

# ONE LIFE

Dorset Humanists Magazine

30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year 1996-2026

July 2026



**Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 3.00-6.00pm. Please note start time. This event is in David Warden's garden. Address supplied when you RSVP via Meetup or email or phone to confirm that you are definitely coming.**

Indulge in the quintessential English tradition of an *al fresco* Summer Cream Tea including home made gluten-free scones and clotted cream. Forecast unknown at the time of writing. Bring a parasol if you prefer shade. Start time is 3pm and leaving time is 6pm. There's no parking in our drive or street – please plan your parking and allow a few minutes to walk to the venue (please let David know if you need disabled parking).

This event is complimentary for members and guests but please bring cash or card to make a donation large or small to the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust.

Please don't just turn up unannounced! We are catering for specific numbers.

Contact details:

chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk or text David on 07910 886629

Email: [chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk](mailto:chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk)  
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HMRC Charities Ref No EW10227



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events

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website



Photo by David



Photo by Aaron

# Stunning Corfe Castle Walk

*“Super walk today. Perfect weather, good company and stunning views.”* Duncan

Many thanks to Aaron for leading a superbly well-planned walk on Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June from Wareham to Corfe Castle featuring Wareham Walls, riverside trails, abandoned tramways, forest trails, duck ponds, grazing sheep, butterflies and dragonflies, a rare sight of a young adder, the Swanage steam train, views of Poole Harbour, and culminating in this majestic view of Corfe Castle. Plus ice cream!

Our next walk is the legendary Tyneham Ranges walk on Sunday 26th July. Assemble at Tyneham Village car park 10:15 for a 10:30 set off. This 6-mile circular walk takes in cliff paths and a steep, challenging hillside that will really tone those glutes before we explore a hill fort, relax on a beach, then return on the flat to the start point. Don't worry – we'll go at a manageable pace and take rest breaks when required. The Jurassic Coast views on this walk are some of the most breathtaking to be seen anywhere in the world. You won't regret making the effort!

## Dates for your diary

Saturday 11 <sup>th</sup> July 3.00-6.00pm	Garden Party	Chairman's Charity Garden. Phone 07910 886629 or email: <a href="mailto:chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk">chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk</a> to book your spot in the sun. Delicious scones etc.
Friday 17 <sup>th</sup> July 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Hotel bar social. No set agenda. Come along for a friendly social.
Sunday 26 <sup>th</sup> July 10.15	Tyneham, Purbeck	Tyneham Walk. Please confirm on Meetup and phone David on 07910 886629 to confirm.
Saturday 12 <sup>th</sup> September 2.00	Moordown	<i>A Highly Abridged History of Sex</i> – a talk and discussion with Dr George Locke

Please check all events nearer the time on Meetup in case of any changes.

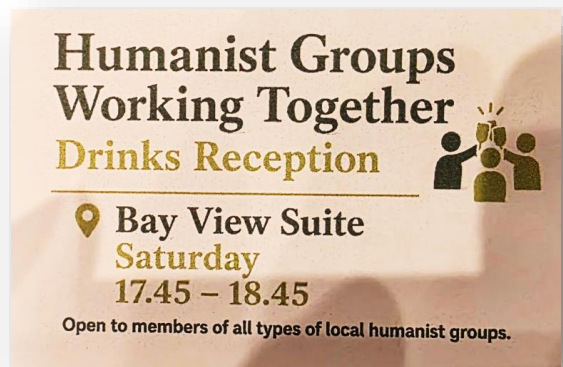


Photo by Aaron

# Festival of Humanism in Bournemouth

650 humanists converged on Bournemouth in June for Humanists UK's Festival of Humanism. Around 15 of our own members attended the weekend of talks and discussions. Local MP Tom Hayes spoke at the opening session on the Saturday which also introduced Humanists UK's new President, Janet Ellis MBE (inset photo, top right).

Janet is a broadcaster, actor and writer, widely remembered as one of the best-loved presenters of *Blue Peter*. She has been a Humanists UK patron since 2014 and has spoken publicly about her humanist outlook.



Dorset Humanists hosted a drinks reception for 28 local humanist groups. This was a great opportunity for groups to get together and share challenges and success stories.



David Warden and George Locke Photo by Aaron



Illustration based on original photos by Aaron

# Conversation as a Humanist Practice

At Humanist Café in June, we explored ‘The Art and Skill of Conversation’ (as well as eating plenty of cake!) The afternoon was not intended as a quick guide to becoming a dazzling conversationalist in ten easy steps. It was more an exercise in awareness: noticing what happens when conversation goes well, what happens when it goes wrong, and how small acts of attention, curiosity and generosity can make a dramatic difference to our experience of being together. If humanism is about helping human beings flourish, then good conversation is not a trivial extra. It is one of the basic practices through which community is created.

## Humans in conversation

We began with a few light-hearted ‘YouHum’ opinion polls. Are humans generally excellent at conversation or generally awful? Are humanists better than average, worse than average, or much the same as everyone else? Can we improve, or is there nothing we can do? Are group conversations easy, or are they particularly tricky? The results were revealing. Most of those present seemed to think that humans are not naturally brilliant at

conversation, that group conversations are especially difficult, but that improvement is possible. There was also broad agreement with the central formula for the afternoon:

***“Good conversation creates human connection and connection is conducive to friendship, happiness and community.”***

That idea was summed up in E. M. Forster’s famous phrase: ‘Only connect’. Conversation is one of the ways we do that.

## The alien view of humanity

To help us look at ourselves afresh, we then heard a story from outer space, written by one of our members, Jason, who has often reflected on human social behaviour from the perspective of someone who is neurodivergent. In the story, four alien researchers arrive in Poole Park to study human friendship, relationships and social communication. After months of observation, their conclusion was devastating: ‘Humanity must change the way it socialises.’ The alien story gave us a way of noticing how strange, confusing and counterintuitive human social rules can be. ►

Many of us think of ourselves as ‘normal’, but perhaps we are all rather odd when seen from the outside. Some people simply notice the oddness more clearly than others.

## Eight conversational human types

We then met eight cartoon characters, each representing a familiar conversational tendency:

1. **Niagara Falls** is the torrent of talk: enthusiastic, energetic, unstoppable, but leaving very little space for anyone else.
2. **The Broadcaster** or **Raconteur** is entertaining and full of stories, but sometimes turns conversation into performance. Others become an audience or ‘a pair of ears’.
3. **Silent Owl** listens deeply and thinks carefully, but may leave others wondering what they really feel or think.
4. **Gladiator** treats conversation as combat. The point is not to understand but to win.
5. **Neurodivergent** follows a different conversational map, making unexpected connections, pursuing deep interests, and sometimes missing social cues. The need here is understanding, patience and clarity.
6. **Bad Tennis Player** keeps serving but never returns the ball. They talk, but do not build on what others say.
7. **Professor** is knowledgeable and articulate, but can slide into lecturing and certainty.
8. **Interviewer** asks question after question, but shares so little of herself that conversation can feel like interrogation.

These characters were intended as caricatures, not diagnoses. The aim was not to point the finger at other people, but to notice these habits in ourselves. Most of us can probably recognise several of them within us, depending on the situation, our confidence, our anxiety, or how much we care about the subject.

## What goes wrong?

The table discussions explored why conversation goes wrong. Is it dominance and status? Do some people need to be the cleverest person in the room? Is it lack of self-awareness? Is it anxiety? Does silence feel frightening? Can expertise become a shield? Do families and cultures teach different conversational styles? And how do we make room for neurodiversity without pretending that behaviour has no impact on others?

One of the most important themes was that exclusion is often unintentional. At one table, our oldest member, Anne, who is 98, was in danger of being left out. Not because anyone was unkind, but because group conversations naturally form currents and eddies. A slight physical adjustment, a move towards her end of the table, and a little encouragement brought her into the conversation. That mattered. Anne is not simply ‘an old lady in a chair’. She worked for the World Food Organisation and remains sharp, thoughtful and interesting. Sometimes inclusion requires nothing dramatic: just noticing who has not yet had a chance to exist in the conversation.

## The virtues of good conversation

After considering what goes wrong, we turned to what helps conversation go well. Five virtues emerged.

1. **Self-awareness** means noticing our own habits. Am I talking too much? Am I disappearing? Am I trying to win? Am I really listening?
2. **Curiosity** begins with the thought: ‘There is something interesting about this person that I do not yet know.’
3. **Generosity** means sharing the air. A good conversationalist quietly asks, ‘Who has not had a chance to speak?’
4. **Intellectual humility** reminds us that our way of seeing the world is not the only possible one. Other patterns, stories and interpretations are available. ►



5. **Reciprocity** is the tennis-match principle. Good conversation is a rally. We reveal and invite. We offer something of ourselves and create space for the other person to respond.

Two practical principles were then emphasised: **listen attentively** and **respond authentically**. Listening attentively means giving another person real attention, even for a few minutes. It means noticing clues, following leads, and not simply waiting for our turn to speak. Responding authentically means being present as ourselves. We do not connect by performing a false version of ourselves. We connect by being real enough to meet another real person.

### Putting it into practice

The final exercise was simple. People were invited to move tables and talk to someone they did not know well. This turned the afternoon from a discussion about conversation into an experiment in conversation. The effect was a joy to behold. For example, Adrian and Chris, both long-standing members, found themselves talking to each other for the first time. Chris discovered that Adrian was a retired probation officer. Adrian discovered that Chris had been a

maths teacher, had worked with Voluntary Service Overseas in Uganda, and had later been involved with the Uganda Humanist Schools. They had both been members of Dorset Humanists for years, yet a small change in format opened up a new connection.

This was the point of the whole afternoon. Good conversation is not just spontaneous magic. It can be cultivated. Small adjustments — moving seats, asking a better question, listening more carefully, sharing something of oneself, noticing who is left out — can change the whole atmosphere of a room.

There were also delicious puddings from the frozen food shop COOK, who kindly offer Dorset Humanists a 30% community discount. Tea, coffee, cake and pudding are not incidental to Humanist Café. They are part of the hospitality that helps makes conversation flow.

### A core humanist practice

Dorset Humanists is not just about organising events for entertainment. We're trying to build a community of ordinary people who know and care about each other. That means practising the habits that make community possible: curiosity, kindness, patience, humour, humility and attention.

Conversation as a humanist practice means taking seriously the person in front of us. It means resisting the urge to dominate, perform, withdraw, lecture or interrogate. It means creating space where people can be heard, known and included.

We won't always get it right. That's part of being human. But we can become more aware. We can make small changes. We can learn to listen better and respond more honestly.

If humanism is about living well with others in the one life we have, then good conversation is not a minor social skill. It is one of the ways we practise being human together.



# Building Human Beings: The Humanistic Purpose of Education

What is education really for? Is it primarily about preparing young people for work, or should schools also aim to cultivate curiosity, judgement, resilience, empathy and character? These questions lay behind an engaging Humanist Forum in June, led by Barry Newman. Barry asked whether and how schools should explicitly teach 'life skills' in addition to academic and vocational subjects. But the discussion gradually moved towards a broader and more humanistic view: that the development of the whole person is not an optional extra but lies at the heart of education itself.

## More than preparing for work

The discussion opened with participants reflecting on their own school experiences. Favourite subjects varied widely. Some remembered the satisfaction of mathematics (Eleanor) and technical drawing (Steve), others the inspiration of English (David and John), history or economics. Repeatedly, however, we concluded that the quality and enthusiasm of teachers often mattered more than the subject itself.

Barry presented survey evidence showing public attitudes towards school subjects. English, mathematics and science ranked highly, while subjects such as drama, classics and religious education were generally regarded as less important. This naturally led to a wider question: should schools concentrate on academic subjects that prepare pupils for employment, or should they also nurture broader qualities needed for life?

## What are 'life skills'?

The discussion explored the increasingly popular idea that schools should teach 'life skills'. Suggestions included communication, confidence, resilience, critical thinking, empathy, financial literacy, self-reliance and decision-making. Participants also recognised how difficult it is to define such skills precisely, let alone turn them into a formal curriculum.

Different organisations emphasise different priorities. The World Health Organization, for example, highlights critical thinking, emotional regulation and interpersonal skills.

Educational charities stress resilience and communication. Parents often place financial management near the top of the list and Rehan endorsed the importance of this skill. The sheer variety of answers, however, suggested that 'life skills' may not be a single coherent subject at all.

### **A 'hidden curriculum'?**

As the discussion developed, an interesting shift occurred. Rather than asking how schools might introduce separate lessons in resilience or communication, many participants argued that these qualities are already developed throughout school life.

English literature was seen as fostering empathy by inviting pupils to enter other people's worlds. Drama encourages perspective-taking and self-confidence. Sport develops teamwork and resilience. Science teaches evidence-based thinking and intellectual honesty. Classroom discussion helps pupils learn to listen, question and express themselves clearly.

Perhaps the most important influence is not any individual lesson but the ethos of the school itself: the relationships between teachers and pupils, the encouragement given after failure, the opportunities for discussion and participation, and the everyday habits of respect and cooperation that shape young people's character.

In this sense, communication, confidence and empathy are less like subjects to be taught than capacities to be cultivated.

### **A classical humanist idea**

Although it was not mentioned explicitly during the evening, this conclusion echoes the classical humanist tradition, later articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (late 18th-/early 19th-century German educational reformer) that education is not merely preparation for work but the cultivation of human beings through intellectual, moral and cultural growth. We repeatedly returned to

this broader vision. Schools undoubtedly prepare young people for employment, but they also prepare them for citizenship, relationships, lifelong learning and participation in society. Knowledge matters, but so do judgement, curiosity and the ability to communicate with others.

### **Good teaching matters**

One recurring theme was that these wider educational aims cannot simply be reduced to a checklist. Confidence, resilience and motivation emerge through experience rather than lectures. Good teachers create classrooms where pupils feel able to contribute, recover from mistakes and gradually become more confident learners.

Several contributors suggested that the most valuable life lessons often arise incidentally: through encouragement after failure, participation in discussion, working with classmates, taking responsibility, or seeing a teacher model patience and respect. In other words, these qualities are woven into the educational process rather than delivered as stand-alone topics.

### **No simple answers**

The evening concluded without attempting to reach a final consensus. Some participants felt schools should devote more time to practical subjects such as cooking and budgeting. Others emphasised communication, resilience or simply 'learning how to learn'. There was broad agreement, however, that education is about far more than examination results or vocational preparation.

Perhaps the most significant insight was that schools may already be teaching many of these so-called life skills – not through separate modules, but through the ordinary business of educating young people. In that respect, the humanistic purpose of education is not an optional addition to the curriculum. It is the thread that runs through it.



# A point of view

David Warden

## Seeing the world through different lenses

Human beings never see the world exactly as it is. We understand reality through models, theories and lenses that help us make sense of our experience.

When I was a Christian, my working model was that God was real because I saw his hand at work in the world and in my own life. At university I encountered a different possibility. What if God only appears to be real because I'm looking through God-coloured spectacles? If I took the spectacles off, would the evidence look different? It did. I no longer saw a divine being acting in history but the ordinary world unfolding without supernatural intervention. Once I had learned to see through this new lens, I found it impossible simply to return to the old one.

The same thing has happened to me on other questions. Most historians believe Jesus existed as a historical person. Yet Richard Carrier and a handful of other scholars argue for a very different explanation of how Christianity began. Whether or not they are right, they remind us that the same evidence can sometimes be organised into quite different explanatory models.

Politics is no different. Consider the Israel–Palestine conflict. Many people interpret it through the lens of settler colonialism and oppression. Others see it as one of several painful nation-building conflicts that followed the collapse of empires during the twentieth century, alongside the population exchanges between Greece and Turkey or the Partition of India. Each lens illuminates certain features while pushing others into the background.

For me, this has become less about reaching the 'correct' answer (although that is always tempting) and more about recognising the spectacles we are wearing before we begin to argue. Intelligent people often disagree, not because they possess different facts, but because they are looking through different conceptual lenses.

This realisation has changed the way I want to have conversations. Rather than trying to win interminable arguments, or withdraw altogether from the discussion, I increasingly find myself asking, 'Can we compare our explanatory models before we argue about the facts?' Looking through someone else's spectacles for a few minutes does not require me to abandon my own. But it may help both of us see reality a little more clearly, encourage dialogue, and perhaps even bring a little more peace into the world.

This strikes me as one of the conversational habits that humanism can and should cultivate: the willingness to try on different lenses before deciding which gives the clearest view of the world. We might even call it 'epistemic hospitality' – welcoming someone else's way of seeing things for a few minutes before inviting them to look through our own. Best served, of course, with generous helpings of coffee and cake.

So here's a conversational triad: Listen attentively. Respond authentically. And look through someone else's spectacles before asking them to look through yours.