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## In honour of Dan Dennett

by Richard Dawkins

### **Speech in honour of Dan Dennett, presenting him with the Richard Dawkins Award for 2007 at the Crystal City conference of the Atheist Alliance International**

Dan Dennett is a year younger than me, almost to the day. But I must admit that I have grown to think of him as a sort of intellectual elder brother. Since the deaths of Bill Hamilton and John Maynard Smith, I have been rather short of intellectual heroes to consult on difficult questions. Thank goodness we still have Dan Dennett. A year or so ago, it seemed that it might be a close run thing. I remember the shock followed by deep gloom that was cast over a large group of people in a New York theatre, when we were informed that Dan had collapsed and was undergoing emergency surgery which seemed - or so we were informed - unlikely to succeed. Heroic surgery to save an intellectual hero, not just a national treasure but a world treasure, at least to the world of the mind.

Many of you will have read the stirring testimonial that he wrote while he was in recovery. Actually called 'Thank Goodness'. It was widely published all over the internet, and was read out to those gathered in San Diego for the Beyond Belief conference. In it Dan mentioned his religious friends who had prayed for his recovery. He was touched by their efforts on his behalf, and he chose to interpret their words as meaning that they had been thinking of him. But he added:

I am not joking when I say that I have had to forgive my friends who said that they were PRAYING for me. I have resisted the temptation to respond "Thanks, I appreciate it, but did you also sacrifice a goat?" I feel about this the same way I would feel if one of them

said "I just paid a voodoo doctor to cast a spell for your health." What a gullible waste of money that could have been spent on more important projects! Don't expect me to be grateful, or even indifferent. I do appreciate the affection and generosity of spirit that motivated you, but wish you had found a more reasonable way of expressing it.

Dan considered the impulse he might have felt to say 'Thank God' for his recovery. He asked himself whether his near death experience had been some kind of epiphany. I find his response to this so stirring that I again want to read it out:

Yes, I did have an epiphany. I saw with greater clarity than ever before in my life that when I say "Thank goodness!" this is not merely a euphemism for "Thank God!" (We atheists don't believe that there is any God to thank.) I really do mean THANK GOODNESS! There is a lot of goodness in this world, and more goodness every day, and this fantastic human-made fabric of excellence is genuinely responsible for the fact that I am alive today. It is a worthy recipient of the gratitude I feel today, and I want to celebrate that fact here and now.

To whom, then, do I owe a debt of gratitude? To the cardiologist who has kept me alive and ticking for years, and who swiftly and confidently rejected the original diagnosis of nothing worse than pneumonia. To the surgeons, neurologists, anesthesiologists, and the perfusionist, who kept my systems going for many hours under daunting circumstances. To the dozen or so physician assistants, and to nurses and physical therapists and x-ray technicians and a small army of phlebotomists so deft that you hardly know they are drawing your blood, and the people who brought the meals, kept my room clean, did the mountains of laundry generated by such a messy case, wheel-chaired me to x-ray, and so forth. These people came from Uganda, Kenya, Liberia, Haiti, the Philippines, Croatia, Russia, China, Korea, India - and the United States, of course - and I have never seen more impressive mutual respect, as they helped each other out and checked each other's work. But for all their teamwork, this local gang could not have done their jobs without the huge background of contributions from others. I remember with gratitude my late friend and Tufts colleague, physicist Allan Cormack, who shared the Nobel Prize for his invention of the c-t scanner. Allan - you have posthumously saved yet another life, but who's counting? The world is better for the work you did. Thank goodness. Then there is the whole system of medicine, both the science and the technology, without which the best-intentioned efforts of individuals would be roughly useless. So I am grateful to the editorial boards and referees, past and present, of Science, Nature, Journal of the American Medical Association, Lancet, and all the other institutions of science and medicine that keep churning out improvements, detecting and correcting flaws.

I think you can see why Dan Dennett is my intellectual hero.

He is one of today's most distinguished philosophers, but among philosophers I would describe him as

a scientist's philosopher. Many philosophers call themselves philosophers of science. But rather few of them take the trouble to learn much science, to immerse themselves in the scientific literature, to talk to working scientists and understand what makes them tick. One of the things that strikes me about reading Dan's books is how much science I learn from them. New science, new experimental results, fascinating scientific research, often still unpublished but which Dan knows about because he keeps his ear to the scientific ground and travels to visit laboratories, where he is always an honoured guest.

He is, indeed, a scientist as much as he is a philosopher, and he is also a superb *explainer*. Where other philosophers are mainly interested in showing off how clever they are to their colleagues, Dan really really wants to be understood. He seems to make no distinction between a book written for lay people and a book written for professional philosophers, and this is something I also aspire to when writing for professional scientists. Clarity is clarity, and it doesn't matter who you are writing for. There should be no need to write separate 'popular' books which dumb down the books that are written for professionals.

Dan thinks long and hard, not only about the philosophy itself but about the best way to *explain* it. He is a great coiner of phrases, an inventive deviser of metaphors, a vivid painter of mental images. 'Intuition pump' is one of his phrases, and it well describes exactly what he does when he is explaining something difficult to his readers. His celebrated lecture, 'Where am I?' is a *tour de force* of the explainer's art, combining comedy and high drama with the usual weapons of the lecturer. Notions like 'skyhook' and 'crane', the 'Cartesian theater', the 'Library of Mendel', 'Universal Acid', all these are superb intuition pumps, crafted to assist the reader to accompany him on an exciting mental adventure.

He is a leading thinker in a wide range of important philosophical topics, including philosophy of mind, the problem of free will, consciousness, evolution, and of course religion. *Breaking the Spell* is a pivotal contribution to the rather exhilarating revival which secularism is enjoying at the moment.

In all these fields, as I said, I look up to him as an intellectual hero. Elder brother may be, but also dynamic *enfant terrible* of the mind, and there is no paradox in the contrast. It is a huge pleasure and honour to me to present this award to Dan, and the fact that the award is in my name redoubles the pleasure and quadruples the honour.

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