

Asking “Why” Caused Me to Become a Nontheist

by Dr. David Orenstein

I became an atheist at the age of eight. I think I chose not to believe because I never really thought the supernatural was special in any way. Don’t get me wrong, I had and still have an active imagination and I loved reading comic books about the exploits of Superman and his ilk. But religion, religious ritual and god belief never seemed to make sense to me from a practical point of view.

In the end, as I look back on my choice, I think that I’ve always been a person without religious faith. However, I do have faith in humanity and I remain optimistic even though there is plenty of evidence for great sadness in our world. I believe at its root, this sadness is caused by some form of religious philosophy, sectarian violence or god worship.

Let’s get back to my atheist journey. When I was a pre-teen, I became ill with rheumatic fever. The infection left me with both a damaged mitral and aortic valve. I thought if there was a god and if he was a kind and loving deity, why would he hurt me so? After all, as a child, I never did anything to hurt him or anyone. Why, if god controls all, do I have to suffer, or for that matter, why does *anyone* have to suffer? If god is so powerful, why not just fix everything? Then I realized in my own words, what **Woody Allen** said, “It’s not that god isn’t all powerful, it’s just that he is an underachiever.” As a fellow Jew from Brooklyn, I get the joke and the pathos of Allen’s comment.

So in 1979 at the age of seventeen, I underwent open-heart surgery to replace my aortic valve. The medical team gave me a porcine valve — a fancy way of saying the valve of a “pig.” So while I was no longer Kosher (not that I ever was), at least my short life was extended a little longer. That was, up until 1987, when the porcine valve calcified and a new non-organic valve was put in its place.

After each surgery I was told that my family and friends prayed for my survival. Each time I went under the knife I neither prayed nor pleaded with “god” to spare me. Frankly, I was more concerned with the job experience of the heart surgeon than with divine intervention and salvation.

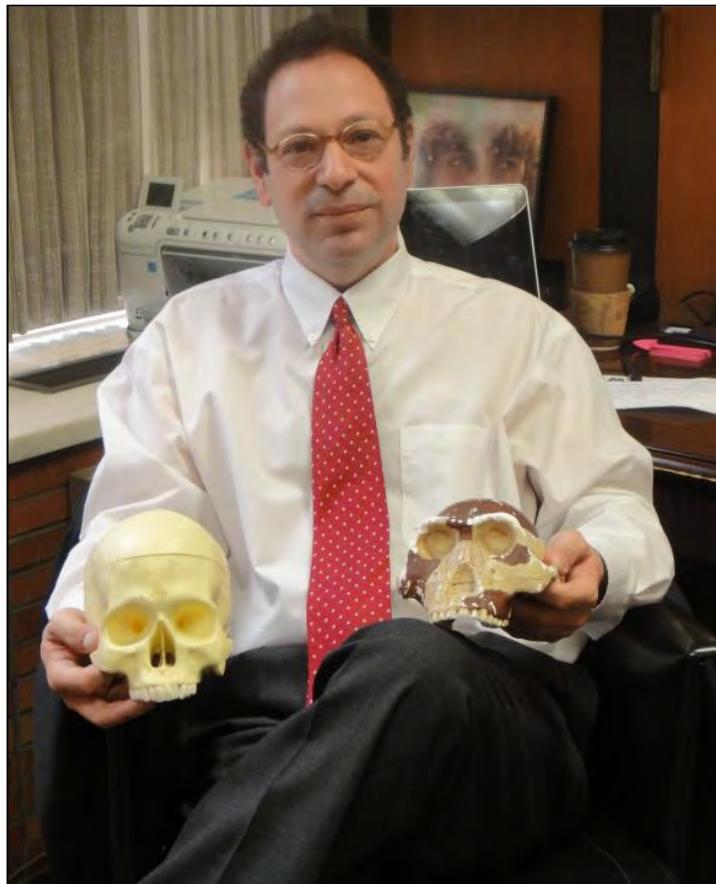
I guess you can say that my heart surgeries were a form of “battle.” In that context, I can assure you that there are atheists in foxholes. I am now and will always be a non-believer. I choose atheism because I have never seen evidence to contradict my conclusion that there isn’t a god. So if god does not exist, it follows that there is no need for a religious or spiritual life. It also follows that one can act morally and with kindness toward others even without the threat or reliance on god or a theistic philosophy. I am not alone, as there are about 1.6 billion people on the planet who share this nontheistic view of life. As atheism and secularism grow, we see that active religious participation is shrinking in almost every nation.

The great **Carl Sagan** is quoted as saying that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” Without evidence, humans backslide into a Paleolithic set of beliefs which existed long before science could show us that the natural world and the mechanics of the universe are knowable. The physical world is testable and it can be understood through human invention and inquiry. Although there is still so much more to know, science allows us to both explore and

expand our knowledge of the natural world and to me, that it is both beautiful and amazing.

New discoveries in all scientific disciplines are being made daily. These new discoveries show us how the world and universe operate without the need for superstition or theistic intervention. At the same time, we have religion which tells us nothing about human nature, except in my opinion that we can be ignorant, sometimes violent and duped into believing the unbelievable through religious faith.

Frankly, what I knew as a little boy I know as an adult man — there is no need for god. We have science and the scientific method to fill in the gaps of our understanding and, more important, to explore what we don’t know. So long as we can test the mechanics of the universe, we can ensure that what we do know is valid while at the same time we continue to question and make discoveries to enliven our world. □



Dr. David Orenstein is pictured above relaxing with a few non-talking heads in his office at Warren County Community College located in New York where he serves as Dean of Academic Affairs and teaches anthropology.