

HUMANIST CHAPLAINCY

newsletter

The lights are nearly entirely dimmed in the Interfaith Center meeting space on Thursday evenings before members of the Tufts Humanist community gather and light dozens of candles. This signals the opening of a space for thoughtful reflection—a time students have described as the only time in their week they can synthesize what they've learned with what they've experienced and confront bigger questions of life with their peers in a way that feels secure rather than overwhelming.

These weekly reflection meetings bring together students with many philosophies of life, but all of them interested in respectfully and critically asking one another why and how we can make a brighter world. After a closing breathing exercise facilitated by the Humanist chaplain, the candles are blown out at the end of each meeting, and the students return to life on the Hill.

Humanism is concerned with life in the natural world and what we as creatures in that world can accomplish among ourselves. This identity has been a convening force for students at Tufts for over a decade, though not everyone connected to the Humanist Community at Tufts (HCAT) or the Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy would use the



Walker Bristol, Tufts Humanist Chaplain

term "humanist." Atheists, agnostics, those spiritual but not religious, those simply seeking answers have all been welcomed in Humanist life at Tufts.

The Humanist Chaplaincy serves to help members of the Tufts community harness those sources of strength and meaning and offer opportunities to live them out in ways that make the world a better place. This past year has been an exciting and defining time in our growing program, and I'm excited to share with you all that we've accomplished and are looking forward to in the future.

Best wishes,
Walker Bristol, Tufts Humanist Chaplain

Humanist students at Tufts gather in the Interfaith Center for their weekly HCAT meeting.



History of Humanism at Tufts

Tufts University is among the most innovative campuses in the country for Humanist life and spiritual exploration. The Humanist Community at Tufts, formerly Tufts Freethought Society, has hosted nationally recognized programs ranging from debates to meal packing projects. This community has, perhaps most importantly, been the site of identity formation and connection for many students, who build deep and lasting supportive relationships through exploring deeper questions about the world together in a dedicated space.

The Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy was established in 2014 after years of student organizing. The Humanist chaplain supports the student-led HCAT in weekly gatherings and programming, and also serves as a confidential resource to students for counseling. In addition, the Humanist chaplain serves the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, where more than half of the student population identifies as nonreligious.



Humanist students on retreat at the Tufts Loj in Woodstock, NH in 2013.

Reflection Meetings

As with many campus communities, our weekly meetings have been the cornerstone of programming for Humanists at Tufts. While ritual candle lighting and breathing meditations bookend these meetings, the facilitators and topics of reflection rotate.



"HCAT group meetings quickly became one of my weekly touchstones at Tufts, and it is one of my favorite times to reflect among friends. To a large extent, I think this was thanks to the ritual aspects of the meeting—from the setting to candle-lighting to sharing deep breathes. Knowing what to expect each week helped me feel more comfortable and build a sense of community that was geared towards genuine reflection and thoughtful conversation."

John Lazur, A22 and HCAT member

HCAT members Justin Tavares, A22, (left) and Zoe Bair, A22, (right) lighting candles at an HCAT potluck.

Solstice Celebrations

The Winter and Summer Solstices are markers of significance across cultures, often coinciding with religious holidays and celebrations. Much of their literal significance relates to agriculture—anticipating the increasing daylight after December or marking the peak of the harvest in June. In these periods, the Humanists at Tufts come together to celebrate their symbolic significance.

At our Winter Solstice celebration in December 2018, students offered readings of appreciation for the darkness. While reflecting on changes in their lives during the fall semester, students also looked forward to how the increasingly bright days might bring new opportunities to live out their values.

At our Summer Solstice celebration in May 2019, we shifted our focus to ideas of responsibility: When we can see all that is before us, and are given the luxury of time, how might we use that privilege for good?



HCAT members gather in the Interfaith Center for the Winter Solstice.

Winter Solstice Reading: From *In Nature's Honor* by Patricia Montley

On Solstice Eve, value the dark. On this longest night of the year, before the light overcomes the dark, sit in the dark (alone or with others) and think about the importance of darkness... Give thanks for sheltering dark places: the rich earth where seeds germinate, the caves that harbored our ancient ancestors, the cellars that keep us safe from tornadoes, the wombs that provide our first nourishment. Acknowledge the darkness of suffering, which can deepen our appreciation of life and strengthen our connection to one another.

Death Cafe

In the winter of 2019, the Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy hosted a community-wide Death Cafe, as part of a national movement to pair respectful, open conversations about death and dying with the joy of sharing in a meal.

Dozens of students came together to explore facilitation questions written by members of HCAT, including, "What kinds of rituals are important to you at the end of your life?" and "What do you believe is still significant about us after we die?" At the end of the program, more than one first-year student who attended shared that it was the first time they had ever spoken to people outside their immediate family about death, and that they were excited to continue to participate in conversations like it in the future.



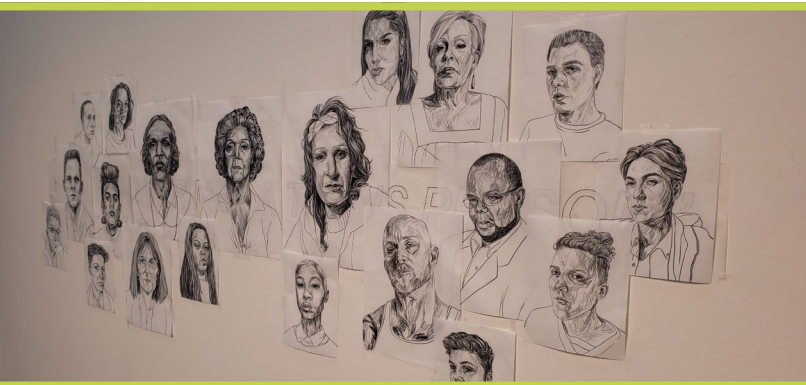
Tufts students joined the HCAT members in an intimate setting for Death Cafe 2019.



Humanist Chaplain, Walker Bristol, and HCAT students run in the Somerville Homeless Coalition 5k fundraiser in the fall of 2018.

Service Work

A central component of Humanism as a lifestance is not only living a life of service to others, but of constant reflection on the impact of that service such that we might take full responsibility for our world. At Tufts, for many years, this has meant recognizing the impact our host institution has on our shared communities in Medford and Somerville—especially with respect to housing. In partnership with the Somerville Homeless Coalition and the City of Medford, students involved in Humanist life fundraise, clean up public spaces, and host educational programs like Narcan trainings to live out our responsibility to our neighborhood.



Art Exhibit for the Transgender Day of Remembrance

Transgender Day of Remembrance

The Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy has partnered with the Tufts LGBT Center for the past two years to fund and showcase an art project lifting up the lives of those lost to anti-transgender violence around the International Transgender Day of Remembrance.



Tufts students engage with a panel sponsored by the Humanist Community.

Education

With an eye towards new developments and directions in spiritual life, The Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy hosts educational programs intending to start and continue conversations around changes in religious life. Our panel discussions have been videotaped and used in training multifaith chaplains nationally. This year, we hosted an educational conversation exploring meaningful service work and impactful changemaking, drawing together thought leaders across campus.

Interfaith Collaboration

HCAT and the Unitarian Universalist student group cosponsored the Open Mic Night with the Interfaith Student Council in the fall of 2018. The Tufts' religious and philosophical student organizations gathered for an evening of interfaith/interbelief sharing and community. The event was an open space for anyone to share their stories and experiences having to do with belief and nonbelief through storytelling, poetry, music, text readings, spoken word, and more.

John Lazur, A22, helped organize the Interfaith Open Mic Night as HCAT's representative on the Interfaith Student Council. John (left) sings with fellow HCAT member (center) during the Interfaith Open Mic Night, Fall 2018.



Humanist Leadership on Campus

Anne Hall, A19, HCAT member and University Chaplaincy Student Worker, presented the "Wisdom from Our Traditions" Humanism reading at the Baccalaureate Service 2019:

"Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous

dance with death just before dawn. ... And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."

Excerpt from *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami



Kumar Ramanathan, A15

Alumni Spotlight

Kumar Ramanathan, A15, Ph.D. student in political science at Northwestern University and president of Tufts Freethought Society, 2013-2015

Freethought/HCAT was a treasured community for me during my time at Tufts. It was a rare space where I met not only a group of friends, but also a community that enabled me to learn a great deal about myself. When it was difficult to bond with others over shared identity or shared tradition, Freethought/HCAT offered a space where we could come together to explore our different identities and to make new traditions. I remember events like discussion meetings and jam sessions fondly, but what I cherish the most is the opportunity those times of

respite gave me to connect with others who were also eager to learn and to share. Our emphasis on personal stories and values taught me to seek out and respect those aspects of others' lives when I meet them. Sharing our stories again and again, with new friends and with old friends, allowed me (and I think others too) to chart and reflect on our own growth, which is an experience I valued in a time where change seemed constant. At a time when I was still discovering my beliefs and exploring my interests, Freethought/HCAT gave me a space in which to form community around shared values and shared questions, and to learn from the beliefs, interests, and passions of others.

Support Humanist Life at Tufts University

A substantial portion of our annual programs are made possible by community donations. Here are some suggestions for how you can help make a difference in students' lives:

- \$50 will fund a social community program among nonreligious students at Tufts to connect with each other in a safe, collaborative environment.
- \$100 will fund materials for a cleanup program to brighten the community we share in Medford and Somerville.
- \$250 will fund travel expenses for a scholar of contemporary religion and Humanism to come to Tufts and connect with students and faculty.

To give to the Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy online, please visit <http://chaplaincy.tufts.edu/giving>.

To make a gift by credit card over the phone please contact Tufts Senior Associate Director of Development Rob Ayles. Thank you for your support.

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