

AOK|ATHÉE OKIE

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GETTING CROSS OVER THE CROSS

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February 2003 – OKC City Manager Jim Couch ordered a large concrete cross removed from the Oklahoma State Fair Park, in response to letters suggesting the city could be sued for violating federal court rulings against religious displays on public property. His action touched off a controversy in the opinion pages of the *Oklahoman* and other local news outlets, in which Couch was repeatedly condemned for his action, while some few folks praised his defense of strict church/state separation.

The editorial staff at the *Oklahoman* took its stand firmly on the middle ground, claiming that “Jim Couch was correct in removing the cross, and the Oklahoma City Council was correct in backing the manager's decision” because it spared the city from the losing end of an expensive legal battle, while nevertheless insisting that the “debate about religious displays on public property...never should have started. We don't believe the Constitution's framers had such displays in mind when they fashioned the First Amendment.”

Well, now, maybe they did, maybe they didn't. One must ask, though, *so what if they didn't?*

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It seems that our good friends over at the *Oklahoman* have fallen into the same trap as the radical church/state separationists who sent the original letters of complaint to Jim Couch's office. They have all assumed that they should go leaping directly to the U.S. Constitution for guidance in this matter, and commence to arguing over its proper interpretation in order to settle what should be done. But what if this legal question was addressed with far greater clarity by a law with more proximate jurisdiction?

It may surprise many folks to learn that this is in fact the case. Our state constitution specifically forbids the use of public property (including city property) for the sake of promoting any system of religion:

No public money or property shall ever be appropriated, applied, donated, or used, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, or system of religion, or for the use, benefit, or support of any priest, preacher, minister, or other religious teacher or dignitary, or sectarian institution as such. (II-5)

There it is, plain as day, smack in the middle of our state's bill of rights. Think about it.

BURNHAM & PHELAN'S *MEAN GENES*

AN AOK BOOK REVIEW BY LEONIDS@OKLAHOMAATHEISTS.ORG

Ruminating and fretting over whether one is happy seems to lead to despair. Research shows that those who fret over happiness are, paradoxically, apt to be less happy, and apt to be less productive, less successful in their endeavors than average. "Ask yourself whether you are happy," said J. S. Mill, "and you cease to be so." We are all concerned with happiness, and yet as Mill reminds us, we are confused about how to understand and achieve happiness. Let's look to look to Charles Darwin and our evolutionary past to understand our present.

In *Mean Genes* (2000), authors Terry Burnham, a professor of economics at Harvard University, and Jay Phelan, a professor of biology at the University of California at Los Angeles, summarize much of the fields known as sociobiology or evolutionary psychology. The short version of this approach is that humans are self-domesticated apes. Modern humans arose about 100,000 years ago on the African Savanna. While we live in a modern world far removed from that Savanna, we still have brains built for the ancestral world. Many of our problems stem from the mismatch between our modern world and the non-industrialized environment in which we evolved.

This "Mean Genes" view is central to understanding our happiness (or unhappiness). *Mean Genes* goes beyond other books by providing advice on employing that knowledge to pursue happiness; a peril in *The Odyssey* serves as an illustration. Odysseus faces the peril of the sea nymphs known as the Sirens. Singing, the Sirens lured passing mariners with their enchanting voices; ineluctably, the latter crashed their ships on the approach. Armed with this knowledge, Odysseus dared not approach the Sirens, yet he wished to hear their captivating voices. He hit upon a way to solve this dilemma: After ordering his crew to ignore his facial instructions, Odysseus plugged their ears with wax and then bound himself to his ship's mast. Thus immobilized, Odysseus listened to the Sirens without having to pay for the privilege with his life.

Like Odysseus, we can indulge our passions, while preventing them from controlling us. We can lead better lives, "lives with integrity," Burnham and Phelan conclude. "The key to a satisfying life is finding a middle ground that combines free-flowing pleasure, iron willpower, and the crafty manipulation of ourselves and our situations." While our genes hold sway over us viscerally—through satisfaction, pain, and pleasure—they also have "created willpower and the ability to control behavior consciously"—abilities signifying "we are not lumbering robots doomed to carry out our genetic programming." Burnham and Phelan prescribe practical remedies for heading off unpropitious behaviors that lead us into aimlessness, obesity, indebtedness, addiction, and kindred predicaments. Self-improvement efforts represent a battle, largely, against our own genes that "predispose us to certain failings"; understanding the aim of our genes—to promote the reproduction of design features—is key to winning the battle for self-control in the face of temptation. By anticipating genetically induced moments of weakness, we can avert lapses by minimizing the number of opportunities we give to the bugaboos plaguing us, effectively outsmarting our destructive impulses.

The very desire for a happy, fulfilling life is a key feature in our genetic makeup, a feature that keeps us striving, thereby increasing the odds that our genes will propagate. Even as we fail to find happiness, we remain confident it is just over the horizon. Like a fleeing artificial rabbit at a racetrack remaining just ahead of pursuing gray hounds, Burnham and Phelan show, our genes keep permanent contentment just beyond our grasp. We adapt quickly to life altering events, be they rewarding or injurious, and rejoin the pursuit of the ever-elusive fake rabbit of nirvana.

In a study of the well-being of identical twins, Dr. David Lykken, a behavioral geneticist at the University of Minnesota, concluded part “of your sense of well-being is determined by your set-point, which is from the genetic lottery,” while the rest derives “from the sorrows and pleasure of the last hours, days, or weeks.” Or, as Burnham and Phelan show, happiness is volatile in the short term, and in the long term it tends toward a set point. We can, however, engineer happiness by capitalizing on the knowledge that: (a) our genes permit only small changes, if any, on absolute levels on happiness, (b) "we love making progress," and (c) "we should create situations and expectations such that surprises will be positive."

Researchers have discovered that leisure and repose do not induce happiness. Because we have an instinctual love for progress, success in achieving challenging, clear goals brings happiness. "Lurking inside our hopes are genes that want us to work hard all the time," Burnham and Phelan write. "They prosper most when we run full tilt. Once we approach the point of promised bliss," the emotional bar is raised. "In this manner, we are motivated to do our best at every minute." We simply aren't designed for lasting fulfillment. Take perpetually happy ancestors; they would have sat around and basked in bliss, activities that would have led to oblivion. Our ancestors who were goaded by anxiety and restlessness to find food and mates, cement alliances, stay vigilant against threats, and so on were better equipped to survive.

We ought to concern ourselves with the *pursuit* of happiness, not happiness itself. "Homer was wrong," wrote Heraclitus of Ephesus, "Homer was wrong in saying: 'Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away." Consistent perfection can be equated with annihilation; wherever one finds life, one finds strife. The Hindus proclaim that Nirvana, the goal of their striving, is nothingness. Though we may claim to do so, humans do not desire to live in some blissful, contented state of mind free of striving, for it is in striving that we progress. In a state of Nirvana—a state of narcotic bliss and perpetual happiness—the tedium, fecklessness and atrophy of our mental faculties would induce unbearable boredom.

Burnham and Phelan recount "a memorable Twilight Zone episode," in which "the main character starts in a hospital bed, then awakes to find himself in a hotel room. Whenever he wishes for anything, a bellhop appears instantly to provide the object of his desire. After some days of this, the man tires of his effortless existence and says to the bellhop, 'I sort of wish I'd gone to the other place.' 'What place?' asks the bellhop. 'Well, I assume I've died and gone to heaven, but I'm so bored, perhaps hell would be better.' The bellhop responds, 'This is hell.'"

There is No God

Arthur Hugh Clough

“There is no God,” the wicked saith,
“And truly it’s a blessing,
For whoa he might have done with us
It’s better only guessing.”

“There is no God,” a youngster thinks
“Or really, if there may be,
He surely didn’t mean a man
Always to be a baby.”

”There is no God, or if there is,”
The tradesman thinks, “’twere funny
If he should take it ill in me
To make a little money.”

“Whether there be,” the rich man says,
“It matters very little,
For I and mine, thank somebody,
Are not in want of victual”

Some others, also, to themselves
Who scarce so much as doubt it,
Think there is none, when they are well,
And do not think about it.

But country folks who live beneath
The shadow of the steeple;
The parson and the parson’s wife,
And mostly married people;

Youths green and happy in first love,
So thankful for illusion
And men caught out in what the world
Calls guilt, in first confusion;

And almost everyone when age
Disease, or sorrows strike him,
Inclines to think there is a God,
Or something very like him.

Oklahoma Atheists Calendar - March 2003

March 16th – [Harmon Bldg. Tulsa](#)
Quarterly road-trip to the [monthly meeting](#) of
the [Humanist Association of Tulsa](#).

March 18th – **Meetup @ [Starbucks](#) (7pm)**
8500 N Rockwell Ave, Oklahoma City
See <http://atheists.meetup.com> for more info.

March 28th – **Dining out at [Galileo’s](#) (7pm)**
Monthly chill-out time in the Paseo district.
Good food, good drinks, and good people!

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