

## **Telling my Story – Jackie**

I am a Humanist and a member of Humanists UK. I'm also an atheist, non-religious, I don't believe in the supernatural, and my answer to the question, 'What religion are you?' is 'none'. Humanists and non-religious people often have to present ourselves in the negative - in terms of what we *don't* believe! So, I'd like to be more positive here and try to explain what I *do* believe.

As a Humanist I look for naturalistic explanations for the mysteries of life. I look to science to explain the origins of the universe, to work out how life came about and then became so complex, and even to explain our social and moral behaviours. I accept that we may *never* find all the answers. As a Humanist, I believe we need to support each other and help each other to thrive, and we need to use reason to work out the best way to live both with other humans and with the planet. As the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Humanist, Robert Ingersoll said, our goals should be to be happy and to help others to be happy. We should use evidence and reason to work out how best to do this, but we should accept that we will often fail or fall short, and this is to be expected. We also need to accept that at some point our lives will end, we will die, and hopefully we will live on in the memories people have of us and the influence we have had on others – at least for a little while.

In summary, I would say that a Humanist is someone who believes that we humans are on this earth because of natural processes, and we should use our amazing, evolved brains to find out about where we are and who we are, and to reason out the best way to live happy and fulfilled lives. This beautiful planet, with its unusually complex life, is precious in its own right, just because it has come to exist, but also because it's the only home we have.

I was brought up in a Christian family and regularly attended church. I was christened and then confirmed at the age of 14. I was a convinced and serious Christian but, at the age of 16, I suddenly realised that my prayers – or prayerful thoughts to be more accurate – were not being addressed by a god but were a way of helping me think through problems for myself. By the time I was 18, I could make no sense of a loving God who permitted and caused suffering that most humans wouldn't wish on anyone. After reading Sartre and other existentialist thinkers, I came to the view that we need to make our own considered choices in life for our own best reasons; that death is the end of life and of our being; and that life is precious, and we should make the most and the best of what life gives us, including the inevitable challenges. There is no such thing as fate – we make our own path out of the unique conditions and experiences we each encounter.

I've always been politically left of centre and, in my thirties, when I had small children, I was very involved in the peace movement and CND. In my forties, I became an RE teacher, because I find human thinking and cultural ideas fascinating. I firmly believe in dialogue between people of different religions and beliefs. In my fifties, I became an academic and focused my research on contemporary spirituality, wondering how people today are making meaning of their lives, especially in the absence of religious beliefs. Seven years ago, now 'retired' in my sixties, I became a Humanist celebrant and a non-religious, hospital chaplain. I work part time in my local hospital, and I also teach about modern, inclusive chaplaincy. As a chaplain, I listen with people as they negotiate some of the most difficult challenges in their lives, or tell their story as they come towards the end of their life, and this is a truly wonderful experience and a huge privilege.

I'm currently reading a collection of letters by a self-declared feminist and rationalist, Olga Jacoby, which she wrote between 1909 and 1913, and which has recently been published in an edited collection. Amongst other inspiring things, she says this:

"More and more to me this simplest of thoughts seems right: Live, live keenly, live fully; make ample use of every power that has been given us to use, to use for the good end. Blind yourself to nothing; look straight at sadness, loss, evil; but at the same time look with such intense delight at all that is good and noble that quite naturally the heart's longing will be to help the glory to triumph, and that to have been a strong fighter in that cause will appear the only end worth achieving." (Olga Jacoby, p. 67)

Olga Jacoby, Edited by Jocelyn Catty and Trevor Moore, 2019, *Words in Pain, Letters on Life and Death*, Bloxham, Skyscraper Publications.