

God's Psychiatrist?

A biographical goodbye to Dr. Wendell Watters

Walt Michalsky

Franz Kafka once wrote that we should read “the kind of books that wound or stab us,” the kind that “wake us up with a blow to the head... that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply.” A book, in his judgment, must be “the axe for the frozen sea within us.” I like this forceful observation very much because it reminds me of my friend and well-known humanist Dr. Wendell Watters who passed away 17 August 2012. His writings, his teaching, his psychiatric therapies – all embodied this kind of approach: he wanted desperately to wake people up, to make them think, to help them cope with the world’s irrationalities, to show the value of reason and, particularly, the toxic dangers of religious authoritarianism. And, to Wendell, if reason becomes a frozen sea, then indeed it may create monsters.

The Globe and Mail’s Sandra Martin (a senior features editor) wrote an admirable, full-page obituary where she thoughtfully encapsulated Wendell’s life.¹ Consulting Wendell’s friends and colleagues (for example, psychiatrist Bernie Trossman and therapist John Lamont

and lawyer Morris Manning), she painted a picture of a man who was an unabashed contrarian, a ferocious intellectual and a committed humanist. A witness for Henry Morgentaler’s trials – at a time when performing an abortion in Canada meant life imprisonment – he fought tenaciously for women’s rights, published his book, *Compulsory Parenthood: The Truth about Abortion*² and was a founding member of Doctors for the Repeal of the Abortion Law. At the same time and, indeed, throughout his 88 years of life, he was a dedicated family man – to his wife Lena, children and grandchildren – never allowing his career to overshadow his private life.

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After his death, according to his family, numerous letters, phone calls and emails flooded the house, many commenting how willingly and selflessly Wendell had helped family and friends who found themselves in distress. With waves of nostalgia I recall the numerous “get-togethers” that we had over thirty-five years where, without exception, the first comments, as he opened the front door, concerned my family and how everyone was faring: could he help take adver-

tising photos of my daughter who was starting her own music business? Could he consult my wife on how to make his famous French Onion soup even better? What am I reading now that he should know about? Meanwhile, in his practice as a psychiatrist and professor at McMaster University, he laboured to heal the distraught, the lonely and the confused. His specialty was couples therapy where he used his skills to soothe troubled relationships. So Sandra Martin was quite correct to note that beneath his “often curmudgeonly exterior” lay a generous, compassionate man who loved humanity, who enjoyed life in the here and now and who cultivated moral excellence by his actions both in the world arena and at home. Odd, some would say, because like the prominent, nineteenth century philosopher Henry Sidgwick (who sought scientific proof of an afterlife), most people today still believe that one cannot be moral without theism being true.³

‘There are worse crimes than burning books and one of them is not reading them’

Wendell had close connections to eastern Canada where he grew up in a repressive Anglican atmosphere and where he began questioning the role of religion and the purpose of war. He did serve in the RCAF as a navigator in B-24s (Liberators) during World War II, but went on to graduate with a medical degree from Dalhousie in Halifax, met Lena, (his wife of 60 years who is presently in Penticton, BC), and practised psychotherapy first at McGill in Montreal and then at McMaster in Hamilton, Ontario.

It is here, in Hamilton, that I met Wendell while I was teaching English with the Hamilton Wentworth Board of Education. I had written a few articles, mostly for educational journals, when Wendell called me to discuss a piece I had done for the *Hamilton Spectator* that promoted the significance of teaching critical thinking in public schools. For the next three decades we locked into each other’s thinking, sharing ideas by the myriad on education, religion, psychology, politics and books. Volumes and volumes

of books. Both of us were avid readers and often exchanged books from our beloved libraries. When he, Lena and their son Derek moved to Penticton to be closer to family, he donated a large number of his books to the Humanist Association of Canada. But during those years, when Wendell lived in Ancaster, Ontario, we shared our passion for books – our constant companions and wise counsellors. More so, perhaps, because we both accepted as a basic assumption Nobel prize-winner Brodsky’s comment that “there are worse crimes than burning books and one of them is not reading them.”

Throughout my teaching career, I always made it a point to offer students extended reading lists encouraging them to read beyond what was course-required. The point obviously, in any educational setting, is to set the mind on fire, not to fill a cerebral bucket. But reading, as Wendell and I reflected on many occasions, is a very dangerous activity: beyond simple entertainment it opens your mind to other lives, it explores mysterious countries, it plunges into absorbing philosophies ... and it creates doubt. And doubt, as Bertrand Russell recognized, especially about matters that are not supposed to be questioned or discussed, is a remarkable tool tending to replace cocksure ignorance with some thoughtful uncertainty. Therefore, reading is dangerous and parents (like the one I describe below) sometimes become fearful. Are their children being morally corrupted by books that make them swim with other minds? Thus, as with books and education, so then with sexuality and religion: is knowledge infectious positive or negative?⁴

I also quickly learned that Wendell loved photography and was an ardent, perspicacious, amateur photographer. Our families shared many evenings of aesthetic joy viewing striking images and slides painted by his Nikon, some of which adorn various households in Ontario and BC and two of which hang in our family room reminding us of Wendell’s adoration for nature, with a special place in his heart for the eastern coast. His photography constantly evidenced how much we didn’t see, how much

there is to be savoured in the minutest of details and how quickly we can miss the subtle realities of moments gone forever.⁵

As time went by and with the benefit of practical experience and personal reflection, Wendell began to concentrate on a major, provocative thesis, one that would define his work in psychotherapy and one that would reaffirm his commitment to secular humanism. If he were to make a difference, if he were to make society a healthier place, then he would have to use Kafka's "blow to the head." Not to injure but to enlighten; not destroy but to build. He came to the conclusion, empirically, intellectually and psychoanalytically that religion "has had a devastating impact on interpersonal relationships and human health."⁶ To begin with, he wanted to focus on human sexuality. This, because he witnessed, in his practice, that when it came to sexual relationships, we were still in the dark ages. We were following (as many still do today) an outdated and perilous pro-natalist sex code, a code in various ways heavily endorsed by major religions. This code is characterized by

1. Tolerance, if not actual promotion, of sexual ignorance.
2. Gender role stereotyping.
3. Downplaying of individual sexual responsibility in favour of rigid adherence to religiously prescribed laws.
4. Proscription against sexual awareness in childhood and adolescence.
5. Phobic attitudes towards sensual pleasure.
6. Prohibition of sexual behaviours that do not lead to conception (masturbation, oral sex, homosexuality, etc.)
7. Prohibition of sexual pleasure over and above that necessary to complete the coital act.
8. Rejection of individual rights in the choice of parenthood.
9. Rejection of individual rights in reproductive regulation.

All this sounds strangely prescient, written as it was in 1981 as part of an article emphasizing the physician's role in sexual education.⁷ I

say prescient because, as I write this, a parent right here in Hamilton – saying that he "owns his children" – is suing the local public school board because it has not advised him of, nor withdrawn his children from, specific classroom lessons – lessons that contravene his Christian values. This parent also made it clear to the media that his biblical notions about sex, homosexuality and environment were being violated by a secular system of education.⁸ I say prescient, too, because as large numbers of Muslims immigrate to the west, Canada included, regrettably too many bring with them an antediluvian brashness that, at once, girdles women as lesser persons while prohibiting rational inquiry of Islamic tenets. The clash of civilizations and precisely these two issues are described meticulously by Irshad Manji and Nonie Darwish.⁹ Wendell would have been one of the first to send letters to the editor explaining what the words "education" and "inclusion" and "equality" mean to a healthy society. In fact, he would have gone much further to argue that archaic attitudes (from individuals who claim to know what God wants) that promote ignorance of sexuality, diminish women as human beings and lead to future complications in social or marital relationships. Of course, he would also have had much to say on the Catholic boards' reluctance to accept gay-straight clubs, on the whole matter of Muslim prayer in public schools and on the festering issue of special privileges for faith-based schools.

Now, claiming that religion is bad for you is not new. Christopher Hitchens, Richards Dawkins and Sam Harris, to tag a readily recognizable trio, have all done it and have done it skillfully.¹⁰ Wendell, deservedly so, is a dynamic member of these humanist musketeers; but, whereas the former are philosophers, journalists and specialized scientists, Wendell detected direct evidence in his couples therapy that religion in general, and Christianity specifically, contribute to imbalances in self-esteem, self-actualization and sexual maturity. "It is safe to conclude," he states, "that committed Christians, when compared to those with a more scientific approach to life, do not fare well when

it comes to mental health, racial prejudice and concern for others.”¹¹ Innovative, too, was his attempt to introduce what he called “a humanist curriculum”¹² to affect changes. Whereas contemporary writers tend to point out the ills related to, and the consequences of, relying on theistic beliefs, Wendell, further, wanted to offer something practical. He thus directed his comments to family physicians who are the ones who tend to see their patients most often and have greater access to, and involvement with, the general public. But in a modern society, where extended office waits are the norm, where people look for quick fixes to complex problems, it is difficult to get medical practitioners to speak about, never mind discuss fully, such topics with patients. Unfortunately, too, readily available drugs sometimes take the place of human interaction, education and personal responsibility.¹³

In addition to writing books and articles and letters, as formal examples, Wendell approached me and his son Derek to form a humanist association in Hamilton. The unholy threesome did just that and at its peak, in the early 1990s, we boasted a membership of more than three dozen members who each undertook the task of writing letters, meeting regularly and distributing literature related to humanistic principles. But none of us knocked on doors, evangelically proclaiming that humanism is an incontrovertible set of sacred beliefs. Bad enough that our detractors keep claiming that public schools desensitize the religious, that they reflect a human, rather than God, centred philosophy. To them secular humanism is just another “religion.” But we did what we could and The Hamilton Humanist Association lasted a number of years, only to move quietly into the sunset, with no afterlife to follow (maybe, in this case, it would be worthwhile to believe in reincarnation).

To the extent that we are such “unclamorous” individuals, reluctant to be labelled, uncomfortable with proselytizing, unwilling to rhythmically swing placards in front of churches or government offices, we are our own worst enemies, it seems, when it comes to promoting

the humanist line of thinking. This is a topic that was discussed endlessly, especially when Wendell and I met with Henry Morgenthaler – a fervent supporter of humanism in Canada. The hugely progressive influence that Henry has had on women’s rights in Canada is legendary, but many people are not aware that he willingly donated his time, efforts and finances to support various humanist organizations, particularly The Humanist Association of Canada. To that extent, for instance, Henry financed an initiative to bring a course in critical thinking to elementary public schools. A number of people, including Wendell, Derek and me, worked for over a year to plan and write such a course. In the end the ministry of education, unfortunately, did not accept this document. But, I know from experience, that many dedicated teachers in our public schools are employing just such approaches. A course of study doesn’t have to be named, “Critical Thinking.” Many devoted teachers place great value on intellectual integrity, teaching the use of active, sound reasoning and encouraging a questioning attitude – irrespective of specific courses in their discipline. But much more is needed.

A few final words. During my teaching career I invited numerous guest speakers. As time went by and word got around that someone in Michalsky’s class was going to talk about something contentious, touch on some prickly topics, my classes began to fill – overflow, in fact, not only with my students but with others who skipped classes to hear guests representing diverse opinions and life styles. Most students were not disappointed. However, among all the invitees that stood at the front of the room – lawyers, media artists, creationists, evolutionists, doctors, directors of education, judges, clergy, police officers, economists, entrepreneurs, professors, writers – my students always asked for encores from Dr. Wendell Watters, the soft spoken, amiable humanist who carried an axe for those frozen seas.

Today, as is my habit every day, I watched *The National*. Incensed over a French publication that satirized the prophet Mohammed and

furious about an obscure film that insulted him, rabid hordes of men (few, if any, women, I noted) mobbed French and US embassies in a variety of Muslim countries. The camera focused on a protester, dishevelled and frenetic, who shouted in Arabic, “When you insult us under the slogan of freedom and democracy, then we say to hell with freedom and democracy.” According to the reporter on hand, the screaming crowd had just come out of prayer.

Late last night, not being able to sleep, I roamed the channels landing on televangelist Jack van Impe who heralded the return of Christ ... soon. And hoped for donations to his ministry ... now. He looked at his co-host – an emaciated, Tammy Faye lookalike – and, gesticulating wildly, announced that there are 100 billion planets in our galaxy and Voyager 1 and 2 will leave it in 2014 eventually to reach third heaven where his grandpa is.

The omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Jehogodallah must be looking down and wondering what in tarnation he has created. He may be thinking he needs some help – a psychiatrist perhaps. Well, I just happen to have a recommendation.

References

1. Sandra Martin, “Humanist was witness for Morgentaler,” *The Globe and Mail* (September 7, 2012).
2. Wendell W. Watters, *Compulsory Parenthood: The Truth about Abortion* (McLelland and Stewart: 1976).
3. John Gray in his recently published book, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death* (Doubleday Canada: 2011), methodically discusses Sidgwick’s approach, outlining the prevailing psychology of belief in an afterlife. Also worth a look is Robert Buckman’s *Can We Be Good Without God?* (Penguin Books: 2001) where he argues that ethics and religion can and, in fact, must be separated.
4. Further discussion on matters like these can be found in the intensely readable book, Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From*

Prometheus to Pornography (St.Martin’s Press: 1996).

5. Scribbled in one of his booklets Wendell had shown me this quote by Susan Sontag: “All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.”

6. Wendell W. Watters, *Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness and Christian God-Talk* (Prometheus Books: 1992), p. 191. Hereafter referred to as DD.

7. W.W. Watters, J.A. Lamont, J.” Askwith, M. Cohen, “Education for Sexuality: The Physician’s Role” (Can Fam Physician 1981; 27:1941-45), p.1942.

8. “Hamilton dad takes public board to court over equity policy,” *The Hamilton Spectator*, (September 11, 2012).

9. Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam* (Random House Canada: 2003) and Nonie Darwish, *Cruel and Usual Punishment* (Thomas Nelson: 2008).

10. Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (McLelland and Stewart: 2007), Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton and Mifflin: 2006) and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (W.W. Norton and Company Inc.: 2005).

11. DD, p. 160.

12. Watters, Lamont, Askwith, Cohen, p. 1944.

13. DD, Chapter 10.

Walt Michalsky is a retired teacher who taught English and Philosophy at all levels: elementary, secondary and university. He has several degrees, including two masters in Philosophy (Western) and Philosophy of Education (Toronto). He lives in Ancaster, ON with his wife of 40 years, Anna (a laboratory technician). They have two daughters, one Tasya, still at university and the other, Alyssa, a professional harpist and private music teacher. Walt Michalsky plays chess on the internet and enjoys repairing computers for senior citizens. He is a book collector and avid reader with a special love for old science fiction stories by classic writers such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Theodore Sturgeon,