

# Red River Rationalist

No. 86 - April, 2006

redriverfreethinkers.org

## OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

Wednesday, 19 April, at the Fargo Theatre: **DAVID SEDARIS**, the national best selling author and NPR regular. "One of America's most prickly, and most delicious, young comic talents." -- *The Washington Post*. Tickets available at all TICKETMASTER outlets 701-235-7171. Tickets also available at the Fargo Theatre Box Office during regular business hours.

David Sedaris. *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*. 2004. David Sedaris is a writer, a regular commentator for National Public Radio, and this is a book of his essays. He'll be appearing in Fargo 19 April. I'm going. I don't know how to describe his writing (hey, I'm a mathematician -- the English Department is at the other end of the hall). It's about family and strangers; it's about being gay and about kindness and understanding; it's about the absurdity of life and about its meaningfulness. Having made that clear, I shall resort to quotation:

About travel and the advantages of finding out about the locality from questioning the cabdriver or desk clerk and, in the United States:

What really interests me are the local gun laws. Can I carry a concealed weapon and, if so, under what circumstances? What's the waiting period for a tommy gun? Could I buy a Glock 17 if I were recently divorced or fired from my job? I've learned from experience that it's best to lead into this subject as delicately as possible, especially if you and the local citizen are alone and enclosed in a relatively small area. Bide your time, though, and you can walk away with some excellent stories. I've learned, for example, that the blind can legally hunt in both Texas and Michigan. In Texas they must be accompanied by a sighted companion, but I heard that in Michigan they're allowed to go it alone, which raises the question: How do they find whatever it is they just shot? In addition to that, how do they get it home? Are the Michigan blind allowed to drive as well? I ask about guns not because I want one of my own but because the answers vary so widely from state to state. In a country that's become increasingly homogeneous, I'm reassured by these last charming touches of regionalism. [From *Six to Eight Black Men*]

About his younger brother Paul, exuberantly "guy":

Regardless of the situation, for Paul it was always all about the joke. A warm embrace, a heartfelt declaration of concern: in moments of weakness we'd fall for these setups, vowing later to never trust him again. The last time I allowed my brother to hug me, I flew from Raleigh to New York oblivious to the sign he'd slapped to the back of my sports coat, a name tag sticker reading, "Hello, I'm Gay." This following the hilarity of our mother's funeral. [From *Rooster at the Hitchin' Post*]

About love and relationships: But first a little digression. *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church* by James M. Ault, Jr. (2004) describes the members, activities, concerns of a small fundamentalist church in Worcester, Massachusetts, as observed since 1983 by Ault, a sociologist. It is

a detailed and sympathetic study of this small community. Here's a bit from it. The pastor, Frank, and his wife, Sharon, were high school sweethearts. They married after he was badly wounded in Vietnam and returned home. He ran a garage, she had kids. They bought a house, new cars. But life was empty. Then Sharon was "born again", followed by Frank. Bible study became a big part of their life, a shared interest. They talked. They followed "Biblical" guidelines. The marriage improved. Here is an instance of kindness and forgiving in this fundamentalist relationship:

Frank remembered one decisive moment in this process of change. On his pastor's advice, he had promised God to practice self-sacrificing love toward Sharon and put the results in God's hands. He soon found himself with an agonizing opportunity to do so. He and Sharon were arguing about something, and it suddenly came to light that she was wrong. "And Sharon is seldom, seldom wrong," Frank explained gravely, "and she went flying down the hallway into the bedroom and started crying. And I sat back smug. I said, 'I got her! I know I got her!' And all of a sudden, what I said I was going to do for the Lord came to mind, and I said, 'Oh no, not now! Not now! I've got her, it's great! I don't know if I can do this. It's too much of a temptation!' But she came out about five minutes later ... and said, 'Honey, I'm sorry. I was wrong.' I bit my tongue and said, 'Hon', forget about it. Let me buy you some steak.' And I never brought it up again ... and it killed me. But I've never seen her respond like she responded. You know, forgiveness, genuine forgiveness, that's the way we operate our marriage."

Back to Sedaris. He and his partner, Hugh, have been together a long time, and Sedaris writes, in an essay of the same name, about watching a movie, *The End of the Affair*, with Hugh one summer evening in Paris. The movie is terribly romantic (lovers in London in World War II, bombs falling, etc.) and has an unhappy ending. Sedaris thinks it irritatingly overdone; Hugh is crying his eyes out all through it. Here is an instance of kindness and forgiving in this homosexual relationship: The picture ended at about ten, and afterward we went for coffee at a little place across the street from the Luxembourg Gardens. I was ready to wipe the movie out of my mind, but Hugh was still under its spell. He looked as though his life had not only passed him by but paused along the way to spit in his face. Our coffee arrived, and as he blew his nose into a napkin, I encouraged him to look on the bright side. "Listen," I said, "we maybe don't live in wartime London, but in terms of the occasional bomb scare, Paris is a pretty close second. We both love bacon and country music, what more could you possibly want?" What more could he want? It was an incredibly stupid question and when he failed to answer, I was reminded of just how lucky I truly am. Movie characters might chase each other through the fog or race down the stairs of burning buildings, but that's for beginners. Real love amounts to withholding the truth, even when you're offered the perfect opportunity to hurt someone's feelings.

### ***Pledge of Allegiance***

***(1924 - 1954)***

***I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,  
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation,  
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all***

## **Fantasy!**

When I was in high school in Grand Forks the teachers were required by law to read a passage from the bible in the first class of each day. I felt sorry for teacher Ed Bohnhoff who was obviously very embarrassed as he read.

I used to fantasize that I was the teacher. My scenario went something like this: I read to my class about Jehovah issuing marching orders to Moses to demand that the Israelites kill almost all of all the Midianites and steal all their possessions. Moses was angry because the slaughter was a bit light. So most of the survivors were then liquidated, saving only the virgins for themselves. Numbers 31. Then I read I Samuel 15:3; the Amalekites were wiped out without exception. I asked if verse 33 might be a rare attempt at humor.

The next day I read that parents with stubborn sons should take them to the city commissioners to have them stoned to death. I remarked that this is an unusual case of the girls getting the better deal. Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

Then I read the unambiguous order to kill all the witches (Exodus 22:18) and pre-used brides. Deuteronomy 22:20,21.

I followed up with the story about how King David put Bathsheba's husband "in the forefront of the hottest battle" so that he, David, could take his widow for himself. 2 Samuel 11.

Thinking I shouldn't neglect the New Testament I read Jesus' statement that he came not to bring peace but to set children against their parents. Matthew 10:34-37. However, wives must submit themselves to their "husbands, as unto the Lord." Ephesians 5:22.

I read about the joy of killing babies by smashing them against the rocks (Psalms 137:9), and also about Jesus saying he'd kill the kids of a promiscuous woman. Revelations 2:23.

Bastards "shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation ..." (How could anyone get in? Do the math.) Also excluded are men whose genitals are mutilated. Deuteronomy 23:1,2.

Then the curious story about Lot's daughters getting their dad drunk on two successive nights so they could seduce him. Genesis 19.

I followed this with the men who "eat their own dung, and drink their own piss ..." Isaiah 36:12. I suggested that if they think this unique they should read I Kings 14:10, 16:11, 21:21, II Kings 9:8; 18:27.

Soon I was summoned to the office of Principal P H Lehman.

PH: Mr. Treumann, I have complaints from parents of many of your students; they think you could do a better job of making selections from the bible. In fact, they say you are behaving excrementitiously.

WB: Mr. Lehman, are you implying that some parts of the holy bible are not fit to be read to our

students?

PH: No, no, of course not. But perhaps you could exercise better judgment in making your selections.

WB: I don't understand. Surely every jot and tittle of the holy bible is the revealed word of God.

PH: Well, yes, of course. But don't you agree that some parts are more appropriate for our students than others?

WB: No, I can't accept that. I don't feel qualified to evaluate any of it as more inspired than any of the rest. Would you like to make the choices for me?

PH: No, but we do need to be concerned about the parents. I urge you to give this some careful thought. And what's the point of reading about bathroom behavior? Don't you know you could be fired for using that kind of language in class?

WB: Fired for reading from the holy bible when it's required by law! Perhaps I should just open the bible at random and read from the left-hand page? With God as my guide, shouldn't that work out well?

PH: Well, you could try that. But if you land in the begats you might skip a page or two. Some students would find them very tedious.

WB: No student has ever complained that what I read to them is boring. But maybe that's the problem.

**- Bill Treumann**

---

-----

## **Editorial Ramblings**

As I was paging through my dictionary the other day, I noticed that the word "fundament" is defined as the anus. So, it seems to follow that "fundamental" would deal with matters relating to the anus -- would that make "fundamentalists" a bunch of --? Well, maybe I shouldn't go there. I also saw "intelligent design" as a crossword clue. The answer required was "political science."

## **Ten Commandments Funds**

Decision from the 19 February 2006 RRF Meeting:

There has been considerable discussion at our RRF meetings about the Ten Commandments case and possible further action. The following resolution was passed unanimously at the 19 February meeting: Moved by Davis Cope and seconded by Tom Ebacher: That Red River Freethinkers will contribute its remaining Ten Commandments funds to an appropriate group that will carry on the Ten Commandments issue as part of a general support of First Amendment rights.

## The 23rd Qualm

(Written by a retired Methodist minister.)

Bush is my shepherd; I dwell in want.  
He maketh logs to be cut down in national forests.  
He leadeth trucks into the still wilderness.  
He restoreth my fears.  
He leadeth me in the paths of international disgrace for his ego's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of pollution and war, I will find no exit, for thou art in office.  
Thy tax cuts for the rich and thy media control, they discomfort me.  
Thou preparest an agenda of deception in the presence of thy religion.  
Thou anointest my head with foreign oil.  
My health insurance runneth out.  
Surely megalomania and false patriotism shall follow me all the days of thy term.  
And my jobless child shall dwell in my basement forever

- submitted by **Eric Raveling**

\* \* \* \* \*

Excerpts from "Intelligent Design after Dover" (*Free Inquiry*, April/May 2006)

"The ID wars are part of the Culture Wars. The decline of the United States as a scientific and technological powerhouse can in part be blamed on the growth of fundamentalist religions whose members are trained to reject the conclusion of any endeavor that does not somehow match the literal text of their religious documents. We don't just need to acknowledge and fix declining standards of scientific education, which are surely a problem, but we also need to confront the other reason for this decline: the growth of Christian fundamentalism as a political and cultural power in the United States."

**David**

**Koepsell.** *The Thin Edge of the Wedge.*

## (Ad)Verse

[Editor's note: After nearly two years writing limericks poking fun at bible passages, I've decided that (as someone somewhere said) it's a bit like pulling the wings off a fly. Thomas Paine (and also Bill Treumann) have done such a good job pointing out fantasies and absurdities in the "good book" that it seems redundant for me to keep on. Therefore, I plan to print a selection of verse that may be by me or by others, and may or may not be limericks. Reader contributions are encouraged. CC]

**The Sceptic** (by Robert Service)

*My Father Christmas passed away  
When I was barely seven.  
At twenty-one, alack-a-day,*

*I lost my hope of heaven.*

*Yet not in either lies the curse:  
The hell of it's because  
I don't know which loss hurt the worse --  
My God or Santa Claus.*

\* \* \* \* \*

**Excerpts from "Intelligent Design after Dover" (*Free Inquiry*, April/May 2006)**

"The Intelligent Design conflict unfolds against a background of desperate problems in education. Our public schools are not teaching science effectively. As a society, we should be spending our time and energy trying to teach science better in the classrooms, not worse. In this context, the argument over evolution versus Intelligent Design is a huge waste of time. Having to focus our energies on this attack on science keeps us from finding better ways to teach how remarkable science is in illuminating various aspects of our universe.

"... Advocates of creationism and Intelligent Design ultimately stand opposed to the scientific method, because [it] is based on the assumption that natural effects have natural causes and that human beings can try to understand those causes. Obviously, that's incompatible with their particular theological view of reality...

"... The point that seems to be lost on many people - and the point that ID advocates hope will stay lost - is that the *purpose of education is not to validate ignorance; it's to overcome it.*"

**Lawrence M. Krauss.** *Science vs.*

*Religion in the ID Debate.*

Note: Krauss, in this same article, cites a June, 2005 Harris Poll finding that 54 percent responding said they disbelieved in evolution. He points out that this shouldn't be surprising since, in other polls, about the same percentage were unaware that the earth orbits the sun and takes a year to do it; likewise a similar number were unaware that the last dinosaur died off before the first humans arose and thought that God created humans less than 10,000 years ago.

The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

### **Red River Freethinkers Board Members**

Treasurer

701-232-5676

Carol Sawicki

csawicki@corpcomm.net

Secretary

Davis Cope

701-293-7188

davis\_cope@msn.com

### **General Contacts**

Web Master

605-280-8930

Neils Christoffersen

webmaster@redriverfreethinkers.org

Newsletter

320-763-5666

Chuck Crane

cranes@rea-alp.com

Items for newsletter may be sent to P.O. Box 995, Alexandria, MN 56308

### **Red River Freethinkers Calendar**

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at the Fargo Unitarian Universalist Church at 121 9th Street South in Fargo.

For **16 April 2006**, we will continue trying out the "Critical Discussion Group", a meeting format popular with many humanist and atheist groups.

### **SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND LUNCH SEMINAR**

Spring Semester 2006

North Dakota State University

Updated 02/27/2006.

Meadow Lark Room = Memorial Union 342/343.

University Chamber = Memorial Union 349.

Plains Room = Memorial Union 350.

[A campus map can be found in the local telephone directory.]

4 Apr. Meadow Lark. Mubasher Ahmed (Chicago) Evolution in Creation: An Islamic Perspective.

11 Apr. University Chamber. Gerald Fauske: Review of "The Evolution of a Creationist" by Jobe Martin.

18 Apr. Meadow Lark. Kris Groberg: [On the Russian Orthodox Church.]

The Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar has been sponsored by Red River Freethinkers since spring 2000.

\* \* \* \* \*

## The Myth of Secular Moral Chaos

"... As a source of moral objectivity, the Bible is one of the worst books we have. It might be the very worst , in fact -- if we didn't also happen to have the Qur'an. ...

"... The idea that there is a necessary link between religious faith and morality is one of the principal myths keeping religion in good standing among otherwise reasonable men and women. And yet is a myth that is easily dispelled."

**Sam**

**Harris** in *Free Inquiry*, April/May 2006

### **BECOME A MEMBER!**

Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send dues, name, address, phone number and e-mail address to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.

Family membership	\$45/year
Individual membership	\$30/year
Student membership	\$15/year
Newsletter only	\$10/year

NOTE: If you received a complimentary copy of The Red River Rationalist and would like to be removed from our mailing list, please contact any of the officers.