

# The Idaho Humanist

Humanists of Idaho is a chapter of the American Humanist Association and the Council for Secular Humanism. We are a non-profit corporation organized to promote ethical, democratic, and naturalistic Humanism in the state of Idaho through public awareness, education, and community involvement.

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*Humanism* is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. It affirms the dignity of each human being and supports individual liberty consonant with social and planetary responsibility. Humanism advocates participatory democracy, the open society, human rights, and social justice. Free of super-naturalism, it recognizes human beings as part of nature and holds that all values—be they religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human nature, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological and ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

—*The Humanist*,

Official publication of the American Humanist Association

## Web site gets facelist

The Humanists of Idaho web site was redesigned in August with a new look and layout. The main page now includes a recent news section and upcoming events calendar. These sections will be updated frequently. The newsletter section has updated articles, and will retain about a dozen of the best articles from the past few years on the web site. The links section has been expanded and generally cleaned up to remove outdated links.

## New announcement list

In August we moved to a new service to manage our e-mail announcement list. ListBot, the service we had been using, has been discontinued. Daniel Foster told us about CoolList.com, a free service similar that allows the list to be managed online via a web browser.

We set up a new list at [humanist@coollist.com](mailto:humanist@coollist.com). This list will also be a moderated discussion list. List members can post announcements by sending e-mail to [humanist@coollist.com](mailto:humanist@coollist.com).

To sign up for the new list, visit <http://www.coollist.com> and click on Join a New List. Enter "humanist" under the group name and your e-mail address. That's all there is to it.

## Center for Inquiry Conference

The first Center for Inquiry International Conference will be held in Atlanta, Georgia from November 9-11. The theme of the conference is "Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?" An impressive array of speakers will debate such topics as near-death experiences, intelligent design, and new cosmologies. For more information, visit <https://secure15.cedant.com/secularhumanism/conference/index.htm>.

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# For Want of a Meme

Book Review by Chris Struble

Recently while book shopping online, I ran across a book whose title intrigued me so much I just had to buy it. That book was *Beyond Civilization* by Daniel Quinn.

What I found was a thought-provoking book that uses ideas humanists may find familiar to arrive in new and largely unexplored cultural territory.

Quinn examines the question of whether the hierarchical culture we call “civilization” is a final, unsurpassable invention and why we refuse to abandon it even though it is clearly not sustainable and is taking us to our extinction.

Quinn borrows the concept of the meme, first described in Richard Dawkin’s book *The Selfish Gene* to tackle this problem. Just as genes are the chemical bits that make up the blueprints for our bodies, memes are the cultural bits that make up the blueprints for our beliefs and assumptions about the world. Like genes, memes pass from person to person, in a sense using humans to perpetuate themselves. And like genes, memes can be benign early on but become lethal later.

Quinn’s story goes like this: about ten thousand years ago, a group of humans living in Mesopotamia adopted a new meme, the idea that agriculture is the only right way for humans to live, and that humans should not be subject to the laws of nature. They then set about clearing, planting, multiplying, building pyramids, and exporting their meme by example and conquest, never giving it up, to the point where today only a handful of tribal cultures live differently.

Such a meme must exist, Quinn reasons, because agriculture is initially a much harder way of life than a hunter-gatherer existence, and also because many New World cultures that experimented with civilization later gave it up, returning to a simpler existence. In particular, the Olmec, Maya, and the people of Teotihuacan

in central Mexico, all built great cities only to abandon or destroy them, while the Anasazi in the American southwest adopted an intensive agricultural life only to walk away from it. But Old World cultures almost never returned to a hunter-gatherer existence once they adopted agriculture, because they adopted the idea that agriculture was the only way to live. In his books, Quinn refers to this meme as the “Taker culture”.

Modern people may recoil at the idea that they are aggressive agriculturalists. After all, only a small percentage of the population actually engages in farming today. But no one questions that the only way to get food is to buy it from someone else who grew it. We tend to view hunter-gatherer peoples as savages, and even modern recreational hunters as some kind of throwback. When we want to test someone’s mettle (think of the TV show *Survivor*) we don’t hand them a sack of grain, a pair of oxen, and a wooden plow and tell them to farm to feed themselves (which would almost certainly kill them). We tell them to adopt a hunter gatherer existence, because our culture has taught us that is a miserable way for humans to live, despite the fact that it sustained humans on this planet for over three million years and could do so today, if only there weren’t so many of us.

While Quinn recognizes that we can’t go back to a hunter-gatherer existence, he suggests that we can “walk away from the pyramid” and go forward to adopt new sustainable ways of making a living based on the tribal model. He then sets out to describe what such a new model might look like, as well as what it isn’t, and how we might go about making it happen.

Quinn would be the first to admit that he struggles at this. Just as the people of the Middle Ages couldn’t imagine the Renaissance, those of us who are alive today cannot imagine how people will think in the future or what kind of societies will enable humans to survive

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## Meme

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sustainably on this planet. In the end, he leaves this problem as an exercise to the reader. But he leaves some guideposts by making it clear that he isn't talking about revolution, passing new laws, going off and starting a commune, or any of the other ways that people typically think about changing the world.

This is a book that one may have to read several times to "get it". In particular, Quinn makes frequent and rather casual reference to ideas in his earlier books, including *Ishmael*, *The Story of B*, and *My Ishmael*. Some of the terms he uses are defined in those books, and may seem odd if you haven't seen them before.

Some may also find Quinn's style argumentative. His style reminds me in some ways of Ayn Rand, another advocate of the idea that people should withdraw their support from a culture that is exploiting them and destroying the world. Of course, definitions are everything. Rand was opposed to socialism that she perceived as being bent on exploiting the talented and destroying the human world. Quinn is opposed to consumerism that he perceives as being bent on exploiting everyone and destroying the natural world.

Quinn's message is different

## Sept Meeting

This month's membership meeting will be on Thursday, Sept 6 at 7:30 PM, at the Flicks Theater, 646 Fulton, Boise.

Agenda items include discussion of President Bush's faith-based initiative, joint project proposals from Idaho Atheists, fall volunteer and social activities.

from Rand's in an important way, in that he advocates living in the Taker world as we go about changing it and distancing ourselves from it incrementally, at the individual level. We don't have to wait until the "culture of maximum harm" crashes, and we certainly don't want it to, because we have to go on living here. We can (and must) begin to make a difference right now.

Despite its imperfections, *Beyond Civilization* is a very important book. If you are looking for a book that challenges your assumptions about the world and offers hope for a better way, this is it.

## Death Sentence in Pakistan

Dr. Younis Shaikh, a teacher at a medical college in Islamabad and founder and president of Enlightenment, the Pakistani humanist organization, was sentenced to death for blasphemy by a court in Pakistan on August 18. His

## Member News

Chris and LeAnne Struble of Boise welcomed a new baby. Hailey Ann Struble was born July 24 and was 9 lbs 10 oz, 20 1/2 inches long.

The Strubles participated in the Walk to Cure Diabetes on August 25. This year's local walk ambassador was 13-year Saige Harrington, whose mom Susan is a member of Idaho Atheists. The event raised over \$100,000 for juvenile diabetes research.

Happy September anniversaries to the Strubles and to Daniel and Nicolle Foster.

## July Meeting

Four members attended the July meeting. Due to extreme heat, we cancelled our march in the July 4th parade this year.

We were unable to locate our canopy to loan to the Idaho Rural Council. It was last seen when we set up a table at the Hyde Park street fair several years ago. If you have it, please call Chris or LeAnne at 362-6873.

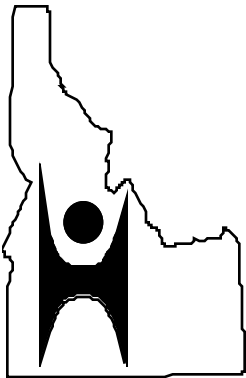
No August meeting was held due to summer schedules.

case is being appealed.

Amnesty International has condemned this judgment, and humanists everywhere are called upon to condemn it. Visit [www.secularhumanism.org](http://www.secularhumanism.org) for more information about the case and how to take action.

# Upcoming Events

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|----------------|--|
| Sept 6, 2001   | General Membership Meeting<br>7:30 PM at the Flicks Theater, 646 Fulton                  |
| Oct 27, 2001   | Make a Difference Day  |
| Nov 9-11, 2001 | Center for Inquiry International Conference<br>Atlanta, Georgia (see inside for details) |



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