a useful public discussion.

If we were 200 years in the future, looking back for details of the fall of civilization, I'm convinced we'd see people of this time as very much in the midst of it. The drowning of New Orleans, the decay of Detroit, global warming, extinctions and invasive species, broken ecosystems, the rise of global terrorism, the electing of messianic figures to public office (cough*DonaldTrump*cough) rather than competent public servants, damaging technologies used to pursue progressively scarcer petroleum, on and on. Not to mention a continuous campaign intended to subvert and destroy public education, to undercut the perceived value of expertise and technical qualification. These are all data points of a collapse *already in progress*.

The Flaw in Unbelief

Compared to religion, atheism is really rather fragile. It has sprung up and died out several times in the U.S. alone. Its recent resurgence is most likely due to the existence of the Internet. Outside that, there's really not a lot to support and preserve it.

Here's the eye-opener I realized a few years back: ***Under the lash of strong emotions, humans become less intelligent.***

Scary, right? But true. In conditions of fear or panic—or even passionate love—higher parts of the human brain temporarily shut down.

If the Internet goes down for some reason—a solar flare or some such event—if there is an incident of nuclear terrorism anywhere in the world, if even some small version of the imagined Dark Singularity happens, a majority of our panicked fellow humans will leap toward the certainty of religion and churches and authoritarian government, unquestioningly supported by a pliant, uncritical corporate-owned media.

Churches will gleefully snatch up these new devotees, telling them to clasp their hands and close their eyes, to read their Bibles and chant its magic verses, to get down on their knees and pray, to give and give and give in order to bribe God into letting them and their loved ones live.

Anyone casting doubt on that mindset will be the enemy, unAmerican traitors to all things good, and a lot of scared, angry fellow citizens will jump in to intimidate them into silence. (The enthusiastic support majority religious figures are currently offering the viciously toxic Donald

Trump is an example of just how twisted things can get.)

That would be the end of the noble mind-adventure of atheism. Bye-bye, outspoken atheists, hello religious fascism.

You're sitting there right now, intelligent and educated, and you probably can't imagine a mob coming to your door and dragging you out, or a riot that smashes your windows and breaks down your doors, sets your home or business on fire. But I can imagine it, because I grew up in the Deep South among people who were not all that far advanced from the lynchings and murders of the KKK's worst days. Old men told us kids the stories, and they were stories of pride.

The witch burnings of yesteryear are absent today not because we humans have evolved beyond them, but because our culture disallows such acts *at this moment*.

But that culture is maintained by humans. It can be abandoned and replaced by humans, sometimes in days. You saw what happened after 9/11—suddenly we were discussing the merits of torture, arguing whether we had too much freedom in public places, and launching off into a war that killed and terrorized hundreds of thousands of real people *who also thought nothing bad would happen to them on any near-future day*.

The more afraid and desperate people are, the crazier it will get.

Making It Happen

Here's the rub: How do you create an entire culture?

I suspect it would take very little effort. Cultural creation already happens, and on a

near-daily basis. At the least prompting, people take on actions and beliefs that become cultural traditions, perpetuating them indefinitely. Some years back the song 'Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree' made a splash on the radio, triggering a sudden leap onto the public stage of ribbon-tying as a way of welcoming returning soldiers. Now ribbons and ribbon-shaped magnets are everywhere, tasked for every social cause.

The way attendees at Reason Rally 2016 reacted with smiles and selfies to a strolling Flying Spaghetti Monster, it was obviously already a much-loved icon of the movement. Yet it arose sheerly out of a sense of fun.

We figure out the basic framework and put it out there. If it's a good idea, people will show up and be part of it, commenting, contributing, coming up with fun or useful things to include, arguing over the details and the aims, and one day there it would be. The short-term challenge might be in laying down the foundation, the basic concepts, before its growth outraced the underlying goals of reason and reality.

The larger challenge would be in creating something that was livable long-term, and paid off on the promise of enhancing the lives of people who join in it.

For years and years, evangelism was taboo in the atheist community. Deliberately trying to get people to give up religion was seen as a self-thwarting shortcut. If people were seduced into atheism simply because it was the latest fad, without working it out for themselves, they'd be no better than religious people, right?

But in this case, that's not a problem. People

coming into it would either want to be there, or they wouldn't. Besides which, we've already started selling atheism. We know we have the right; our problem is in believing we have the duty.

Moreover, considering that religion and religious observances are such an integral part of even modern cultures—Catholicism for example—and that most prospective atheists will come from such cultures, by inviting them into atheism we're basically asking them to give up not only their religion, but their home culture, and often even the loving closeness of their families. To offer them none of the same tribal inclusion in return seems both morally shabby and counterproductive. How many who might otherwise be open atheists stay where they are in order to enjoy the continued safety and warmth of their home traditions and tribe? For millions, especially the weaker and more vulnerable among us, atheism by itself might seem a poor trade.

Where and how do we get the features and attributes of our own culture? Two ways: 1) Make them up. 2) Steal them.

Make them up: If we decide every Beta middle schooler should go off every morning with Great Humanist Quotes fortune cookies to share with other kids, that's doable. If we want every partner bonding (wedding ceremony) to include a traditional *bat'leth* fight with designated champions to determine who cleans the bathroom for the first two years, nothing would stop us. The limits are human nature, and our own imaginations.

Steal them: The entire world, now and for all its history, is a mine of ideas for designing our own

unique cultural environment. We can borrow, copy, or shamelessly expropriate customs and lifeways from any and every culture on Earth, past and present, real and fictional.

So yes, we could all wear Star Trek uniforms. Or sporrans and plaid kilts (with underwear, my people, please!). Or leather jackets with flaming skull insignias and embroidered patches saying 'Born To Raise Questions.'

Borrow cultural goodies from the Amish. Steal from the Catholics. Copy good stuff from the Romans, the Mormons, the Japanese, the Italians, the Navajo. Borrow, copy, steal ... and make it ours.

Cultural appropriation? —Eh. No. Nobody has a copyright on culture, and borrowed traditions take nothing away from the source. I wouldn't expect the group to flaunt yarmulkes, feathered headdresses or dreadlocks, but cultural appropriation is a moot issue, it seems to me.

Lots of people wear cowboy hats, and— as someone who grew up with and worked among real horse-and-cattle cowboys, a group no less fiercely proud of our cultural apparel than Hasidic Jews or Sikhs—I find some of them fairly annoying.

But I would never tell people they have no right to wear a cowboy hat, that I'm somehow mortally offended by it.

I wouldn't join in any screaming chorus of thin-skinned offense junkies, demanding those people instantly cease all cowboy-hat-related activities and apologize to us delicate, sensitive cowpokes.

Why? Because when people copy some element of your culture, it doesn't make you a victim, it

makes you an *icon*.

Other than registered trademarks (which might be an issue with the Star Trek uniforms), nobody owns body decorations, hats, clothing or customs. What one or more groups in history have done, others can do, and the original doers lose nothing.

Hazards

We face two hazards already resident in our psyches—complacency and misplaced optimism.

Rich and safe and well-fed, we're prone to be complacent about dangers. Hey, nothing could really go wrong, right? We went to college, we know how to read and think and figure out this atheism stuff, and pretty much everybody else is just like us—same values, equivalent intelligence, same fearless approach to life. All we need do is be patient and rational, and explain things to them, and they'll come around.

Living in the modern age, we're optimistic that someone else—Brighter People Out There in the World—will work out all the problems. Scientists will solve the challenges of food and water and energy; educated, Empowered Women will spontaneously have smaller families and solve the population problem; Environmental Activists will save the whales and mountain gorillas; and the coming generation of smart, engaged Youth will burst out into the world and fix everything else that's broken.

Yeah, and all those public-spirited multinational corporations will pitch in and help, even if it means reducing their bottom line, right? Riiiiight.

All we have to do, we happy optimists, is sit

back and live our lives, go green and recycle, pick up our litter, continue to drive our SUVs to the grocery store to buy organic fruits and vegetables, and it's all going to work out.

Except it isn't. Complacency and optimism, when you have real problems, can kill you.

There is a third hazard—and not a small one—which seems to be built into the current social media environment. There is a vocal minority among us who appear to believe there is greater value in attacking and destroying ideas and institutions—and even the individuals who attempt to create them—than in having or building them. Their goal is not to pitch in on a worthwhile common endeavor, but to leap on stage and screech about the perceived faults of any new thing, from the first moment of its conception.

Forging ahead, we'll make mistakes. Not every bright idea that pops into our heads for inclusion will be viable. Not everything we add at the beginning should stay forever. Continuous discussion and self-checking has to be a part of it. But hazards and all, we shouldn't be afraid to make the experiment.

Target for Tomorrow

Sooner or later, there has to be that civilization that very deliberately embraces science and reason and rejects superstition, don't you think? I mean, really, shouldn't we have that at some point?

But we don't have it yet. We do not live in that civilization.

Get that? You do not live in a rational society. No, it's not a living hell. Not for you. But for a lot

of other people, and the planet itself, it's pretty bad. Rather than casually accepting this status quo, I think you have to reject it almost violently. Every one of us has to reject it, to establish some bare minimum for being humans on Planet Earth. And until we start figuring some of this stuff out—for instance, “What is the basic intellectual, informational, and moral set every adult human must be *required* to have?”—we'll continue on as we have been.

On a planet of diminished resources, radical human overpopulation, vicious inequality and mistreatment of women and minorities, all that, there's a demand for this basic human society. But we don't have it yet. Considering present-day politics and media, we may even be moving away from it.

Some of us might say “People have the right to believe whatever they want.” And I'd say yes, that's true—if they stay home and don't buy anything, don't drive, don't participate, don't vote, don't have kids they will subject to their idiot beliefs and behaviors.

In a real world, we can have a civilization based on reason and science and reality in which everyone participates, or we can have one based on outlandish fantasy and suffer the very real consequences. So far, we've had one based on fantasy and—in my opinion—it's been an utter disaster. And it's getting worse, right now.

I want a society that survives the disaster-in-progress, that picks up the pieces afterwards with this new way of thinking. What I don't want is a society that reboots using all the old software. I want something that kicks us out of the cycles of mystical thralldom, something that allows us to

live on this planet into the distant future, without wrecking it or ourselves.

Who do you want at your side in the midst of a civilization-wide disaster, working to live through it and later repair it? Goddy mystics who will react with screaming panic, or fall to their knees and pray for the Rapture? Or people who will look at the falling bits with, yes, deep regret, but also with calm determination and say “Let’s fix this, and then find a way to never let it happen again”?

I know who I want. I want a community of cooperative, rational individuals. What I emphatically don’t want is a bunch of faith-professing strangers telling me I need to get right with Jesus or, equally poisonous, a bevy of “Don’t tell them the truth; they might panic” government officials.

We’ve already taken a step back from the negative religious fantasy culture. Now we need to take a step forward, with a positive reason-based culture of our own making.

Like it or not, you cannot be free of culture. You will be subject to cultural values, trends and standards all your life. As things stand, all of it will come from others. A lot of it will be based in unreason, and predatory. If you have to be immersed in culture anyway, why shouldn’t it be something you helped create?

I expect the movement to have enemies. There are people—even a lot of atheists—who will instantly hate the idea of creating an atheist culture. But it’s a club you don’t have to join. Nobody has to be a part of it. It’s also not some sort of horrifying nightmare that needs to be stomped with lug-soled boots. It is one option

among many in response to an uncertain future.

But reality-based thinking and living is not just a luxury to be possessed by the few, or some flickering candle that can be allowed to go out every few years. It's *important*. It's a light that *must* be kept burning, a trend that *must* grow.

In the end, I believe atheists have a lot to offer the world. I think people would see that. If we did this thing, we might be surprised at the number of people who'd want to be a part of it.

So ...

Here's this airy-fairy fantasy someone had, right? This impractical utopian dream. Probably best to sneer and turn away. Get back to the real world.

Except the real world—as it really is—is why we should be thinking about this. Doing something about it. Look around and tell me everything you see is all peachy-keen with you, and all we need is more lovey-love-love, kumbayah. That things will all work out in the end because of fate or something. Because stories always have happy endings, and because somewhere out there, the smart, rich people are working out all the problems. Hey, any day now we'll all have flying cars and robot housekeepers, immortality and world peace.

Yeah, sure.



CHAPTER 4:

The Rescue

Some very large number of atheists feel—somewhat fiercely in many cases—that the atheist journey is a one-ticket ride. We are “I’ve got mine” atheists who save ourselves from religion and mysticism, and then stop there.

I don’t begrudge anyone that viewpoint. For many of us, getting free of our home religion is so difficult an accomplishment it should come with a trophy.

But in that vein, there is a hero of United States pre-Civil War history with a story worth considering, a woman born into slavery who escaped from a slaveholding state to Philadelphia, then returned to lead others to freedom via the

Underground Railroad.

Born Araminta Ross, she later married and changed her name to Harriet Tubman. At barely five feet tall, and despite suffering seizures and narcolepsy throughout her adult life, she made 13 journeys back into slave territory, risking capture, re-enslavement, even death, in order to rescue more than 70 others from lifelong servitude.

Her travails were greater than anything we face today. I can barely imagine that amount of courage, or the conditions that would make it necessary. But the lesson of her life—that you free yourself and then go back for others—I consider to be a useful guide for thoughtful atheists.

To pull yourself out of the fire is admirable, but to reach back into the burning building and pull others to safety ... it's not only heroic, for some of us it is *necessary*.



CHAPTER 5:

Sometimes It's You

Outside my bedroom window, three floors down and about 50 yards away, a car alarm began going off. At about 10 p.m. on a Sunday night in winter.

Thirty blasts of the horn, then silence. For about 30 seconds. Then another 30 blasts. Silence. Again. And again. And again. For close to an hour.

I was reading in bed, as I always do, and I'm able to ignore a lot when I'm caught up in a book, so it wasn't a big problem. But it was annoying. And it went on. And on. And on.

I finally looked out the window, and saw the flashing taillights of the car doing the thing. It

was in a little open-ended garage behind the apartment building next door. And it belonged to someone I knew.

I didn't know how to reach her, but my downstairs neighbor-lady did. I called the downstairs neighbor at about midnight, and of course she too was being kept awake by the incessant noise. After hearing whose car it was, she called the owner and told her about it. A few minutes later, there was a bleep-twip! in the middle of a honk, and the alarm went silent.

Ah, blessed relief. For about 10 minutes. Then it started up again. Calls were made, and the lady was again notified, and a few minutes later, bleep-twip!, it stopped again. For about 5 minutes this time.

Rinse and repeat a couple more times.

Finally, I got up and put on my pants and shirt. I dragged my toolbox out of the closet and made one more call to the lady. We trooped out in the bitterly cold winter weather, and the vehicle owner popped the hood on her car so I could disconnect the battery cable. Ah, blessed silence!

I showed her exactly what to do, how to put the cable back on, so she could drive the car to the shop when she was ready to have them fix it.

I'd wager a good 35 of my neighbors were being kept awake by the thing. They probably all thought the same thing I did: "Someone's going to do something about that pretty soon. Any minute now."

Someone had to go down and fix it. Eventually I realized it was me.

Talking to my local freethinker Meetup group the next day, I said "There are all these problems in the world. One of the problems, though, is

that we generally assume someone else is going to fix them. The government will fix things, or corporations will fix things, or ‘scientists’ will fix things. But sometimes ... sometimes it’s you.”

This is pretty much the cornerstone of my motivation for working on atheist culture.

Most of us automatically think someone else—smarter, bigger, better people, way off somewhere, people more capable or concerned—are going to fix things. But that’s really a type of faith, isn’t it? A sort of pocket religion, the idea that Someone Else is going to make it all better.

Here’s the thing about all those Someone Elses: They can’t—and I mean it literally, they can’t—care about you and your personal interests. They don’t know you, maybe they don’t even want to know you, and they may well find it impossible to take an interest in the things you care about, the things you think are important, the things that are hurting you.

If your street is filled with blowing litter, or the nearby park is covered in dog poop, maybe it’s you who has to pick it up. If the vacant lot next door is a neighborhood eyesore, maybe it’s you who will have to troop over with mower and clippers and do something about it. If a car alarm is going off at midnight, maybe you have to go out into the cold and fix it.

Even if it’s a problem the size of the world, Someone Else, busy with his/her own personal life, or possessed of a whole array of interests different from yours, may never even notice.

Here’s the other thing about all those Someone Elses: They’re just people. Sometimes they are people working together in large numbers—calling themselves government, or First National

Bank, or Monsanto, or the Catholic Church—but they're still just people.

And we, every bit as people-y, can do the things they do ... if we only decide to get them done.

Sometimes—too often, as every mom and dad knows—the person who has to fix things, or pick up the mess, or be the grownup, is you. Or it doesn't get done.

Someone has to be the responsible party, the person or the group with an eye to the future of Planet Earth, a planet that could be unburdened by irresponsible consumption, irrational beliefs, blithe lies and destructive craziness.

Sometimes it's you. Sometimes it's us.

And maybe it's now.