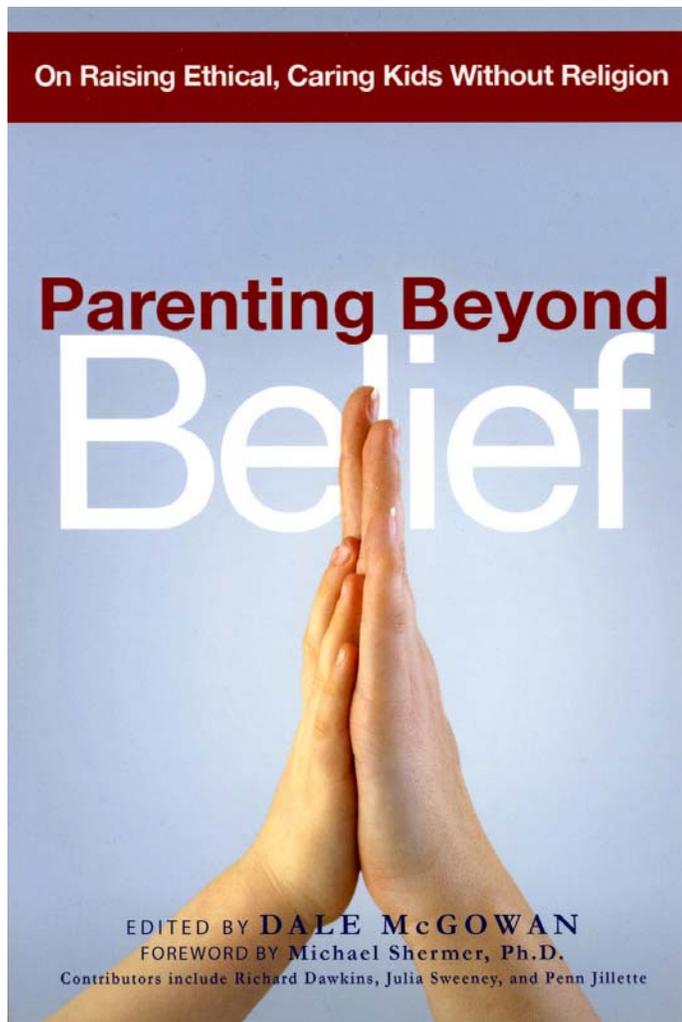


Media Kit



Informational flyer/reviews

FAQ

Book excerpts

Contributing authors

About the Editor

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Parenting Beyond Belief

On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion

...is a book for loving and thoughtful parents who wish to raise their children without religion. There are scores of books for religious parents. Now there's one for the rest of us.

Includes essays by Richard Dawkins, Julia Sweeney, Penn Jillette, Mark Twain, Dr. Jean Mercer, Dr. Donald B. Ardell, Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, and over twenty-five other doctors, educators, psychologists, and secular parents.

Praise for *Parenting Beyond Belief*

“Parents on both sides of the culture war will find [Parenting Beyond Belief] a compelling read.” – *Newsweek*

“Engaging and down-to-earth...highly recommended.” – *Library Journal*

“A wonderful array of essays.” – Mother Talk Network

“Almost impossible to put down!” – A Gaggle of Book Reviews

“An invaluable sourcebook.” – Robert M. Price, Ph.D.

#1 Parenting Reference on Amazon.com for seventeen weeks

#1 in Parenting/Morals & Responsibility on Amazon.com

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is this the first such book?

There have been some excellent shorter books and booklets on parenting without religion, with more limited scope and by smaller presses. *Parenting Beyond Belief* is the first comprehensive parenting book by a major publisher on raising children without religion. We hope it isn't the last!

How big is the audience for this kind of book?

Enormous—and growing. In 1990, 8% of respondents to a USA Today poll identified themselves as non-religious. By 2002 that sector had grown to 14.1%. A minimum of seven million non-religious parents are raising children in the U.S. today—and doing so with limited resources. It is estimated that over 10 million "nominally religious" parents attend church for social and structural benefits and would welcome a secular parenting book. In Europe, of course, the percentages are far higher, ranging from 25% to over 80%.

Why do secular parents need a resource specifically for them?

Religion has much to offer parents: an established community, a pre-defined set of values, rites of passage, a means of engendering wonder, comforting answers to the big questions, and consoling explanations to ease experiences of hardship and loss. *Parenting Beyond Belief* demonstrates the many ways in which these undeniable benefits can be had without the harmful effects of religion. It is also intended to show secular parents, who often feel isolated in their disbelief, that they are far from alone.

You mention "the harmful effects of religion." What harmful effects?

Honest questioning is too often disallowed in religion, the word "values" turned on its head, an "us-vs.-them" mentality reinforced. Many feel that fear—of God, sin, doubt, and difference—is more prevalent with religion than without, and that children often learn to obey authority rather than develop their own judgment.

Does the book intend to convert parents away from religious parenting?

Not at all. It is a resource to help parents who have already decided to raise their children without religion to do it well. Many religious readers have praised the tone of the book, which encourages co-existence, not conflict. Anything that helps parents to be better parents, regardless of their beliefs, is a good thing.

How can you not believe in God when...[fill in the blank]?

A fine question, but that's not our topic. Though the book includes one essay with the classic arguments for and against religious belief, that's not the main purpose—and if we spend time arguing about disbelief itself, we will never get to parenting! Readers wishing to engage those fascinating and worthy questions should look to the many outstanding books exploring basic questions of religious faith and doubt. This book is for those who have already investigated those questions and decided that religion is not for them.

Should religious believers feel threatened by this book?

Quite the opposite. A quick glance through the contents shows that believers and nonbelievers share most of the same values. Like people of religious faith, nonbelievers value love, honesty, kindness and generosity, are captivated by wonder and moved by the mysterious, seek consolation in times of loss, and treasure the companionship of others. We want to raise children who are ethical and caring. Nonetheless,

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polls indicate that nonbelievers are the most mistrusted and feared minority in the U.S. This fear is groundless—and this book can comfort people of faith by helping them realize that there is nothing to fear from nonbelievers. Our shared dreams for our children show that we are far more alike than unlike.

Isn't the book just encouraging indoctrination in a different direction?

Such indoctrination would violate the central value of freethought: the right of the individual to think for him or herself. Children should be allowed to engage ideas across the spectrum of belief (and disbelief) without declaring themselves. The concept of a “Christian child,” a “Muslim child,” or an “atheist child” *should* strike us as absurd as a “Marxist child” or a “Republican child.” Such decisions can, and should, wait until a person is old enough to genuinely decide for herself.

Is the book disrespectful toward religious people?

Some of the contributors are quite straightforward in their disagreement with certain ideas, but never disrespectful toward religious people themselves. The book takes the basic position that religious belief is an understandable human phenomenon—though at times an unfortunate one—and that the beliefs themselves can be questioned honestly without belittling the people who hold them.

Do the thirty contributors always agree?

Not by a long shot! The book practices what it preaches by offering diverse opinions. What other book would have two ministers and Penn Jillette? There's even a point-counterpoint in which two authors square off on how to handle the Santa Claus story. And this is precisely the model we want to present to our kids—not lockstep agreement, but a healthy, open, friendly exchange of ideas and an invitation to sort it out for yourself.

What topics are covered?

The book begins with personal essays by such parents as Julia Sweeney, Penn Jillette and Richard Dawkins, followed by Living with Religion, Holidays and Celebrations, Being and Doing Good, Meaning and Purpose, Dealing with Death, Questioning, the Wonder of Science, and Seeking Community.

How can children be taught moral behavior without religion?

The chapter titled "Being and Doing Good" is devoted to this very topic. Behaving morally makes sense, and most people behave well for sensible reasons—even if they think they are relying on commandments. Psychologist Dr. Jean Mercer contributed an essay describing the six stages of moral development. Children are more likely to move to the higher levels of development and to retain a more nuanced and reliable moral sense if they learn the reasonable principles of ethical behavior than if they rely on parental or scriptural authority.

Dealing with death must be a challenge.

It always is, isn't it? Even those who believe in an afterlife tend to cry at funerals and try hard to delay their own passing. There's no greater challenge for a human being than knowing life will end. But an increasing number of people have come to believe that real maturity requires us to come to terms peacefully with mortality rather than pretending we don't die after all. Some genuinely consoling insights from philosophy are included in the book.

What could possibly replace Heaven as a consolation in the face of death?

First of all, don't forget that along with hope of Heaven comes fear of Hell. The naturalistic view dispenses with both. Our remaining fear of death is based on our failure to really grasp nonexistence—something we

already "experienced" before birth, after all. We weren't afraid then. Why fear a return to that fearless condition? The Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons has written a marvelous, practical essay for the book on how to talk to children about death without recourse to supernatural illusions.

What's a minister doing in a book about raising kids without religion?

Two, in fact. Kendyl Gibbons is a Unitarian Universalist minister. Many people aren't aware that the majority of UUs are nontheists who still want the other benefits of belonging to a church fellowship. Kendyl's experience of taking secular families through grief and loss is powerfully evident in her writing. She is joined in the book by Rev. Dr. Roberta Nelson, who writes about the need for religious literacy.

Isn't it important for kids to feel part of something larger than themselves?

Sure it is. Fortunately as human beings we are already part of many things larger than ourselves. Our families, our communities, humanity, and the interconnected web of life on Earth are just a few examples of larger things that give us purpose and context. Setting religion aside does not suddenly make us islands unto ourselves. It can and should underline our interconnectedness and reliance on each other.

The cover photo has raised some eyebrows.

The beautiful cover image of two hands with palms together is intentionally complex—a sort of Rorschach test that reveals and challenges our preconceptions. Serfs in medieval Europe used this gesture to show humility before their feudal lord. Christians then adopted it as a posture of prayer in the ninth century. In South Asia, the same gesture is called the anjali mudra and signifies a respectful greeting between equals. Prayer is just one of many valid meanings for this universal symbol of peace and respect.

After a moment looking at the cover, our perception tends to shift. We realize they can't really be praying hands after all—we're seeing the hands of two different people, an adult and a child. But the influence of religion is so strong that many of us will still see only prayer. A more fitting idea might be this: when we move beyond belief, we turn not to a god but to each other, with mystery and meaning undiminished. The image also celebrates the parent-child bond—some even see it as a parent-child "high five"! This rich and multifaceted image, like the book itself, challenges us to see possibilities beyond the religious.

Do you expect opposition to the book?

A little of that can be expected, and honest debate is welcome. But many readers who were worried that it would be "anti-religious" have expressed pleasant surprise after reading it. "Remarkably even-handed" is a common response. Though some contributors are strongly critical of religion, others express a continuing affection for it. The first sentence of Julia Sweeney's essay, for example, is "I loved being Catholic." Others urge secular parents to be religiously literate, to empathize with believers, and to applaud the good works of religion—at the same time urging them to stand up against the hatred, ignorance and divisiveness that can also flow from religious belief.

So religion isn't all bad?

Of course not. Like most human creations, it's a mixture of good and bad. We should embrace the best elements while finding our way out of those that are undesirable. The most important freedom we can give our children is the freedom to think, to discern, to determine for themselves what's good and what's bad in anything. But when we place ideas beyond critique, the bad survives along with the good—and that's not good for anyone. Only if we agree to put all of our ideas on the table can we work together to separate those ideas that are unworthy and life-destroying from those that are noble and life-affirming.

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SELECTED EXCERPTS

from the Foreword by Michael Shermer, PhD

I wish I would have had a book like Parenting Beyond Belief when I was starting out on this endless (and endlessly fulfilling) journey. It is choc-a-block full of advice, tips, suggestions, recommendations, anecdotes, and moving (and often funny) stories from a remarkably diverse range of authors who make you laugh and cry at the same time. This is the first book that I know of on parenting without religion. It is almost a given in our society that kids should be raised with religion, because if they aren't they will grow up to be juvenile delinquents, right? Wrong. Wronger than wrong. The assumption is so bigoted and breathtakingly inane that it doesn't deserve a debunking, but it gets one nonetheless in this volume, from nonbelievers of all stripes, who show how and why raising children without religion is not only a loving and ethical approach to parenthood, it is an honorable one.

from the Preface by Dale McGowan

This is not a comprehensive parenting book. It'll be of little help in addressing diaper rash, aggression or tattling. It is intended as a resource of opinions, insights and experiences related to a single issue — raising children without religion — and the many issues that relate directly to it.

You may also note a relative lack of prescriptive instruction. Although our contributors include MDs, PhDs, and even two Reverend Doctors, there's little attempt to dictate authoritative answers. Our writers suggest, inform, challenge and encourage without ever claiming there's only one right way. And a good thing, too — secularists are a famously freethinking bunch. It's the attribute that ended us up secularists, after all—that desire to consider all points of view and make up our own minds.

This is also not a book of arguments against religious belief, nor one intended to convince readers to raise their children secularly. This book is intended to support and encourage those who, having already decided to raise their children without religion, are in search of that support and encouragement.

from "Navigating Around the Dinner Table" by Julia Sweeney

One day we were walking home from the park with one of her friends, and the friend said, "Did you see your grandfather's spirit fly up to heaven when he died?" And my daughter looked at me and said, "Did it?" And I said, "No, we don't believe in things like that." And my daughter parroted me, "Yeah, we don't believe in that." And for a second she looked confident repeating me, and then her face crinkled up and she frowned and directed her eyes downward.

Suddenly I was seized with compassion for my little girl and how she will be navigating herself in a world where she will be a little bit different. I didn't have this burden. I was told what everyone else was told. Grandpas died and went to heaven. You would see them later when you died. Vague memories arose of my own childhood images of heaven, of a long dining table with a gold tablecloth and a feast. It was easier for me, in that way, than it will be for her.

from "Passing Down the Joy of Not Collecting Stamps" by Penn Jillette

Tell your kids the truth as you see it and let the marketplace of ideas work as they grow up. I don't know who said, "Atheism is a religion like not collecting stamps is a hobby," maybe it was Francis Xavier, or more likely The Amazing James Randi, but, some guy or gal said it, and it's a more important idea than any Jesuit ever came up with. You have to work hard to get kids to believe nonsense. If you're not desperately selling lies, the work is a lot easier.

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My kids are really young, they're still babies, they can't even talk yet, but what the hell, we're still a little bit careful what we say. When someone sneezes we say, "That's funny," because it is. We don't have any friends who are into any kind of faith-based hokey, so our kids will just think that "damn it" follows "god" like "Hubbard" (or something) follows "mother." That's cool. That's easy.

from "Parenting in a Secular/Religious Marriage" by Pete Wernick, PhD

An atheist and a Catholic in a marriage? It's surely a head-shaker. The "soul connection" we'd had now felt to me more like a triangle. As a sociologist mindful of statistics, I knew well that marriages of religiously mismatched partners are less likely to succeed and generally "not recommended." I had a vague dread that we might have hard collisions of will, and a fear that deepening commitments would lead her toward patterns I might find intolerable. Indeed, in our marriage ceremony we acknowledged the threat of growing apart. Distressed, I started seeing a counselor and did a lot of complaining. The counselor settled on the mantra, "What are you going to do?" After weighing the agonizing alternatives, I finally knew I wanted to keep our family together, and make it work as well as possible. With that as the goal, there was a lot of hard work to do.

from "On Being Religiously Literate" by the Rev. Dr. Roberta Nelson

Unless our children are isolated and do not ask questions, they are bound to hear "stories" that are confusing, troubling, or raise additional issues. They will have questions: Who is Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed? What is the Bible; why do so many people think it's so important? Why did Jesus die? What is Passover, or Ramadan? Why doesn't Rachel celebrate Christmas, Halloween, birthdays? What is a savior? Where is heaven? Where will I go when I die? What's this about some people going to hell? Who is this God guy? Why do people say we have to believe in him?

These are some of the questions and issues that I have helped parents and young people deal with as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Included among these were many secular parents who came to the churches I served because they found it difficult going it alone. They wanted answers and ways of dealing with complex religious issues. They wanted an education for their children and soon realized they needed it for themselves as well.

Choosing not to affiliate or join a religious community does not shield a parent from these questions – you will still need to be able to answer some or all of them. If you do not provide the answers, someone else will – and you may be distressed by the answers they provide.

from "Secular Schooling" by Ed Buckner, PhD

Every citizen benefits from separation of church and state or, in the case of public schools, from the separation of religious education from common public education. Despite myths to the contrary, separation is not a matter of being careful not to offend either people without religion or people who follow a minority religion. Nor is separation of church and state an anti-religious principle. "Secular" means "not based on religion"—it doesn't mean "hostile to religion." As every public school teacher and every parent should know, the purpose of separation is to protect religious liberty. As government becomes involved in religion, interpretations of the true meaning of "God" and "faith" inevitably drift toward one narrowly-defined denominational vision. Many Christian denominations in the U.S., including Baptists and Catholics, have actively supported separation to prevent their own religious identities being pushed aside by a different concept of God. The Southern Baptist Conference understood the point so well that it included separation of church and state as one of its founding principles.

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from "Humanist Ceremonies" by Jane Wynne Willson

For families who hold no supernatural beliefs, a religious wedding or funeral service is quite inappropriate and can be an uncomfortable and even distressing experience. Those humanists who want to mark an important event with a ceremony, to give the occasion some formality, feel the need for a secular alternative free of religious association. The growth in the popularity of humanist and non-religious ceremonies in many countries at the present time is proof that there is a deep, though at times latent, need for such provision....

The beauty of our situation is that the way is wide open for any parents to create ceremonies that feel right for them and their children together as a family, if that is their wish. Humanists are not governed by convention or by church authorities.

from "Behaving Yourself: Moral Development in the Secular Family" by Dr. Jean Mercer

The early development of moral thinking and moral behavior choices is largely based on brief interactions. Children do childish wrong things, and parents provide ad hoc corrections. In early and middle childhood, parents are quite unlikely to instruct children on major moral issues, because the children are unlikely to do things that obviously involve major issues in a direct way. It is probably safe to say that no parent gives direct training on avoiding the most serious moral lapses—"Sally, when you go out to play, I don't want you to murder anybody. And Timmy, no raping—I don't care what the other boys do, it's not nice to rape people." Nevertheless, few adults do commit murder or rape, in part because they did receive direct instruction about related minor matters like hitting or pulling another child's pants down — instruction from which abstract moral principles may be derived as the child's reasoning ability matures. The whole process is a gradual one involving repeated experiences, rather than memorization of a list of "right things" and "wrong things," or the early mastery of universal principles.

from "Seven Secular Virtues" by Dale McGowan

Empathy is the ability to understand how someone else feels — and, by implication, to care. It is the ultimate sign of maturity. Infants are, for their own adaptive good, entirely self-centered. But as we grow, our circle of concern and understanding enlarges, including first family, then one's own community. But having developed empathy for those who are most like us, we too often stop cold, leaving the empathy boundary at the boundary of our own nation, race or creed — a recipe for disaster. Statements of concern for "the loss of American lives" in armed conflict, for example, carry an unspoken judgment that American lives are more precious than others, a serious failure of empathy.

Continually pushing out the empathy boundary is a life's work. We can help our kids begin that critical work as early as possible not by preaching it but by embodying it. Allow your children to see poverty up close. Travel to other countries if you can, staying as long as possible until our shared humanity becomes unmistakable. Engage other cultures and races not just to value difference but to recognize sameness. It's difficult to hate when you begin to see yourself in the other.

from "Dealing with Death in the Secular Family" by the Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons

The human impulse to deny the reality of death is deep and ancient. It affects us all both as individuals and as a culture. Nevertheless, death confronts us all, including our children. One of the challenges of parenting is to introduce this subject and help them respond to it in developmentally appropriate ways. There is a great deal of helpful literature about how children deal with death, and both secular and religious children have much the same needs for reassurance and support when they begin to confront mortality. The particular challenge for secular families is the absence of comforting answers supplied by

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doctrines and images from various faith traditions. Yet by telling the truth, providing emotional comfort, and validating the child's own experiences, secular parents can give their children the tools to understand and accept death as a natural part of life and to find meaning in their grief.

from "Family Road Trip: Discovering the Self Behind My Eyes" by Amy Hilden, PhD

I became a philosopher in the summer of '69 in the back seat of a Chevy. Before you jump to conclusions, let me add that I was ten years old, riding along on the latest of many cross-country family road trips. In the days before electronic entertainment devices, before air conditioning was common in cars, before seat belt laws, I remember staring out the window, watching the telephone poles and meadows go by. There really was nothing else for me to do. I had been ordered by my parents to turn away from the sister whose all-too-sweaty body was leeching on to me and whose nasty barbs had injured me deeply for the very last time! So I just looked out there. And as I did, I began what would become a lifelong passion—wondering.

from "Teaching Kids to Yawn at Counterfeit Wonder" by Dale McGowan

A lot of people believe that you can't experience wonder without religious faith. The life of a person without supernatural beliefs is thought to be cold, sterile and lifeless.

If that were the case, this book would have to sound the alarm. Childhood, after all, is our first and best chance to revel in wonder. If parenting without religion meant parenting without wonder, I might just say to heck with reality.

Funny, though, how often I've experienced something that seemed an awful lot like wonder. It couldn't have been actual wonder, I'm told, since real wonder is said to come only from contemplation of God and a knowledge that he created all that is.

Call me Ishmael, but that never did much for me. I always found the biblical version of wonder rather flat and hollow, even as a kid. It never moved me even as metaphor, rendered pale by its own vague hyperbole.

Now try these on for size:

- If you condense the history of the universe to a single year, humans would appear on December 31st at 10:30 pm. 99.98% of the history of the universe happened before humans even existed.
- We are star material that knows it exists.
- Through the wonder of DNA, you are literally half your mom and half your dad.
- The faster you go, the slower time moves.
- All life on Earth is directly related by descent. You are a cousin not just of apes, but of the sequoia and the amoeba, of mosses and butterflies and blue whales.

Now *that*, my friends, is wonder.

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JIM HERRICK has worked for thirty years in the humanist movement in the UK. He is former editor of the *New Humanist* and *International Humanist*. His writings include "Vision and Realism: a hundred years of *The Freethinker*," *Against the Faith: Some Deists, Sceptics and Atheists* and *Humanism: An Introduction*. He is a co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

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PENN JILLETTE is the Emmy Award-winning illusionist/entertainer/debunker of the duo Penn & Teller. Author of several books, star and producer of such films as *The Aristocrats* and *Penn & Teller Get Killed*, Jillette's current efforts are split between the Showtime series *Bullshit!* and a daily live show in Las Vegas. Penn is married to producer Emily Zolten Jillette, with whom he has two young children, Moxie (born in 2005) and Zolten (born in 2006).

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At age nine, **EMILY ROSA** produced a study on Therapeutic Touch that was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, creating a media sensation that put her in the Guinness Book of World Records as the youngest person to publish serious medical research. She just finished two years of university at CU-Boulder with an academic interest in forensic psychology.

Grammy Award-winning comedian **JULIA SWEENEY** is also an actor, playwright and monologist. Her monologue *Letting Go of God*, which chronicles her journey from faith to philosophical naturalism, was Critics' Choice for the Los Angeles Times and Pick of the Week for the LA Weekly. She is the author of *My Beautiful Loss Of Faith Story* and was the 2006 recipient of the Richard Dawkins Award for raising public awareness of the nontheistic life stance. She is the adoptive mother of a seven-year old girl named Mulan.

STU TANQUIST is a national speaker, seminar leader and published author with over 20 years of experience in the learning and development industry. He facilitates learning on variety of topics including critical thinking. Stu holds three degrees including an M.S. in Management. In his free time, he coordinates the South Metro Chapter of the Critical Thinking Club of Minnesota.

Bronx-born Coloradoan **PETE WERNICK, PhD** earned a doctorate in Sociology from Columbia University while developing a career in music on the side. His bestselling instruction book *Bluegrass Banjo* allowed "Dr. Banjo" to leave his sociology research job at Cornell to form Hot Rize, a classic bluegrass band that traveled worldwide. An atheist since age fifteen, Pete was president of the Family of Humanists from 1997 to 2006.

A lifelong agnostic, **JANE WYNNE WILLSON** has served as president of the London-based International Humanist and Ethical Union and Vice-President of the British Humanist Association. She is the author of *Parenting Without God*, *New Arrivals*, *Sharing the Future*, and *Funerals Without God*. A retired Special Needs teacher with four children and ten grandchildren, Jane has a deep interest in bringing up children happily with a strong basis for morality but no religion.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR



DALE MCGOWAN

DALE MCGOWAN is an author, editor, and critical thinking advocate in Atlanta. A former conductor and professor of music, Dale turned to writing several years ago with his satirical novel *Calling Bernadette's Bluff*, which reviewers called “an undoubted triumph of satire” and “a riot.” He recently completed *Nothing at Midlife*, a humorous narrative of a midlife crisis encountered on the trails of Britain.

In addition to authoring and editing several current book projects, Dale recently completed a stint as U.S. Communications Coordinator for Nonviolent Peaceforce, an NGO that trains unarmed civilian peacekeepers for deployment to conflict zones around the world. He is also a board member of the Critical Thinking Club, Inc. and has taught critical thinking skills in the college classroom, the corporate boardroom, and public venues.



L-R: Delaney, Dale, Connor, Becca, and Erin McGowan.

Dale holds degrees in physical anthropology and in music from UC Berkeley, UCLA, Cal State Northridge, and the University of Minnesota. He met Becca, now an elementary educator, in 1984 when they were both members of the University of California Band. They live near Atlanta with their three ethical, caring kids.

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