

A Walk Down the Thames Path and Memory Lane

by Herb Silverman

My wife **Sharon Fratepietro** and I spent several weeks in September traveling in England. Our primary purpose for going was to walk the Thames River Path, from its puddle of a source near Kemble to the flowing river it becomes in Windsor.

We followed the river over 150 miles, in 13 days. We arranged with travel company Footpath Holidays to make our overnight accommodations and transport our luggage from inn to inn along the way. The footpath took us through woods and fields and occasional charming villages. We encountered many kinds of birds (ducks, geese, and swans on the water) and domestic animals like cows, horses, goats, and sheep, including black sheep. That reminded me of an epithet we once used, which would be considered racist today: "He is the black sheep of the family," which I often was.

I feel kind of proud at age 79 to have walked the 150-mile Thames path, especially after having had a stroke a couple of years ago. But I am even more proud of Sharon doing it at age 83.

Speaking of our age difference, Sharon had a wonderful article published last year in the NY Times section called "Tiny Love Stories." Here is what she wrote:

Our Ages Added Up Perfectly

by Sharon Fratepietro

In 1990, I joined Herb's campaign for South Carolina governor. Herb wanted to overturn the provision in the state constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. We met in person, then fell in love via phone and letter during the summer. I worried about telling him my age. When he asked, I said, 'Fifty-two. And you?' 'Forty-eight.' We lost the election but helped to overturn the law. After we wed, I asked, 'What did you think when I told you my age?' He said, 'I thought 52 and 48 make 100.' Did I mention he was a mathematics professor?

We lived together for ten years before getting married at 12:01 AM on January 1, 2000. On the right is our wedding photo.

While in England, Sharon and I spent an extra day in Oxford during our Thames walk. We saw interesting sites, but mainly I wanted to revisit the Oxford Union at Oxford University, the most famous debating society in the world. I took part in a debate there in 2005. The topic of the debate was whether or not American religion undermines American values.

My opponents were **Rich Lowry**, who was the editor of *National Review*, **Eric Metaxes**, and **Joe Loconte**. On my side, **Michael Lind** cancelled at the last minute, leaving **Welton Gaddy**, who was president of the national Interfaith Alliance, and me. And each side included an Oxford student.

The age-old format at the Oxford Union is highly formal and ritualized, with debaters wearing tuxedos. I rented one for the occasion and have never worn a tuxedo before or since that debate, except for my tuxedo T-shirt (see the wedding photo).

I followed Lowry in the debate. My opening line made even Lowry laugh: "You just heard Richard Lowry complain about what it's like to be a conservative in New York City. Now I'll tell you what it's like to be an atheist in South Carolina." I then described some of my experiences, including my run for governor to help overturn the provision in the South Carolina Constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office.

I further illustrated how American values were being undermined by American religion, describing my experience at my local city council meeting in Charleston. Meetings start with a religious invocation by one of the members, usually a Christian. At my request, one council member invited me to give a secular invocation. But as I got up to speak, half the council members walked out because they knew I was an atheist. They didn't return until it was time for the *Pledge of Allegiance*, and they turned toward me as they recited the words "under God."

I then presented in my Oxford debate the "dreaded" invocation, which promoted American values, that several council members refused to hear:

Thank you for this opportunity to "invoke" a minority point of view. Each of us is a minority in some way. It might be race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or however else we may be regarded as different. Each of us is also part of some majority. It is when we wear our majority hats that we need to be most mindful of how we treat others. We must pledge our best efforts to help one another, and to defend the rights of all our citizens and residents.

What divides us is not so much our religious differences in this diverse country, but the degree of commitment we have to equal freedom of conscience for all people. We are gathered today, both religious and secular members of our community, with the shared belief that we must treat our fellow human beings with respect and dignity.

In this invocation, I don't ask you to bow your heads, but to look up at what you can accomplish by applying your talents and experience to the issues that confront us. I don't ask you to close your eyes, but to keep your eyes open to the serious problems that city government can solve or improve. As you work together on behalf of all who live in this city, may you draw strength and sustenance from one another through reason and compassion.

I close my invocation in a bipartisan manner by quoting from two American presidents I greatly admire — one a Republican and the other a Democrat.

First, the Republican: 'When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad. That is my religion.' ~ Abraham Lincoln



Then, the Democrat: 'It's remarkable how much you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.'
~ **Harry S. Truman**

During the Oxford debate, an audience member asked, "Isn't the 'Creator' mentioned in the United States Constitution?" My response: "No, not in the Constitution. It is mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, which is not a governing document but a call for rebellion against the British Crown. The Declaration refers to a Creator endowing people with inalienable rights, which distinguishes Americans from an empire that asserted the divine right of kings."

I also said: "In the melting pot called America, we are one nation under the godless Constitution (or maybe under Canada), but we are not one nation under God. In fact, given how the religious right opposes the teaching of evolution, or any scientific or social view that conflicts with a literal interpretation of the Bible, we are really becoming one nation under-educated."

I closed my portion of the debate with this: "To understand the universe and solve human problems, America must be a country committed to the application of reason, science, and experience, but not religion — a country where our deeds are more important than our creeds."

When the debate ended, the audience of students, professors, and guests voted with their feet according to which door they chose to leave the hall. Our side won the debate.

You can watch my portion of the debate on my website at this link:

<https://www.herbsilverman.com/videos.html>

After walking the Thames Path, Sharon and I spent a week in London, where we visited interesting sites, went to several fine plays, and saw a terrific movie called *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life*. We also walked in Hyde Park to the

Speakers Corner, known as the oldest free speech platform in the world, where we saw people give arguments for their issues, and get audience reactions.

England is a fascinating and beautiful travel destination, and I will always remember our experiences there, appreciatively. But the 150-mile Thames walk will be the most memorable part of the trip for Sharon and me, till death do us part — hopefully not for a long time. □

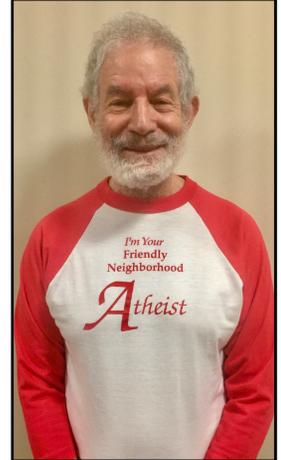
Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's ezine *The Freethought Society News*. He is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won an unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

When designating "The Freethought Society" as your chosen AmazonSmile benefits recipient it automatically increases the organization's funds.



Attention Southern California Humanists, Agnostics, Atheists,
Skeptics, and Freethinkers

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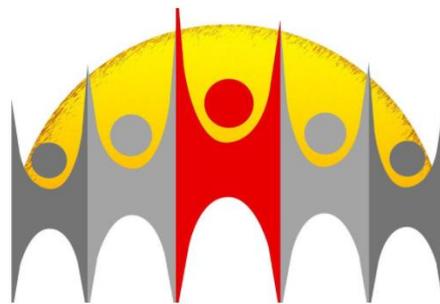
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