

Banned Book Week

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This is Banned Book Week. Set up to remind us yearly of the dangers of banning literature and to celebrate our American right to read what we want. It is the contention of the organizers of Banned Book Week that while not every book is intended for every reader, each of us has the right to decide for ourselves what to read, listen to or view.

That's a Unitarian Universalist principle, if I ever heard one.

Here's a little history of book banning.

In 213 BC, China's Emperor Shih Huang Ti thought that if he burned all the documents in his kingdom, history would begin with him. (He took it a step further by also burying alive those scholars who continued to teach old ideas.)

Eight centuries later, it is said that Caliph Omar burned some 200,000 objectionable books belonging to the library at Alexandria.

When the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258, the waters of the Tigris were said to have run black with ink from all the destroyed books.

And this was all before the printing press was invented. Suddenly there were a whole lot more books that were accessible to more people. And so, twenty years after Gutenberg invented his printing press, the first official censorship office was established because a local archbishop demanded that dangerous publications be censored. That was just the beginning.

In 1617, Catholics torched the writings of Protestant reformer Martin Luther.

In 1650 a subversive theological text written by William Pynchon was burned in Boston Common—the US's first known book burning.

The Nazis lit towering bonfires of books by Jewish writers such as Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud and Upton Sinclair.

In the US in the 1950's, Senator Joseph McCarthy encouraged Americans to burn pro-Communist books.

Earlier, back in 1873, the Comstock Law was passed by Congress. It updated an 1865 law designed to stop the mailing of obscene materials to soldiers—clearly because our soldiers are so pure and clean of thought that we don't want them contaminated. The

Comstock Law banned obscene materials from being distributed through the US Postal Service and through interstate commerce.

The Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that School libraries may not remove books from their shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books. The Court ruled that if a school board is to remove books from a school library, an inquiry must be made as to the motivation and intention of the party challenging the book. If the party's intention is to deny students access to ideas with which the party disagrees, it is a violation of the First Amendment.

Since that time, thousands of books have been challenged. The American Library Association has documented more than 6000 book challenges in the US—and that's just between 1990 and 2000.

Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men are among the top 10 most frequently challenged books in those ten years. More recently, the Harry Potter series wear the crown for most challenged books, for its focus on wizardry and magic and Satanic influence.

In 2008, The Kite Runner was among the books most likely to inspire complaints from parents and educators—according to the ALA. I'll bet you're wondering why, aren't you? Any guesses? The book includes a rape scene and has been criticized for offensive language and sexual content.

In the US, in order for a book to be banned in a library, a challenge must be made. That's a formal written complaint filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness. A successful challenge results in a ban. And, the ban stays in effect until it is lifted through someone – perhaps someone like us—taking notice and protesting until the ban is lifted.

Who files a complaint to have a book banned? Far and away it's parents who do it. It's mom and dad protecting us from ourselves.

And, what grounds do mom and dad have for protecting us from books? Sexual content and language, primarily. Evidently, mom and dad do not read their own children's facebook pages!

Books banned at one time or another in the US include (and I am listing only a very few of the total banned):--

A Clockwork Orange

Catch-22

East of Eden

Fanny Hill

Lady Chatterley's Lover

Lord of the Flies—it is racist

Slaughterhouse Five

I can't condone banning books, but I can see why a parent would be uneasy over those titles.

But how about Huckleberry Finn?

Silas Marner? – I'll bet my 10th grade English teacher didn't know how salacious that book was!

The Handmaid's Tale

And, let's not forget—Heather Has Two Moms.,

My Friend Flicka

Black Beauty

Tarzan of the Apes

The Merchant of Venice and Twelfth Night by Shakespeare

And, my personal favorite—Little Red Riding Hood

And, the very dangerous Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.

Ironically, Ray Bradbury's book about firemen whose job it is to burn books-- Fahrenheit 451 was banned in 1998 because it contained the words "God Damn".

And, only this month, a small congregation in Florida—one exactly our size—threatened to hold a public book burning of the Koran—appalling!

You can get a list of banned books online—just google banned books. You may enjoy discovering how many of them you have read—and enjoyed—and perhaps make it a goal to read the others.

I'm going to share with you excerpts from a book that I firmly believe will be challenged at some library in the not-too-distant future because it flies in the face of Christian religions who base much of their preachings on what will happen to all us sinners after we die.

SUM—FORTY TALES FROM THE AFTERLIVES

By David Eagleman

We all have probably thought from time to time about our death. And about what happens to us once we are dead to this earth. This book gives you forty different alternatives of an afterlife to consider—to worry about. Forty different versions of what may happen to you. The author makes no claim that any of these alternatives is the right one, but he does give us something to think about, in case you're bored with the alternative of a heaven or a hell.

Each of the forty choices is an unexpected exploration. For example, in one afterlife you may find that God is the size of a microbe and is totally unaware of your gigantic existence.

In another, your creators are a species of dim-witted creatures who built us humans in order to figure out what they themselves could not.

In a different version of the afterlife, you work as a background character in other people's dreams.

Get the idea? I'd like to share some of these alternative afterlives with you now.

Afterlife number one:--

In this first afterlife, you relive all your life's experiences, but this time with the events reshuffled into a new order—all the moments that share the same quality are grouped together. We each have lived different lives, so our numbers will vary, but, on the average, here's how you'll spend your afterlife.

You will spend two months driving the street in front of your house—non-stop for two months. Night and day you drive that street in front of your house. Then, for seven months you have sex non-stop, night and day. Seven months.

You sleep for thirty years straight, without opening your eyes. You take all your pain at once, all twenty-seven intense hours of it. Bones break, cars crash, skin is cut, babies are born. All the pain. Once you make it through, it's agony free for the rest of your afterlife.

But that doesn't mean it's always pleasant. You will spend six days just clipping your nails. That's about fifteen hours for each finger. Fifteen hours for each toe.

Fifteen months looking for lost items.

Eighteen months waiting in line.

Two years of boredom—staring out a bus window, sitting in an airport terminal.

One year reading books.

Your eyes itch, and you itch, because you can't take a shower until it's your time to take your marathon two-hundred-day shower.

Two weeks wondering what happens when you die.

One minute realizing your body is falling.

Seventy-seven hours of being confused. One hour realizing you've forgotten someone's name.

Three weeks realizing you are wrong.

Two days lying.

Six weeks waiting for a green light.

Seven hours vomiting.

Fourteen minutes experiencing pure joy.

Three months doing laundry.

Fifteen hours writing your signature.

Two days tying shoelaces.

Three days calculating restaurant tips.

Fifty-one days deciding what to wear.

Nine days pretending you know what is being talked about.

Six months watching commercials.

Four weeks sitting in thought, wondering if there is something better you could be doing with your time.

This kind of makes you rethink how you'd better be spending your life, doesn't it?

In this second afterlife alternative, you discover that your Creator is a species of small, dim-witted, obtuse creatures. They look vaguely human, but they are smaller and more brutish. They are singularly unintelligent. They knit their brows when they try to follow what you are saying. It will help if you speak slowly, and it sometimes helps to draw pictures. At some point their eyes will glaze over and they will nod as though they understand you, but they will have lost the thread of the conversation entirely.

A word of warning—when you wake up in this afterlife, you will be surrounded by these creatures. They will be pushing and shoving in around you, rubbernecking, howling to get a look at you. And they will all be asking you the same thing—“Do you have answer? Do you have answer?”

Don't be frightened. These creatures are kind and innocuous.

You will probably ask them what they are talking about. They will knit their brows, pondering your words like a mysterious proverb. Then they will timidly repeat—“Do you have answer?”

To understand where you are, it will help to have some background.

At some point in the development of their society, these creatures began to wonder—“Why are we here? What is the purpose of our existence?” These turned out to be very difficult questions for them to answer. So difficult, in fact, that rather than attacking the questions directly, they decided it might be easier to build super computing machines devoted to finding the answers. So, they invested the labor of tens of generations to engineer these machines.

WE are their machines.

This seemed a clever strategy to the elders of their community. However, they overlooked a problem—to build a machine smarter than you, it has to be more complex than you—and the ability to understand the machine begins to slip away.

When you, their machine, wear out and stop functioning here on Earth, (we call that dying) your software is downloaded into their laboratory so they can probe it. This is where you awaken. And as soon as you make your first sound in the afterlife, they crowd around you to learn one thing—“Do you have answer?”

They don’t realize that when they dropped us into our terrarium, on this planet Earth, we didn’t waste a moment—we built societies, roads, wrote novels, built catapults, telescopes, rifles, and every variety of our own machines. They have a hard time detecting this progress of ours, much less understanding it, because they simply can’t follow the complexity.

When you try to explain to them what has happened, they cannot keep up with your rapid and unfathomable speech, so they set about their dim-witted nodding. It makes them sad, because they know their project has failed. They believe we have figured out the answer but are too advanced to communicate it at their level.

They don’t guess that we have no answers for them. They don’t guess that our main priority is to answer these questions for ourselves. They don’t guess that we are unable, and that we build machines of increasing sophistication to address our own mysteries. You try to explain this to the creatures, but it is fruitless—not only because they don’t understand you, but also because you realize how little you understand about our machines.

In this last afterlife alternative, you are treated to a generous opportunity—you can choose whatever you would like to be in your next life. Would you like to be a member

of the opposite sex? Maybe born into royalty? A soldier facing triumphant battles. You can pick anything you like.

But perhaps you've just died after having lived a hard life. Perhaps you are tortured by the enormity of the decisions and responsibilities that surrounded you in life and now there's only one thing you yearn for in your life—simplicity. That's permissible. That's okay.

So, for the next round, you choose to be a horse. You covet the bliss of that simple life—afternoons of grazing in grassy fields, the handsome angles of your skeleton and the prominence of your muscles, the peace of the slow-flicking tail or the steam rifling through your nostrils as you lope across snow-blanketed plains. To be a horse in your next life is what you pick.

You announce your decision. Incantations are muttered. A wand is waved. And your body begins to metamorphose into a horse.

Your muscles start to bulge. A mat of strong hair erupts to cover you like a comfortable blanket in winter. Your neck thickens and lengthens and it immediately feels normal as it happens.

Your carotid arteries grow in diameter, your fingers blend hoofward, your knees stiffen, your hips strengthen. Meanwhile, as your skull lengthens into its new shape, your brain races in its changes—your cortex retreats as your cerebellum grows, melting man to horse.

Neurons redirect, synapses unplug and replugin on their way to equestrian patterns. Your dream of understanding what it is like to be a horse gallops toward you from the distance. Your concern about human affairs begins to slip away. Your cynicism about human behavior melts, and even your human way of thinking begins to drift away from you.

But, suddenly, for just a moment, you are aware of the important problem you overlooked. The more you become a horse, the more you forget your original wish. You forget what it was like to be a human wondering what it was like to be a horse.

This moment of clear thinking does not last long. But it serves as the punishment for your sins—there you are as half horse, half human, with the knowledge that you cannot appreciate the destination without knowing the starting point—you cannot revel in the simplicity unless you remember the alternatives.

And, that's not the worst of your revelation. You realize that the next time you return to the afterlife, to begin your next life, you'll be standing here—not as you are now, but with your thick horse brain, and you won't have the capacity to ask to become a human again. You won't understand what a human is.

Your choice to slide down the intelligence ladder is irreversible. And just before you lose your final human faculties, you painfully ponder what magnificent extraterrestrial creature, enthralled with the idea of finding a simpler life, chose in the last round to become a human.