



Lumens

Mensa Canada's Western
Region Newsletter

Islands Mensa, Mountain Mensa, Vancouver Mensa & Yukon Mensa

Dec / Jan 2009 Vol 11, Issue 6

Reg Rep Rap

by Dave Stubbs



Earlier in the fall, I distributed, either personally or by mail, 25-year Mensa membership certificates to 50 long-term members in the B.C./Yukon Region.

A couple of weeks after the mailing, I received a letter from Robert Coupe, a long-time active member of the Lower Mainland group, thanking me for his certificate and noting that he had actually been a member of Mensa for 45 years, having joined in Minneapolis in 1964. Realizing that he had been a member longer than anyone else I could think of, I did a quick check of the summary sheets that came with the certificates and discovered that he had both the 'lowest' membership number and the earliest 'join' date (1964).

As this list includes all current Mensans who had been (continuous) members for 25 years or more, it would therefore appear that not only has Robert been a member of Mensa for a very long time, he has been a member longer than anyone else in the entire region! Congratulations, Robert, and thank you for your exceptional long-term commitment and dedication to Mensa.

For those of you keeping track, as at the end of October, the national membership stood at 1,917, with this region making up 348 of the total.

Leo's Lot

by Leo Jung



Hey Everybody,

Beginning January, Holly Pyhtila of CBC Radio (Toronto & Vancouver) and I will alternate hosting the group. Holly will host on odd-numbered months.

Holly Pyhtila is one of our newest members of Mensa Vancouver. She's originally from Thunder Bay, Ontario where she worked for CBC radio for over 20 years. Holly moved west 2 years ago, and now works for CBC Radio Vancouver as well as doing some environmental health writing.

She's just finished a Master of Public Health and will be giving the talk at January's speakers group on some of her recent research. The topic will be "PINK WATER - Introduced Estrogen and the Feminization of North America's Municipal Water Supply".

Please join her in the New Year where she promises delicious goodies for attending! ☺

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Editor's Letter

by Lisa Le Blanc



Seasons Greetings. Start roasting those chestnuts and hanging the shiny decorations. Festivities are upon us. As I write this, I notice that snow has finally fallen on the mountains. Skiers start dusting off their gear. Beach bums admit defeat and succumb to a brief respite.

Welcome to the new members of the Mensa family!! Nearly a tie, undoubtedly, for the newest and cutest. Between our lumens' assistant editor, Ephraim's baby girl, and Brian Porter's baby girl, I'm sure cigars are flying off the shelves. Congrats to the happy pappys and mammas.

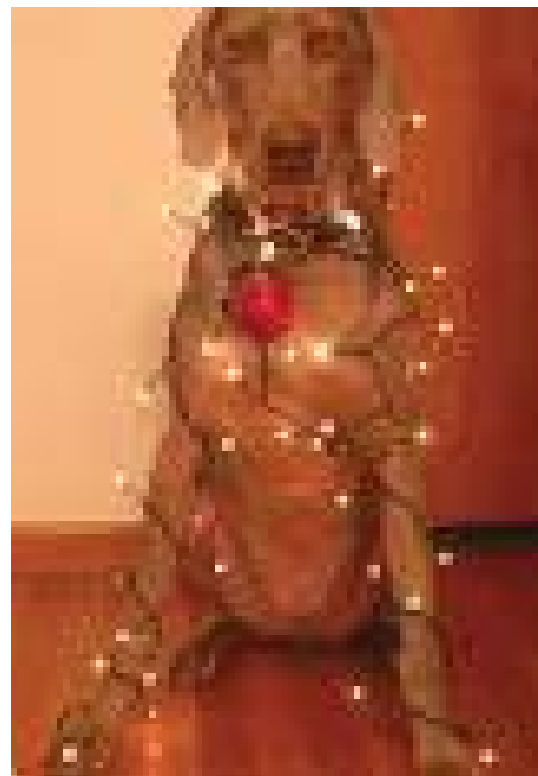
Also, welcome to Holly Pyhtila, who will be heading up Speaker's group on alternative months with Leo. Her talk in January on Pink Water has certainly piqued my interest. Hope to see you all there.

In the meantime, don't eat too many chocolate bon-bons. Save some room for that turkey.

Please forward submissions to editor@lumens.ca or write to Lumens with any brainstorm or ideas.

Season's Greetings to all. And to all, a good night. Till next time.

*Looking forward to hearing from you,
Lisa*



Here's another fine mess you've gotten me into...



The following is an actual question given on a chemistry mid-term. This student received the only "A".

Bonus Question: Is Hell exothermic (gives off heat) or endothermic (absorbs heat)? Most students wrote proofs of their beliefs using Boyle's Law (gas cools when it expands and heats when it is compressed) or some variant. One student, however, wrote the following:

First, we need to know how the mass of Hell is changing in time. So we need to know the rate at which souls are moving into Hell and the rate at which they are leaving. I think that we can safely assume that once a soul gets to Hell, it will not leave. Therefore, no souls

are leaving.

As for how many souls are entering Hell, let's look at the different religions that exist in the world today. Most of these religions state that if you are not a member of their religion, you will go to Hell. Since there is more than one of these religions and since people do not belong to more than one religion, we can project that all souls go to Hell. With birth and death rates as they are, we can expect the number of souls in Hell to increase exponentially.

Now, we look at the rate of change of the volume in Hell because Boyle's Law states that in order for the temperature and pressure in Hell to stay the same, the volume of Hell has to expand proportionately as souls are added.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I briefly internally debated whether I should reply to Don Graham's Synthesis article in the Oct/Nov issue, seeing it is probably rather pointless. Nevertheless, in the interest of a friendly exchange of thoughts, here is an economical response.

Don seems to believe that I sucked from my thumb the notion that he is an atheist because it feels better. I realized at the time I made the comment that I might be misapprehending his meaning, which is why I wrote "if I understand it correctly, his argument is...", but for him to say that "nowhere" did he "say, suggest, or imply" that his atheism was motivated by the emotional benefits of it overlooks his statement that informed my comment: "When I threw off my belief in God, I was astonished at the relief I experienced from the crushing burden I had been carrying around all my life..."

I agree that his statement doesn't say that he accepted atheism for the resultant feelings, but I think one can be forgiven for reading into his text that a feeling of free-

dom may have motivated him to cling to his atheism once obtained.

I agree with Don that order arises spontaneously, but in a system that is far from equilibrium AND is not closed. We see this throughout the world: weather systems, geysers, crystals, growing flora and fauna. It seems to me that these organized results happen because there is some sort of matrix or template that induces these outcomes from dissipating or dispersing energy. This provides us with the question "who built the template?"

Is it so foolish to want a creator for the creation, a lawgiver for the laws we observe in physics and other areas of study, a lifegiver for life, and a designer for design? Don resorts to Occam's Razor, and assuming a designer authored a design seems to me to require much less assumption than any other explanation.

I freely admit that the evidence for God may be insufficient to justify a belief without faith, but that it is also sufficient to justify that faith.

Gordon Feil

New Nursery Rhymes

This little piggy
played the market.
This little piggy went to jail.
This little piggy
made Club Fed.
This little piggy got bail.
This little piggy
kept his shipping
company offshore
To avoid taxes,
Got fired as Finance Minister,
Wound up as
Prime Minister of Canada.

Higgeldy piggeldy, my M.P.
He speaks in Ottawa for me.
Members come
from miles away
To hear what my M.P. will
say.
The thing that makes
my molars clench:
The bugger's on
the rearmost bench.

That's a good idea, Ollie, tell me that again...

This gives two possibilities:

1. If Hell is expanding at a slower rate than the rate at which souls enter Hell, then the temperature and pressure in Hell will increase until all Hell breaks loose.
2. If Hell is expanding at a rate faster than the rate at which souls enter Hell, then the temperature and pressure will drop until Hell freezes over.

So which is it?

If we accept the postulate given to me by Teresa, (Cheerleader Captain and Class Valedictorian) during my Freshman year that, "it will be a cold day in Hell before I sleep with you", and take into account the fact that I slept with her last night and again this morning, then number 2 must be true, and thus I am sure that Hell is exothermic and has already frozen over.

The corollary of this theory is that since Hell has frozen over, it follows that it is not accepting any more souls and is therefore, extinct, leaving only Heaven, and thereby proving the existence of a divine being which explains why Teresa kept shouting "Oh my God!!!"



Everything Google

by Geraldine Sombke



Google is one of those sites that you shouldn't start wandering through near a deadline. It just keeps growing more useful all the time, from maps and driving directions tied into transit schedules, image searches and video, mail and news from 4,500 news sources around the globe. Even when the information is no longer on the web, Google probably has a copy in their cache (click on the Cached link in your search results.)

What time is it Anywhere?

Another cool trick you can do with Google is find the local time for any major city anywhere around the world. To do this, go to Google's Web site (www.google.com) and in the search box, type "time in city name." For example, if you wanted to get the time for Madrid, Spain, you would type in "Time in Madrid." Even better is that it will give you the time for any other cities around the world by that name as well. It surprised me that there was a London in Arkansas as well as Ontario and the UK.

Exchange rates and more

Along with the local time, Google will give you the exchange rates for any two currencies. In the search box type "500 USD in CAD" without the quotation marks and you'll be amazed and delighted. Or not, depending on the source of your income. Don't use the \$ sign - for some reason it doesn't work.

Instant stock quotes (type the ticker symbol), translations, scholarly inquiries (scholar.google.com searches across disciplines and sources for theses, abstracts, books and articles), are all available.

Use a ~ (top left corner of your keyboard) to have Google look for synonyms of your search word. For example, ~cats will bring you cats, kittens, caterpillar (ok, it's not perfect) and even the site for "I can has cheezburger.com, which is always good for a smile.

Phone numbers, math problems and books in print

Type a phone number into Google. If it's in the phone book, Google will generally come up with the details. Type your postal code into Google Maps and see your neighbourhood. Click on Satellite view and zoom right down to see your own backyard. And of course try googling yourself to see how often your name has appeared on the web.

Type a math problem into Google, either in numbers or words and Google will solve it for you.

Search for a topic at print.google.com and see information from actual books that have been scanned into Google's database.

Peer inside Google with the *More* link on each page, and type in Google Labs in your search box to see what those clever engineers are planning next.

Mountain Mensa

Members of Mountain Mensa met in Nelson on October 4th, 2008. This time we had the pleasure of Larry Jones and his wife Rose joining us. They had driven all the way from Edgewood, which took them about 3-1/2 hours. Larry and Rose are retired teachers and now have a B & B in Edgewood. We were also joined by a Mensa group from Washington state.

This time we had decided to take in the Touchstones Museum in Nelson before going for lunch. This way we learned a bit more about the interesting history of Nelson, including a background on the native population pre white settlement and Nelson's mining history. After all this culture we went for lunch where more discussion followed.

Birthe Wilson Ahtner
LocSec Mountain Mensa

Poison Plastic

by Holly Pyhtila, MPH

When future archaeologists dig up our civilization, they may name this the “plastilithic era.” The wood will quickly rot. Decades later, the steel will rust away. But a thousand years from now, plastic will be our most enduring contribution.

The world’s population consumes almost 100 million tons of plastic every year. It’s versatile, cheap, portable and virtually unbreakable. But cracks are forming in plastic’s solid reputation.

The first brittle signs came after the harmful health effects of phthalates were confirmed in the late 1990s. Concern about genital defects, liver damage and reproductive abnormalities surfaced after scientists found that the chemical leached from a flexible plastic known as polyvinyl chloride.

This new information was enough to ban most phthalates from children’s toys and products in places such as the European Union, China, Mexico, Canada and the state of California. The rest of the United States may soon see a similar ban, depending on the success of an amendment to the Consumer Product Safety Commission bill introduced early in 2008. But the problems with plastic do not end there.

The most recent health concern involves Bisphenol A or BPA, an estrogen mimicker that leaches from hard, clear plastics made of polycarbonate resin. Drink containers, the lining of cans and baby bottles often contain the chemical, but BPA is also found in adhesives, pipes, flooring, electronics, paints, helmets and even dental sealants.

Dr. Fred Vom Saal, a biologist at the University of Missouri, is an outspoken opponent of BPA. Based on more than three decades of research, Vom Saal warns that “putting female sex hormones into a male’s body is a really bad idea.



You’ll see lower sperm levels, male breast development, and changes in fat distribution. In females you’ll observe damaged egg cells, repeated miscarriage and genetic abnormalities in the embryos.” According to Vom Saal, washing the plastic does not help: the older the product or the more it is scrubbed, the worse the leaching becomes.

Vom Saal found that other side effects of BPA exposure include obesity, diabetes, early onset puberty, prostate and breast cancer, hyperactivity, hormonal disruption, neurological damage, and possibly ADHD and autism.

Despite mounting evidence of harmful health effects resulting from BPA exposure, polycarbonate resin is still available in developed countries, including the U.S. and Canada. Federal governing bodies approved BPA decades ago, while published studies on the chemical only began to surface around the year 2000.

Health Canada, the regulatory body for food and consumer products, recently declared BPA a dangerous substance—a label that could pave the way for a complete ban on baby bottles made using the substance. The decision came after a U.S. study determined that the chemical may be far more dangerous for infants, since they lack the capacity to detoxify it.

Some Canadian sporting goods chains did not want to wait for an official request to pull the plastic. In December 2007, Mountain Equipment Co-op and Lululemon paved the way by pulling Nalgene and other polycarbonate resin water bottles off their shelves. Walmart and most other large chains quickly did the same.

In 2007, Los Angeles attorney Robert Weiss filed a landmark billion-dollar class action lawsuit against five leading baby bottle manufacturers. The case was filed on behalf of California babies who may have been injured by drinking out of plastic bottles that contain BPA. The case is proceeding to a status hearing in Los Angeles Superior Court, where Weiss will seek financial compensation and future mandatory labeling of bottles that contain the chemical.

If you’d like to avoid BPA, you might consider switching to glass. If mobility is an issue, stainless steel water bottles provide a good alternative (be sure it’s not lined with plastic). Try to steer clear of canned products, particularly for your baby.

Never heat food or drinks in plastic, as heating increases the degree of leaching by a factor of fifty.

To identify plastics that contain BPA, be aware of the following: polycarbonate resin is often labeled with recycling number seven, the word “other,” or the letters “PC.”

In general, BPA is found in most hard clear plastic, whether colored or not. Opaque plastic, on the other hand, is usually BPA-free.

Internet sites with information on BPA are numerous, but plastics industry websites abound to assure people that there are no health risks associated with using any type of plastic. Until legal and legislative debates are resolved, consumers are left on their own to decide.

Religious Intelligence

by Don Graham

In view of Nicky Kew's letter, this seems a good time to present the following. I am in almost total agreement with nearly everything Nicky says, with one exception: she seems to see religion, God, and spirituality as inextricably bound together, whereas I see them as independent concepts artificially conflated.

When I was about 12, one of my friends said he had read somewhere that the average American had the religious intelligence of a twelve-year-old. I didn't know what that meant (and I don't think he did either – after all, both of us were 12), but I filed it away in my mind under things to think about later. I certainly didn't understand the religion I was supposed to be practising, but expected that as I got older, things would fall into place.

Well, they did, but *very* differently from the way I expected. The things that made no sense to me then make no sense today – particularly the concept of "God." Some people may have gained the impression that I am anti-religion, but nothing could be further from the truth. What I object to is *stupid* religion – by which I mean most institutional religions. If you trust a religion more than your own judgment to tell you how to run your life, you need to wake up. The only legitimate purpose of an institutional religion is to provide spiritual guidance *for those who feel the need for it*. It has no business intruding on the lives of those who don't, or controlling the petty details of *anybody's* life – food, clothing, hairstyles, sexual behaviour, etc. By spiritual guidance, I mean such things as counselling in times of personal difficulty (which can also be done by non-religious means). When people describe *themselves* as "spiritual," I have no idea what they mean. Meaningful religion has to be rooted in some kind of reality, and is an intensely personal matter that cannot be captured in an encoded set of beliefs.

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that I am in fact deeply religious, but not in any way that would be recognized by most of those who practise some kind of formal religion. I'm an *atheist*, for God's sake – and if you think that is blasphemy, you are being too literal. Blasphemy isn't anything as trivial as uttering a name in a context not endorsed by a priesthood. Blasphemy is denying your own inner reality (what some call the God within) – the ultimate form of hypocrisy.

The stupidest (and most blasphemous) religion of all is fundamentalism: believing what your leaders tell you to believe, even if it means denying your inner reality, powers of reason, and the evidence of your senses. Its followers are dupes, and its leaders downright evil. Fundamentalism isn't confined to religion – there are fundamentalist Marxists, feminists, objectivists, and even atheists. The religious variety doesn't understand that interpreting their scriptures literally is an insult to the God they believe in, because it implies that He is too stupid to use myth, allegory, symbol, or metaphor. Jesus at least had the sense to label his stories parables so that the more dim-witted among his listeners wouldn't take him literally.

Just because a richly symbolic passage in a religious scripture isn't explicitly identified as such doesn't mean that it has to be taken at face value. In fact, literal interpretation of such passages trivializes and makes nonsense out of them. They are *myth*, meaning not falsehood, but truth that cuts deeper when expressed as a story. The author is trying not to insult your intelligence by labouring what should be obvious.

A symbol represents a deeper truth behind something that cannot be fully expressed literally. What is the Garden of Eden? To think of it as a geographic location is naïve in the extreme. It is clearly a Jungian symbol of some kind. If it exists at all, it is at the core of your own being. Its most

obvious symbolic meaning is the innocence of childhood. And eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and of evil then leaving the Garden is so clearly a symbol for growing up and consciously taking full responsibility for your life that failing to see it requires a truly remarkable degree of selective blindness.

The central religious experience is an *epiphany*, meaning a profoundly transforming, and usually sudden, internal revolution in one's way of experiencing life. It may or may not be experienced as religious. It has nothing to do with the outside world, but its subjective reality cannot be denied. Abraham Maslow called it a "peak experience." It is terrifying while it's underway, since it provides a window into the deepest part of your unconscious mind, thereby bringing it into full consciousness, strips away all pretence, and forces you to see yourself as you *really* are, not as you would like to think you are. But when it's over, you will be changed forever. It is as if up to that point you had been asleep, and now for the first time ever you are fully awake. My realization of the real significance of the Garden of Eden story resulted from a major epiphany I had decades ago. The depth and intensity of the experience itself exceed my ability to describe.

Institutional religions are designed to *prevent* people from having epiphanies. Any practitioners who had them would see through what the institution was trying to do to them, and would never go back. After all, religions are examples of *complex adaptive systems*: structures that have evolved to a state of complexity such that they develop purposes, their primary purpose being self-preservation or the formation and preservation of structures similar to themselves. Their purpose for *you* is to keep you there until you are *ready* to leave and take full responsibility for your life – which can be done only by forcibly breaking their hold over you, cannot be done until you are ready, and cannot fail to be done once you are.

More Letters to the Editor (cont)

Dear Editor,

I'd like to respond to the two letters in the Oct/Nov issue which were replies to my letter from a previous issue. With respect to the issues raised by Don Graham and Nicky Kew, there are some common themes I'd like to address. It seems no matter how hard I try to pry God away from the old man upstairs with the long, flowing beard, it comes back to that, because that seems to be the God everyone is comfortable arguing against. Let me join you in that – the God you don't believe in is the one I don't believe in either.

The angry God, the vengeful God, the fire-and-brimstone-be-have-yourself-or-you're-going-to-Hell God...is absolutely not what I'm trying to talk about. I think, in fact, the big problem here is the word God itself. It's so pre-loaded with connotations and "understanding" that it's impossible to clear that part out of one's head and thinking about this totally differently.

If others want to argue against the existence of that fear-the-bible God, great, go ahead. I'll join you. But that's not what this argument is about at all. Recall that this entire discussion began with a summary of a ThinkTank discussion that concluded that God exists. Then everyone decided to assume exactly what "God" we were talking about, and that's where this discussion came from.

I completely understand and agree with Don Graham's conclusion, based on his experience as a child. In fact, I seem to agree with pretty much everything he has to say until we get to the end. Invoking Occam's Razor to satisfy the non-existence of a Greater Organizational Design just doesn't do it for me. I know it's possible for two people to look at the identical thing and

come to completely opposite conclusions, and perhaps that's where we're at. I don't see any simple explanation for a lot of things, EXCEPT to consider that there's more to it than we understand. You're absolutely right, I have no proof, but that's where this follow-up discussion began; me asking what that proof would need to look like so that maybe you'd consider the alternative.

Nicky Kew seems to get a little defensive on this topic, so let me start by clearly stating that it's not my intention to try to convince anyone of anything. My original letter was an open call to anyone who wanted to think about the issue, to throw in some thoughts about trying to prove the existence of God – but not the God anyone is usually thinking about. Nicky's refusal to even consider the possibility of such a thing, with the circular reasoning that "it can't be proven because it doesn't exist" coupled with "it doesn't exist because it can't be proven" doesn't really solve much except to indicate a pretty closed mind.

"Irrefutable proof of the existence of any deity will probably be warmly welcomed by the believers themselves, but atheists will continue to remain unimpressed."



The willingness to discount any and all evidence, no matter how compelling, is certainly your right... but I just hope I'm never accused of a crime and have you sitting in the jury box, your mind all made up.

Nicky accuses me of being an Agnostic, not a believer. Actually, I'm neither. I'm certain of the existence of God (the God that I've tried to define, not the one you and Don and others reject), I'm just interested in trying to find proof that'll satisfy others, not me. I think that makes me a "knower", not a "believer". I don't need any further proof.

As has been mentioned, once it was clearly understood what I was talking about, the majority of a roomful of Mensans agreed. The only thing that might interest others is that what's proof to me is "nothing" to them. If your mind is made up and nothing will change it, that's fine, this discussion isn't for you. But don't accuse me of trying to convince anyone of anything; it's me asking YOU for your opinion.

There is certainly no answer that will satisfy "everyone", but there quite possibly could be one that might satisfy those with an open-enough mind to consider it.

Horatio Kemeny

Mensa Canada Western Regional Officers

National Board

Second VP	Brigit O'Connell	250-337-8324 vp2nd@mensacanada.org
Regional Rep	Dave Stubbs	604-576-9294 dastubbs@telus.net
National Webmaster	Brigit O'Connell	webmaster@mensacanada.org
Queen of Aesthetic Detail	Brigit O'Connell	qad@mensacanada.org

Vancouver Mensa

LocSec	Sheila Gair, 14372 Ridge Cres, Surrey BC V3X 1B6	604-594-5023 sscribe@telus.net
Social Secretary and Event Publicist	Don Graham	604-526-2460 albannach@telus.net
Information Officer	Brian Hollington	604-467-0020 pikfly@shaw.ca
Treasurer	Martin Ramshaw	604-739-2068

Islands Mensa

LocSec	Lana Kenderdine	250-598-8911 lanakenderdine@telus.net
Dep LocSec	John Webber	250-920-4159 pacificsafety@shaw.ca
Treasurer	C. Garrison White	250-598-4725 C.Garrison.White@hotmail.com

Mountain Mensa

LocSec	Birthe Wilson-Achtner	250-825-9471 birthe@netidea.com
---------------	-----------------------	------------------------------------

Proctors

KELOWNA	Alison Flack	250-769-1387
VANCOUVER	Leo Jung	leojung@lynx.net
VICTORIA	Delma Murray	250-388-9784
CAMPBELL RIVER	Brien Dolan	250-923-3993
PRINCE GEORGE	Kris Benson	250-564-5280

www.canada.mensa.org



Lumens

www.lumens.ca

Ephraim Risho, Webmaster, 604-803-2001
recklesspoet@gmail.com

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Lisa Le Blanc, Editor
Vancouver, BC, Canada
604-733-1586
editor@lumens.ca

Change of Address

Mensa Canada
P.O. BOX 1570
Kingston, ON K7L 5C8
PHONE: 613-547-0824
FAX: 613-531-0626
mensa@eventsmgt.com