

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST
With Ginger Campbell, MD

Episode #53

**Interview with Becky Hale, President of the American Humanist
Association**

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INTRODUCTION

This is Episode 53 of [Books and Ideas](#), and I'm your host, Dr. Ginger Campbell. It's been awhile since I posted an episode of *Books and Ideas*, so I want to thank those of you who have stayed subscribed, and also welcome new listeners.

Books and Ideas is the show where I talk to interesting people about a wide variety of topics; and I'm hoping to produce the show on a regular basis in 2014. Today's episode is an interview with Rebecca Hale, current president of the American Humanist Association.

Before I tell you a little bit about this month's show, I want to remind you that you can get full show notes and free episode transcripts at booksandideas.com. You can also send me feedback at docartemis@gmail.com.

Today's guest, Becky Hale, hasn't written any books. But, as I mentioned a minute ago, she is the president of the American Humanist Association. I learned about the AHA from listening to their excellent podcast, [The Humanist Hour](#).

Today I want to introduce you to humanism—or, at least the American version. I realize that many of you listen from outside the United States, but I hope this interview will give you a unique glimpse into an aspect of American culture that you might find a little odd.

Humanism is a non-theistic approach to ethics. But I want to share it with both believers and non-believers, because I feel it is important to find ways for people of diverse beliefs to work together to tackle problems.

Please listen all the way through to my comments after the interview. It will be easier for me to explain where I'm coming from once you have heard the interview.

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INTERVIEW

Ginger: My guest today is [Rebecca Hale](#) from the [American Humanist Association](#). Becky, I'm really glad to have you on *Books and Ideas* today.

Becky: Thank you, Ginger. I'm thrilled to be here with you today. It's always a pleasure to be able to let people know about the American Humanist Association and humanism; I'm excited.

Ginger: Well, me too. I've only recently, I guess in the last couple of years, become aware of the American Humanist Association—[The Humanist Hour](#) podcast was actually what made me aware of it—even though I've been aware of the [skeptical movement](#) longer than that. And I've been attracted to humanism because it seems to me to be a little bit—I don't know whether the right word is 'tolerant' or not; but we're going to explore that in a minute.

I have listeners who have a wide variety, ranging from beliefs to no beliefs, and I wanted to introduce all of them to humanism. And so, I thought we would start with just the basic question of what is humanism?

Becky: [Humanism](#) is really the notion of making your decisions on your behavior and how you make your philosophical choices in life, based on what works rather than on dogma. Decisions are based on human interaction—best practices, if you will—rather than something that is written down in a book and attributed to some supernatural being.

Ginger: I got a quote from an essay that I think one of the bloggers on the website wrote, where he said (he was quoting from another place on the site, so I don't know exactly where) it's a "rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion." ¹ I like that.

Becky: Right. One of the other lines that's often used is 'motivated by compassion, informed by evidence.' I like to say it's a life philosophy based on personal responsibility: humans made the problems in the world, and it's up to us to take responsibility to fix them, so that we leave the planet better than we found it.

Ginger: So, humanism really goes back a lot farther. Would you say it originates in the [Enlightenment](#), as recognized as a thought, or farther back than that?

Becky: Yes, it goes farther back than that. 1500, 1600 year B.C.E. there were humanist writings coming out of India; [Confucianism](#); the [Buddha](#); [Lao Tzu](#), from [Taoism](#)—all of that has a very strong basis, or background, for humanism. And then you move up into the early Greeks, [Epicurus](#).

¹ This quote comes from <http://davidscott.wilmingtonfavs.com/2014/01/20/misconceptions-faith/>

You know, as soon as you start noticing that what religions are saying is that God wants exactly what the leaders want, exactly what the rulers want, the next question becomes, *Well, did people create these rules or did gods create these rules?* And from there, you digress into different levels of understanding that.

Ginger: So, if you call yourself a humanist, how is that different from saying that you're a skeptic, or even an [atheist](#)?

Becky: It's really pretty different. The thing that we have in common in modern day—and I'm really going to speak to American Humanist Association people, because there's a whole segment of [religious humanism](#), as well—but when you compare what's going on with the American Humanist Association to the skeptics or the atheist movement, we go beyond the premise that there probably isn't a God. There are no supernatural beings taking any kind of interest or involvement in our lives—that's kind of where you go with skepticism and atheism. You take the next step with humanism and you say, *But what now?*

When you take a supernatural being out of the formula, then you have to make decisions on how do you live your life: What are the best practices? How do you make decisions about [stem cell](#) research? How do you make decisions about [choice](#)? How do you make decisions about [same-gender relationships](#)? How do you make decisions about the planet; about the environment; about ethics and science—all of those kinds of things? Atheism and skepticism don't answer those questions.

Ginger: And that's why the American Humanist Association also has that byline, "Good without a God."

Becky: Absolutely; it's on us to fix this.

Ginger: So, it's going beyond saying, *Well, I don't think there's a God*, to saying, *That means I've got some responsibility for the future of other beings, including humans and the rest of the planet.*

Becky: Right. I kind of prefer just taking God out of the formula, since you can't know—you can't know that there is a God, you can't really know there isn't a God. From my perspective, I'm pretty comfortable there isn't. But that's where you open the door to people who maybe are [deists](#), maybe are unsure, but they want to spend some time thinking about the life choices that they make and are looking for a way to determine what the best way is to behave.

Ginger: So, can a believer be a humanist?

Becky: A believer can be a humanist. I don't think that a fundamentalist believer—someone who would take the [Bible](#), or the [Koran](#), or the [Torah](#), any of that literally. I think that individual would have a difficult time, because within humanism, we aren't going to make decisions based on something written in a book by something we don't have proof of.

However, it works as a very good philosophical umbrella for deists and (I don't want to offend anybody) maybe a soft [Christian](#); someone who likes the idea of a God, or maybe isn't comfortable with saying that we just got here through [evolution](#). They want to put a God at the beginning of the [Big Bang](#), or they want to insert some supernatural somewhere along the path, but they're not going to use something that was written down during the [Stone Age](#) as codes for behavior for the Modern Age.

And so, those individuals will find a very comfortable place within humanism. Now, the AHA is largely non-[theistic](#). When we say "best practices based on human involvement without supernatural beings," that would exclude many [religionists](#).

Ginger: But it doesn't mean that you couldn't work on projects with other humanists that have beliefs.

Becky: Oh, absolutely not. We cooperate with a lot of organizations; we cooperate with a lot of churches. We'll work with any organization that is headed in the same direction on an issue that we are.

Ginger: I just think that that's so important, because if you decide that the only people you can work with are the people that believe exactly the same thing as you do, you really are making it very difficult for people to work together. Because that just doesn't happen; people tend to believe different things.

Have you ever read the book, [Freethinkers](#), by [Susan Jacoby](#)?

Becky: I haven't read that one.

Ginger: Well, it's actually a great book.

Becky: I know it is—they're stacking up by my bedside.

Ginger: Well, one of the things that I really love about that book is that—it's sort of the history of free thinking, mostly in the United States—one of the things the early parts of it talk about is when they were writing the [Constitution](#), how (we know there's no God in the Constitution; certain factions in our country now seem to want to ignore that fact) there's no God in the U.S. Constitution, and that was done by the writers of the Constitution on purpose.

And in *Freethinkers*, she discussed how the people who would probably call themselves atheists now, but wouldn't have back then, and the people who belong to minority faiths (which was a lot of people, because a lot of people came to America to get away from religious persecution) worked together on the Constitution to make sure that God wasn't in it, so as to protect them as

minorities. And people seem to have forgotten that's the purpose of the [separation of church and state](#).

Becky: Is the question about the value of the separation of church and state?

Ginger: No, actually I was just commenting on Susan Jacoby's book, *Freethinkers*.

Becky: The book; yes.

Ginger: I do want to come back to that in a minute, but I think I've sort of gotten off track. Let me come back to that so that I give you a chance to tell me a little bit about yourself. We've talked a little bit about humanism, and the difference between humanism, in general, and the AHA; so why don't you just tell me a little bit about Becky Hale, and how you got involved in the American Humanist Association?

Becky: Well, that's an interesting story, because I was raised humanist, but not within the AHA—because I didn't know that the American Humanist Association existed. I was raised within the [Unitarian](#) movement, which is where the AHA came from.

However, about 1992, in Colorado we passed the infamous [Amendment 2](#), which was focused on taking civil liberties away from gays and lesbians—the whole spectrum there. And when my husband and I looked at that, we saw the [Machiavellian](#) hands of the [religious right](#). And so, we thought, *we need to do something about this*, and we started selling things. My husband and I created a business called [EvolveFISH](#). And with EvolveFISH, we were selling Darwin fish, and Evolve emblems, and coffee cups, and bumper stickers, and all of this, to promote science as opposed to decision-making based on interpretations of the Bible.

Well, EvolveFISH was involved in a couple of activities where we came up against people who were working with an organization called the American Humanist Association. And this was really exciting. And we started attending the AHA conferences, and at some point along the line, the American Humanist Association asked us to become more involved.

And that was really my beginning with the American Humanist Association, was part of a commercial enterprise; certainly a philosophical match, but it was a commercial enterprise that made me aware of their existence. It was the early days of the Internet; and now, hopefully with our billboards, and our Facebook advertising, and everything else we're doing, it isn't quite so hard to find us as it was then.

Ginger: So, even though the AHA is like over seventy-five years old...

Becky: The AHA itself is not quite seventy-five years old. We're on our way; we will be seventy-five in 2016, I think it is.

Ginger: Could you tell us a little bit about the history—a brief overview of the AHA's history; where it came from, and maybe a little bit about its goals? Although, you've pretty much alluded to the goals, I think.

Becky: Well, the goal is to let people know what humanism is.

Ginger: Right.

Becky: And to encourage people to start thinking about the world and about their actions in a compassionate way—in a human-centered way.

The AHA started back in the '40s. It came from the [Unitarian Universalist](#) movement. It was a couple of Unitarian ministers—actually, Universalism wasn't in there at that time—but there were several Unitarian ministers who banded

together and created a humanist fellowship at the [University of Chicago](#); and that was 1927.

That morphed, if you will, into the Humanist Press Association, where they were doing a lot of writing and printing. And in 1941, it became the American Humanist Association. We're the largest democratically-run humanist organization in the United States.

Ginger: Is there overlap between AHA and the stuff that [Paul Kurtz](#) has done?

Becky: Oh, really quite a bit. Paul Kurtz was a member, and on the Board, and president of the American Humanist Association for a number of years; and I think he was doing a lot of publishing, too. He found the strictures of the democratic organization to be too confining. So, there was a schism some years ago, where Paul took his printing operation and his drive for humanism and created the [Council for Secular Humanism](#). So, it's sort of a spin-off.

Ginger: And, for the sake of my international listeners, does the AHA work with any similar organizations around the world?

Becky: Yes, we're a member organization of the IHEU, which is the International Humanist and Ethical Union. That is a member organization that brings together all of the so-named organizations in the world that want to join and be active supporting each other.

Ginger: Do they have their own website where a person could figure out whether their country has...

Becky: Sure; the [IHEU](#).

Ginger: Well, you can just give me that link later, and I'll put it in the show notes.

Becky: Oh, okay; I'll do that. They have a world congress every three or so years. This year it's going to be in Oxford, England. They're very big. And I think the [Norwegian Humanist Association](#) is one of the largest in the world. Some of the European humanist organizations are much larger and more visible than we are in the United States.

Ginger: And that probably has something to do with European history, and the fact that they probably still have some kind of historical memory of why state religions are a bad idea.

Becky: Exactly! That's part of it, is that so many of them had to live through these [Draconian](#) religious wars, and [pogroms](#), and all of these things.

It's also, I think, somewhat because many of the governments in Europe fund their religious institutions. They're funded by the number of people who stand up and say, *I want to be a piece of this organization*—or this church, or this religion, or whatever they're calling it. And so, many of the humanist organizations in Europe have government support.

Ginger: Okay. So, they're sort of...

Becky: They're on a par with religions; they're on a par with churches.

Ginger: Okay. So, that's an interesting solution to the problem.

Becky: It is. You know, we think we've done so well keeping church and state separate—which certainly has advantages. But we've also seen, because of the way our capitalist society works, that with advertising and marketing, we've become way more religious in the United States than the European countries that actually support church. It's just an interesting anomaly.

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Ginger: So, I know that separation of church and state is one of the issues that the AHA considers important. And we don't have time to talk about all the issues, and I picked this one because it's my personal one I care about—to be perfectly honest. But can we talk a little bit about why this is important? And remember that we have listeners outside the United States, so just keep that in mind.

Becky: Sure. Well, keeping church and state separate, to me it's just so important. Because when you align a church with a government, you then kind of have the implication that whatever the government does is sanctioned by the god—by the religion—that happens to be in power. You also deny good intellectual thought on many topics, because everyone has to toe the line of the dogma that is in power.

It's stultifying. What we're seeing in our country is it became stultifying on science research. It becomes stultifying on art, on music. It's a repressive kind of regime that uses the authority of a Supreme Being to enforce the desires of the political leadership.

And I find that to be dangerous. It's really, really scary. Many, many people will say, *Oh, well Hitler was an atheist*. Well, Hitler wasn't an atheist; [Hitler](#) was a

religious person. He had the church on his side. And there were lots of really horrible things done under that regime.

We can see this time and time again, with the [Crusades](#), and in more recent times with what was going on—well, not recently—in Ireland. You've got two religions fighting. Nobody can win. And you just go down this terrible trail, and dividing your country, and killing each other.

Ginger: Yes. I visited Scotland in 2005, so that gave me an opportunity to read a lot of Scottish history. And that same story was played out there between [Catholicism](#) and whatever the [Church of Scotland](#) is called—they considered themselves [Protestant](#), but probably wouldn't be considered Protestant by American [Baptists](#)—but whoever was in power would want. And obviously, English history, too.

A lot of people don't even realize that the various original States, almost each one of them has a certain religious origin. You know, Maryland was Catholic, Massachusetts was [Puritan](#), the [Quakers](#) were in Pennsylvania.

Becky: Right. And they denied land ownership, they denied freedom of thought, they denied voting to anyone who wasn't a member of their church. So, you could be a Catholic but be in the wrong colony, and you had no rights. They were bringing forward; even though they left Europe for religious freedom, they only wanted their own religious freedom. And they came here and did the same thing to anybody who didn't agree with exactly their take on religion.

Ginger: It really makes me wonder what kids in Texas are learning in history class—since they were trying to get rid of [Jefferson](#).

Becky: Yes; well, we kind of know what they're learning.

Ginger: Well anyway, I guess we shouldn't get sidetracked by that.

Do you have a favorite book for introducing humanism to people?

Becky: Well, I'm going to have to get back to you on that one. I'll send it with the link. There are so many great books out there now. The AHA, with membership we give an introductory book² on humanism. And for many years, it was a book by [Corliss Lamont](#).

Ginger: The one they give out now, which I think I got a couple of years ago, it's okay, but it sort of reads like it was written for a fifth grader. I really like *Freethinkers*, by Susan Jacoby, even though it's not about humanism, *per se*. It's more historical.

For sort of worldwide, I think that [Doubt](#), by Jennifer Michael Hecht³, although it's not about humanism, is about the history of people questioning the whole idea that some supernatural being is the source of the answers. And it's sort of ironic to think of somebody like [Socrates](#) being accused of being an atheist—because the definition of 'atheist' also is a moving target through history.

Becky: Right; it really is that which doesn't agree with you.

Ginger: And the [AHA website](#) has a lot of great books.

Becky: You know, I can't come up with a title right now for you, but I'll get one for you. There are just enormous resources on the web.

[Fred Edwards](#) has a lot of writings in there. Fred really is one of the more modern luminaries; one of the trench workers for decades. And he has written a lot over the years; and many of his pieces are on the AHA website.

Ginger: So, as I mentioned before we started talking, fans of [Books and Ideas](#) have a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs. And since we can't address every

² [The Philosophy of Humanism](#) by Corliss Lamont (revised ed 1997)

³ Jennifer Michael Hecht was interviewed in [Episode 27](#) of *Books and Ideas*.

possibility, I want to take two extremes. For the person who knows absolutely nothing about humanism—this is the first time they've ever heard of it—what is the one thing you want them to come away with?

Becky: That it's a compassionate life philosophy, but it's a compassionate philosophy based on best practices. [David Niose](#), our past president said it well: it's *atheism with progressive values*. And that's what it is via the American Humanist Association.

We inculcate many of the progressive values. So, we've taken non-belief and added ethics and values to it. That's a good starting point. It immediately lets people know that, for the most part, we're not [evangelicals](#). And for the second part, that we also don't eat babies.

Ginger: That's one of the things that [Todd](#) talks a lot about on [The Humanist Hour](#) is communicating that whole idea that you can be ethical, and you can be a good person, without a religion.

Becky: Yes, absolutely! It's all about *good without a God*. It's all about leaving the planet better than you found it; that's our job.

Ginger: And hopefully, we have a few new listeners who came to listen to this episode because they belong to the AHA and want to hear some more from you. For them, I want to ask you what's the most surprising thing that's happened to you since you've been the president of the AHA?

Becky: Hmm; the most surprising thing. I don't know; I think how much work it is. I mean I knew the organization; I was on the Board for eight years before I became the president.

Also the depth and the breadth of everything we're involved in. It sounds so simple, but then you look at all the ramifications of it, and all the branches. The

legal center is doing a lot of work protecting peoples' rights—church-state separation activities. We have a phenomenal education arm which is doing a lot of online curriculum building now, so that people can share the word with their children.

And I guess maybe that brings me to that piece which has been so surprising to me; and that's the number of people who have been so wounded by their individual religious upbringing that they are reticent to share their life philosophy of humanism with their own children. To me, that was really shocking that they would say, *Oh no, I want my children to make their own decisions*. Which, of course, we do.

But when you look at parenting, the number one thing is to let your kids know where you stand. And to find people that have been so terribly wounded that they are even fearful of letting their kids know where they stand, that, to me, is surprising—probably not what you were looking for, but that has been the most shocking thing to me.

Ginger: Yes. And that's important. And so, you're trying to get the word out why it's important to let your kids know where you stand.

Becky: Yes. I'm not going to beat it into my kids, but they're going to know; they're going to know what their mom and their dad believe, and how they live their lives, and what their philosophies are. And then they can make informed choices from there; but they have to know where I stand. That was the shocker.

Ginger: So, what's the most rewarding thing about being a part of the AHA—since it's a big part of your life now, even before you became president.

Becky: Yes, it really is. It's the people. The people that I meet, Ginger, are the most amazing, delightful, caring, compassionate people. I really don't worry

about the ethics or the values of the people that I deal with. When they sign on to humanism, they're saying a lot about themselves.

And so, it's this instant community wherever I go. And it's the privilege of getting to interact with and get to know other people who are in the movement and who are working towards living this life.

Ginger: Well, that's what appeals to me, also; the idea that there's community. Because that's one of the things that, as a non-theist, you sometimes feel (I sometime do feel; and I think almost everyone has experienced this, especially if you live, like I do, in the South); yearning to be a part of a community, and feeling sort of left out when everyone else is going to church.

I actually went to a Baptist church once—and this was long before I realized I was an atheist; I just knew I wasn't a [Jehovah's Witness](#) anymore.

Becky: My sister is a Jehovah's Witness.

Ginger: I went to a Baptist church, and I happened to be there during [revival](#). And I was thinking to myself, *Well, I think I could stand this if I avoided revival.* And then I thought, *Wait a minute, I think revival is supposed to make me feel good; I don't think this is the place for me.*

Becky: That's right; that revival thing is the big party, isn't it?

Ginger: Well, you have to remember this was in the South, so the guest speaker on that Sunday was actually a football coach. But anyway.

Becky: We're working at the American Humanist Association to help communities develop around the country. You know, there are people who are very active on an individual basis, and they find that very fulfilling, and that's all they need from it. They have their own lives, and their jobs that they go to, the

families that they take care of, and whatever their hobbies are. And they're just living their life.

And for many people, just knowing that humanism is out there is enough. But there are people who feel isolated, and feel persecuted at some level. And the idea of having communities for people to join, whether they're online or in person in their region, is valuable.

I can remember, I guess it's almost twenty years ago now, when we were advertising in [Discover](#) magazine. I got a telephone call (because I answered all the phones in those days) from a person who was literally in their closet calling, whispering saying, *I saw you're ad And I thought I was the only person; I thought something was wrong with me because I didn't believe in God.*

And so, the idea of really being out there and letting people know: it's why we use the billboards, and we use the magazine advertising, and we use online advertising to reach out, so that those people who are trying to engage their brains know that they're not alone.

Ginger: That's why *Doubt* is such a great book; because it makes you feel like you're a part of a community that goes back 2500 years, at least.

Becky: Right; you're not alone, you're not crazy—which feels good. I think that's really what we're coming to understand as a society—maybe it's just me; maybe I'm just catching up—but that what everybody really is looking for is community. We're tribal; people like to have other people. We like communication, we like touch. We're just trying to provide that for the people who don't fit in, who don't find a place in religious organization.

Ginger: Two things that fit here with what I've been learning in the time I've spent devoted to studying [neuroscience](#) and trying to share it are: We are so wired to be social—which is just what you said. And the other is we're wired to

see [cause and effect](#) and to believe something. And we don't actually control what that something is. I can't remember who said this, but it's just a great quote: he said, "One person's possible correlation is another person's absolute causation."

So, there's a point at which, either you take all the evidence that we've got and you say, *Well, I'm sure there's no God*, or you take all the evidence that we've got and you say, *Well, I think there must be something out there beyond what we can see*. Whichever side of that you come down on, you can't really control that.

I've had a point in my life when I was a believer. I know you didn't grow up that way, but I think because I did, I know that when I changed positions, it looked like I chose. And that's why what I call the 'fundamentalist atheists' bother me: because they act like if you still believe in God, you're stupid. That doesn't accomplish anything.

Becky: No. And it's harsh, and it cuts off a huge segment of the population that you might be friends with that you'll have something in common with. You have something not in common with them, but you have other things that are.

A recent line that we were talking about—let's see if I can remember this—it was, 'We know there's something more, we just don't think it's something else.' There's stuff out there that we don't get yet—we just don't understand it. We're just not—as humanists and as non-believers, we're not going to assign it to a god of the gaps. We're going to look for the source; we're going to look to see what the cause is, rather than give it away to something else.

Ginger: Is there anything else you want to share, Becky, before we start to wrap up?

Becky: No, I don't think so. I just would like to encourage your listeners to explore; to pursue it. If they find that indeed they resonate with one of the

organizations—especially if they resonate with the American Humanist Association—I'd love them to sign up to just add their numbers to our numbers.

Because as we try to move the political discussion, and the agenda, and the culture in this country to a kinder, gentler perspective on the world, our numbers are going to count. And so, it's important. I hear people say, *I'm not a joiner*. And I want you to join; I want you to let me count you.

Ginger: You also talked about how we contribute in different ways. For me, I feel science communication is the gift that I can contribute. And everyone has their own particular gifts that they can contribute.

Before we close, tell us a little bit about this year's [annual meeting](#).

Becky: Oh, the annual conference this year is in Philadelphia. It is the weekend of June—I think it starts around the 4th of June and runs to about Sunday. We've got an incredible line-up (and people always catch me off guard on this); I know we have [Barney Frank](#) coming, and he'll be receiving one of our awards.

Ginger: Well, I know [Eugenie Scott](#)—my friend, Eugenie Scott—is getting...

Becky: Oh yes, I think she's getting a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Ginger: Yes.

Becky: Is that what she's getting this year?

Ginger: Yes.

Becky: Yes, she's an amazing woman. She has dedicated her life to increasing science education all around the country, and just has done good work. I didn't know she was a friend of yours. That's great.

Ginger: She was [on the show](#) a long time ago—early on—and we've met at several, I guess sort of skeptical events. But what I really respect about her is the way she can communicate with people who have different levels of belief, and recognizes that science is for everyone and tries to work within that. Because, I mean until thirty years ago, that seemed to be the way things worked; and now, all of a sudden, it's just assumed that they have to be opposites. And I'd like it to go back to...

Becky: You know, we're going to be much better off if science is for everyone, and people at least really understand it, making real effort to understand [scientific thought](#) and how that works—you know, the idea of questioning.

I've had people say, *Well, evolutionism can't be true because you've changed what it means over the years.* Well, that's what science is about: if the evidence shows that you're wrong, you change your perspective; you go with what is shown to be true, whether or not you like it. I know a lot of people have had to change their different scientific theories as evidence has come up.

And your [Brain Science Podcast](#) is a perfect example of that. Brain science has changed so much; it's so different than what it was when I was in college. And we know so much more. So, people have had to adapt; they've had to move and say, *Okay, the evidence shows this.*

So, if we go back to the conference, Barney Frank is the Humanist of the Year, Dr. Eugenie Scott is getting a Lifetime Achievement Award. [Jessica Valenti](#) is getting the Humanist Heroine Award, and that's given by the [Feminist Caucus](#). I know we had [Jason Silva](#), but we lost him; he's going to be in Europe and won't be with us. [Natalie Angier](#) is getting the Humanist Media Award. So, it will be fun.

And one of the really exciting things about the conferences is that they're small, so you get to sit down and actually have a conversation with some of the top thinkers of the time. I mean I've sat and had—before I was president—

conversations with [Christopher Hitchens](#) and [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#). [Stephen Jay Gould](#) died before I had a chance to talk with him; but certainly [Steven Pinker](#), and [Daniel Dennett](#), and [Richard Dawkins](#), many of these people are very accessible at these conferences, and you could find yourself sitting right next to them at a banquet.

Ginger: I actually have a reservation at the hotel. I haven't actually signed up for the conference yet, but I know the hotel reservations go first, so I did that.

Becky: Well, we'll save a spot for you.

Ginger: I was kind of trying to decide between that and something that happens the week before. So, I made reservations at hotels for both of those events, because that's where the hang-up always comes in.

Becky: Right.

Ginger: Well, I've been to Philadelphia a couple of times, the last time a couple of years ago. So, I know kind of how it's laid out down there, and how important it is to have a good location on your hotel.

Becky: Yes, and it is a great location; we've got a good place. Well, I hope you make it, because I really think it will be fun.

Ginger: Well, that was actually my ulterior motive for interviewing you—so that I would know that I knew somebody.

Becky: Well, you know me; find me. And any of your listeners, find me. We're a very relaxed batch of people. There's not a lot of protocol. It's a casual, happy event.

Ginger: And a great place for women, I assume. Because you know one of the issues going on in the skeptical movement among women is that women haven't

felt like they were really respected within skepticism the way they feel they should be.

Becky: Yes. You know, [feminism](#), or however you want to refer to it, is another place where you see the difference between humanism and atheism or skepticism. We took a stand on women's rights decades ago. We've taken stands on choice. My vice president at the American Humanist Association is a woman. And half the Board is female—it might even be better than half the Board now.

We've had a Feminist Caucus for several decades. They're active and doing things right now. They're pushing the [ERA](#) in New Mexico and a couple of other states.

Ginger: I'm old enough, I guess I should say, to remember the original ERA.

Becky: Yes! And we thought it all got done, but it didn't.

Ginger: Yes.

Becky: We also have an [LGBTQ](#)—I don't think they're a caucus, but they're an interest group, and they have their own awarding. And we take all of this seriously; I think we're walking our talk pretty well. There's always room for improvement, but I think we're doing a good job.

Ginger: Well, Becky, it has been great getting to talk to you, and I appreciate your taking the time to talk with me today.

Becky: Oh, it's been my pleasure.

[music]

I want to thank Becky Hale for talking with me today. I really hope I'll be able to attend the AHA [annual meeting](#) in Philadelphia in June, because I would love to

meet her. And I want to see my friend, Eugenie Scott get her well-deserved Lifetime Achievement Award.

I will include a link to information about the annual meeting in the show notes at booksandideas.com. If any of you decide to attend, be sure to drop me an email at docartemis@gmail.com so we can get together.

Of course, a free episode transcript will also be available, along with links to related episodes of *Books and Ideas*. Those will be in the show notes.

I should mention that, in addition to interviewing Eugenic Scott back in [Episode 21](#), I also interviewed Jennifer Michael Hecht, author of *Doubt*—one of the books I mentioned—back in [Episode 27](#). Please check out the show notes for a complete list of related episodes.

One of the great things about podcasting is that I get emails from people from all over the world, with a wide variety of beliefs and non-belief. I would love to hear your feedback about this episode, because the main focus of both *Books and Ideas* and my [Brain Science Podcast](#) is sharing how science really works, with listeners of all backgrounds. It is very important to me to respect your diversity, while being honest about where I stand.

Although I am a non-theist—or atheist, if you prefer—it is not my goal to attack religion. But I am willing to criticize positions that I think are irrational, unscientific, or just plain mean. Humanism appeals to me because its focus is not on being against religion, it's focus is on being for compassion, for using science to solve man-made problems, and for ethics that are informed by a modern appreciation for human diversity.

One of the key projects of the American Humanist Association is to educate people that it is possible to be good without God. That may seem obvious to non-American listeners, but the argument that people need God to tell them what to

do is still actively promoted by most American churches, both Christian and otherwise.

Science cannot tell us what is right or wrong. But, as neuroscience is showing, human beings have an innate sense of morality. Of course, without a church telling us what to do, we do have to be willing to think for ourselves.

Most of the causes that the American Humanist Association promotes are shared by people of a wide variety of beliefs. That is one of the main reasons why I wanted to talk with Becky today.

Also, as she pointed out, while the AHA is explicitly non-theist, humanism more broadly can be embraced by anyone who believes that humans have a responsibility to leave the earth a better place, rather than expecting a supernatural power to rescue us from the mess we've made.

What about those of you who are non-believers? Well, I hope today's conversation will encourage you to learn more about either the [AHA](#) or similar organizations in your own country.

If you listen to my [Brain Science Podcast](#), you know that humans are wired to be social beings, and I think the AHA and similar organizations represent a valuable way to connect with others. If you happen to be in a situation where you are being isolated, or even persecuted for your non-belief, the AHA may be able to help you.

Now for a few brief closing announcements. As I mentioned at the beginning of today's episode, I am hoping to put [Books and Ideas](#) back on a regular schedule; which means putting out a show at least every other month.

I'm going to try for monthly, but I'm not sure if that's a realistic goal, because keeping up with the *Brain Science Podcast* has made it harder for me to do as much reading in other areas as I would like.

I'm hoping that our next episode will be with [Jody Cole](#) from [Wild Rainbow African Safaris](#). Her story of how a girl from Birmingham, Alabama, ended up leading safaris in Africa is quite fascinating. But we've been having a little bit of trouble getting together to record her interview.

I know that most of you also listen to my *Brain Science Podcast*. But if you haven't, I hope you will check it out at brainsciencepodcast.com.

With regards to *Books and Ideas*, please remember to like our [fan page on Facebook](#), or leave a review in [iTunes](#). We also have a [Google+ page](#), and of course, *Books and Ideas* has its own [mobile app](#) for IOS, Android, and Windows phone devices. You can find links to all these things at booksandideas.com, where you can also sign up for the [Newsletter](#), so that you can get show notes automatically.

I would love to hear your feedback. You can write to me at docartemis@gmail.com. I will also be starting a thread for this episode within the [Brain Science Podcast Group](#) on Goodreads. So, that's another good place to share your thoughts.

Thanks again for listening. I look forward to talking with you again very soon.

[music]

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[music]

The music for this episode is "The Open Door," by Beatnik Turtle. Please visit their website at beatnikturtle.com.

[music]

Transcribed by [Lori Wolfson](#)

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