About Austin Cline
—by Tracie Harris (Copyright © 2008)

Some years ago, when I recognized my god was a metaphor, I began searching to find information about atheism. Easily the most helpful site I encountered was <atheism.about.com>, where I found active forums, articles and a live guide to help me find anything and everything I ever wanted to know about atheism.

As I became more active in my local atheist community, I left the online community behind. But I recently had cause to go back to <atheism.about.com>, where I was impressed to see things still going strong. Visitors to the forums will find threads with titles like “Science and God,” “Being Atheist & Black,” and “Political Correctness.” There are posts by apologetic theists, atheists with questions for other atheists, and topics ranging from politics to personal dilemmas to media headlines.

The homepage sports freshly written articles. Check back. Headlines are updated several times a day. They include atheist-oriented perspectives on politics, philosophy, religion, international news, media reviews, commentaries, opinion polls, and more. In all, there are several thousand pages of material posted to entertain and enlighten the public about atheism and atheist perspectives.

Want to comment on an article? Feel free. There is a comments thread attached to every piece.

How is this information produced, organized, catalogued, monitored and moderated? As if by some miracle of a godless universe, this online well of all things atheist is the work of, mainly, one man—one atheist—working tirelessly to keep it buzzing: Austin Cline.

Guides at About.com come and go, but when I returned to About’s atheist and agnostic section, Austin was still writing, moderating, analyzing, identifying fallacies, correcting misconceptions, and staring out at guests from his familiar photo on the homepage. Who is Austin Cline, and what is he doing at About.com? Austin agreed to correspond with me about his views and work, and to share his story with the atheist community.

And so, the first thing I had to know was: What motivates him to

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activism, and how did he end up
at About.com?

“I enjoy writing, learning, teaching, and
academics generally. Because I can read fast, and have read
extensively, I can provide others
with information and perspectives
that would be difficult for them
to find otherwise. I started writing
short essays on my own, publishing
them on my own Web site, when
I learned about an opening at
About.com for a guide for the Ag-
nosticism/Atheism site. The initial
requirements were to do much the
same thing I had started doing on
my own, so it seemed like a great
opportunity—and it has been.”

This achievement becomes even
more amazing when one considers
that, in addition to the hours he
puts in at About.com, Austin holds
down a “real” job as well:

“My day job isn’t associated with
About.com at all. I do graphic de-
sign, networking, database mainte-
nance, and various other computer
work. I’ve been interested in and
working with computers since I
was young so have developed a
diverse background of knowledge
and experience which I can use in
a variety of jobs.”

Still, he explains that he manages
to “spend several hours a day, ev-
every day, working on the site. I am
usually able to get in two or three
hours in the morning and four or
five hours in the evening. There
are blog posts to write and upload,
to articles to write and upload, books
to read and review, e-mails to read
and reply to, online articles to read
and perhaps use in some manner,
and so forth.

“One thing that helps prevent
burnout is the degree of variety
which can come with the topic.
Atheism itself doesn’t entail very
much, which means that if I’m
going to write about anything for
very long I have to branch out.
Depending upon how I feel, I can
deal more with politics, history,
philosophy, or several other areas.
That may be an important motiva-
tion behind continuing—I have
the opportunity to study so many
different topics.”

Austin says the most rewarding
aspect of his work on About.com is
“seeing other writers and bloggers
find useful material on my site
and using it in their own writings.
Even if they disagree with me, it
indicates that I’m succeeding in
giving people something interesting
to think about.”

Austin has administered the site
for about 10 years now. His guide
resume includes a master’s from
Princeton (in Germanic Studies).
The degree “doesn’t have a direct
impact on my atheism and writing,
but it does have some influence.
My studies forced me to read a lot
of philosophy and gave me a lot
of experience with textual analysis
and criticism. All through my stud-
ies in America and Europe, more-
over, I consistently took classes in
religion because that subject was
an interest of mine.”

In fact, it was so much an interest
that Austin attended a Christian
church and Christian youth activi-
ties despite the fact his parents did
not raise him in a religious environ-
ment. When I asked Austin about
his early years, he shot me a link
to an article about his upbringing
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and his personal religious history,
posted on his site archives.

...when I was in school, I was
invited by a classmate to start
attending a Christian church, and I
did so. My parents did not attend
with me, but they also did not
discourage me. On the contrary,
they did whatever was necessary
to help me attend and participate
in the church’s youth activities.

Over time my interest in the
church waned somewhat, but at
no point did I ever actually stop
being a Christian or believing
in basic Christian doctrines.

Like so many other atheists, Aus-
tin’s article goes on to recount a
clear connection between religious
study and deconversion:

...when I began to take classes at
the University of Pennsylvania, I
immediately signed up for courses
dealing with religious history.

Through these courses, I acquired
a perspective on religion which
was both deeper (I learned more
about Christianity in my classes
than I did in my church) and
broadened (I learned a great deal
about a number of non-Christian
religions and non-orthodox Chris-
tian groups). As a consequence,
I began to lose the belief that Chris-
tianity was the One True Religion.

...in the end, my road to atheism
was through education about
religion and philosophy—the more
I learned about the two subjects,
the less tenable both religion and
atheism became for me. My actual
and current disbelief in the exis-
tence of any gods is based upon
the fact that I simply lack any good
reasons to believe in any gods.
Without good reasons, belief for
me is impossible.

In addition to the tools offered at
About.com, Austin is supported in
his work at the site by his wife:

“The only person who has any
involvement with site (except
for those who volunteer to help
moderate the forum) is my wife.
She’s done a tremendous amount
in terms of proof-reading articles,
making suggestions, and generally
providing support at home that has
allowed me to invest so much time
and effort into the site. On top
of all that, she’s a theist—which
makes her a theist who has done
more on behalf of atheist activism
and education than many atheists.”

Austin doesn’t encounter much
opposition to what he does at About.
com in his personal life. In fact,
he says it doesn’t come up very
often. But he certainly encour-
ters opposition online. Apologists
visit often to pitch salvation to
this online community of prodigal
sons and daughters. In any given
week, Austin will be accused of
being immoral, arrogant, deceitful,
anxious, hateful, a tool of Satan, or
even—inexplicably—homosexual.

Atheist visitors can’t help but
notice his capacity to remain civil
in his generally well-thought-out
replies to these ad hominems. How does he keep his demeanor in the midst of personal attack?

“I spent a lot of time reading, and some time posting, in a number of Usenet newsgroups well before I started writing about atheism. No one can spend much time in newsgroups dealing with controversial and political topics without developing a thick skin. It helps to remember that people who just engage in insults are usually covering up for a lack of substantive arguments. The best ‘revenge,’ then, is to make that as clear as possible by giving them enough rope to hang themselves.”

Poke around the site, and you’ll find a personal statement from Austin that reads, in part, “Both atheism and agnosticism are neglected in popular culture. When was the last time you saw an openly atheist politician, an article on atheism in a major periodical, or anyone discussing secular humanism as a serious alternative to religion?”

I asked if his view had changed to religion or freethought? How often do we see information about atheism, humanism, and Jewish perspectives all the time in popular media. One could argue that gays still have a long way to go, but it would be hard to argue that they are as invisible as atheists.”

A good number of Austin’s articles involve combating common misconceptions about atheism. When I asked if anything he encounters still surprises him, these common, simple errors were foremost on his mind: “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised at how often people make basic errors which they never would have had they done even a tiny amount of research, but for some reason it does surprise me. People ‘care’ enough to write to me, but not enough to do any independent research about…well, much of anything at all. I can’t fathom that sort of mentality, but I encounter it with depressing regularity.”

It seems that Austin repeatedly addresses the same misconceptions—not due to a repetitive nature, but because he continually encounters them in articles and comments he comes across while gathering material for his own posts. Since common misconceptions are a prominent issue with Austin, I asked some questions about his views on them, starting with which misconceptions he sees most often from other atheists.

“The two biggest misconceptions and points of debate about atheism which I see among atheists are probably the same ones I see with theists: that atheism is a positive, clearly defined ideology/philosophy and/or that atheism is defined narrowly as the denial of the existence of God rather than broadly as the absence of belief in gods. (Curiously, people sometimes try to argue both even though they are incompatible.) For theists these extend outward into a spider web of closely associated misconceptions (like that atheism is a religion, atheists can’t be moral, etc.).”

“The arguments used by atheists for these errors are about the same as those used by theists—which is not a surprise because I think that they are both working from common cultural misconceptions, in particular an evangelical culture in which all sorts of misconceptions about science, philosophy, religion, and culture are operative. Offering the dictionary definition of atheism is popular, of course, but always involves either a highly abridged pocket dictionary or a willful disregard of anything in the definition that doesn’t fit with one’s preconceptions.

“I don’t think we would be seeing nearly so many mistakes from atheists or theists if there weren’t so many errors—some probably willful and deliberate—in apologetic works from evangelical Christians. Lies about history, science, and everything else are integrated in numerous books that are part of a huge publishing industry. It’s only to be expected that they would,”

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over time, negatively affect more and more people.”

One section of the site is specifically titled “Atheism Myths & Misconceptions: How Theists Misrepresent Atheism.” I asked Austin what he considered the most common theist misconception and, additionally, the most damaging:

“The most common misconception of atheism is one that lies behind just about every other misconception you are likely to come across: the very definition of atheism itself. People who mistakenly assume that atheism is either the explicit denial of gods or also a particular ideology as well are likely to believe a host of other errors on top of that. The next two most common misconceptions are probably the belief that there can be no moral values or behavior without theistic religion and furthermore that there can be no meaning or purpose in one’s life without theistic religion.

“The most damaging misconception is probably the belief that atheism is incompatible with morality. Not only does it encourage more anti-atheist sentiments than the others, but I think it makes it even less likely for people to seriously consider it. Who would give up theistic religion if it meant giving up the only possible basis for morality?”

And if Austin could eliminate just one of these misconceptions?

“…I think I’d eliminate the assorted misconceptions about the definition of atheism. They may not be the most dangerous, but nearly all the rest stem from this problem and thus would be easier to dispel.”

Dr. Richard Dawkins
March 19, 2008 • Austin, Texas

Dr. Richard Dawkins, author of The God Delusion and many titles in evolutionary biology, will be giving a lecture in Austin on March 19th on the UT campus. As of press time, the event is tentatively slated for 7pm in the Hogg Auditorium. Check <http://richarddawkins.net/calendar/> for the latest information. The lecture will be free and open to the public.

A CA CALENDAR

SATURDAY, MARCH 1
• 2-3:30 p.m.: Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, MARCH 2
• 12:15-1:45 p.m.: ACA Lecture Series (Dr. Mark Loewe on “Black body radiation”; Free and open to the public.)
• 3:4-30 p.m.: Atheist Experience (Channel 10)
• 5 p.m.-?: Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, MARCH 6
• 7 p.m.-?: Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)

FRIDAY, MARCH 7
• 8 p.m.-?: ACA Pub Crawl (Starts at Dog & Duck Pub)

SUNDAY, MARCH 9
• 10-11 a.m.: Board Meeting (Romeo’s (outside))
• 11 a.m.-1 p.m.: Regular Sunday Meeting at Romeo’s (Romeo’s)
• 3-4:30 p.m.: Atheist Experience (Channel 10)
• 5 p.m.-?: Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (El Arroyo)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19
• 7 p.m-?: Richard Dawkins lectures in on UT Campus (See Web site for details; Free and open to the public.)

THURSDAY, MARCH 20
• 7 p.m.-?: Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)

SUNDAY, MARCH 23
• 11 a.m.-1 p.m.: Regular Sunday Meeting at Romeo’s (Romeo’s)
• 3-4:30 p.m.: Atheist Experience (Channel 10)

REGULAR LOCATIONS:
• Austin History Center, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.
• Dog & Duck Pub, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. In informal gatherings; food available.
• El Arroyo, 1624 W. 5th near Mopac (Look for the blue bus)
• Romeo’s, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.

In addition to being a formidable and tireless advocate for atheism, Austin is also a regional director for the Council for Secular Humanism. Since humanism and atheism are often closely tied, I asked about his thoughts on the common pairing of atheism and humanism:

“There are advantages and disadvantages, but I think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The major drawback may be that people who are inclined towards atheism could be put off if they assume that atheism requires humanism and they don’t properly understand what humanism is. Fortunately, humanism isn’t a dogma and is instead a set of values or principles that people tend to share anyway. More importantly, there’s nothing about humanism that requires a person to accept every single principle or value outlined in any particular document or manifesto. Those who assume they have to sign off on such documents, agreeing with every single point 100%, are the ones most likely to be put off.

“As to the advantages, the most important may be that atheism itself offers no particular values, principles, or ideas on its own. Atheism is the absence of one single belief and is thus compatible with a wide variety of ideologies.

An atheist can, in principle, just as easily adhere to noxious racist and fascist ideologies as to humane and liberal ones. Atheists who support freethought and humanist princi- ple need to do so because simply being an atheist or announcing their atheism won’t cut it.”

Austin Cline is not the average atheist. He cares enough about his beliefs, and the beliefs and rights of all atheists, to take the time to explain them and defend them, publicly, to anyone who will listen. Stop by his site. You might not agree with everything he expresses, but whether you agree with him or not, he’s clearly right on at least one point, he’s definitely—as noted earlier—“succeeding in giving people something interesting to think about.”
Membership Renewal Time

—By Don Baker

Yearly ACA memberships expire on the last day of February. Yearly membership dues come due March 1. Renewing your membership is inexpensive and easy. Dues for individuals are $24 per year. For families, it’s $36. For students and retirees, it’s just $12. Lifetime membership is $1,000. To make payment, send your check made out to “ACA.” If you would like to make an additional donation to the ACA with your payment, please note that fact on your check. If your contact information has changed, please use the form below to make corrections. You can mail in the form, or if you’d like to bring your check to a meeting, you can give it to one of the board members. Ultimately, it will go to ACA Treasurer Mike Swift who will note your payment. Cash payments are discouraged, for a number of reasons.

Your membership allows you to receive the Austin Atheist newsletter and other official ACA communication. It allows you to vote in elections, and membership is necessary to run for the ACA board. Being a member tells us that you’re invested in the ACA and its activities and you are a participant in the group’s success. A large membership base gives the ACA clout within our larger community. Numbers matter, and larger groups are taken more seriously. Your membership helps the ACA have an impact. Currently, we have about 100 members and seven lifetime members.

Membership dues provide operating funds for our various efforts. Unfortunately, we are operating at a shortfall. Because of this, the ACA board is considering raising the membership dues. If you have paid your dues for the year by the time the dues are raised, you will not be asked for additional payment for the year. If you haven’t renewed and the dues are increased, you will need to pay the increased amount. Note that regardless of any increase, we will continue to prorate dues for new members, but by quarter instead of by month.

Renew your ACA Membership

Membership fees are $24/year for individuals, $12/year for students and retirees, and $36/year for a family. Lifetime membership is $1000. Our membership year begins on March 1st.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION for the ATHEIST COMMUNITY of AUSTIN, INC.

Please fill out the information below if your information has changed or make corrections to your mailing label, as necessary, on the opposite side of this form.

_______________________________________________
_______________________________________________
Last Name First Name

Companion’s Name (for family membership):

_______________________________________________
_______________________________________________
Last Name First Name

Street

Phone

City/State/Zip

E-mail

Please make your check out to ACA in the amount above depending on your membership type. Any amount over the membership fee will be considered a tax deductible contribution to the ACA.

New members must complete the following membership affirmation:

This is to certify that I am a non-theist, that I have read the Purpose Statement of the Atheist Community of Austin, Inc. (appearing on Page 2), and that I am in agreement with the principles stated therein. I understand that membership is only open to non-theists.

Signature Date

Signature (Companion) Date

Please return this form and payment to: Atheist Community of Austin, Inc., P. O. Box 3798, Austin, TX 78764 or bring it to any ACA event and give it to an ACA board member.
>Bible_Boy: The Bible tells us about God and morality. God is good. You can't be good without God.

>Atheist_E: The god who told the Hebrews to kill all men, women, and children of the Amalekites? Genocide & infanticide are moral?*

>Bible_Boy: That was just. Amalek had attacked Israel before.

>Atheist_E: Another nation attacks you, & that justifies slaughtering the whole race including infants? Genocide & infanticide are justifiable, moral and good?

>Bible_Boy: God gives life. God can take it.

>Atheist_E: But you're not talking about someone dying of cancer. We're talking about _people_ killing other people, including infants, & you saying that's a good thing since god told them to do it.

>Bible_Boy: Humans aren't gods. No one can judge God.

>Atheist_E: If god says to commit mass infanticide, I can't judge that "bad"? But YOU can judge it "good," even if there's no better reason you're aware of than "they were warring nations"?

>Atheist_E: I hope you at least understand the reason some atheists are concerned about people believing in god. You're at a forum arguing genocide and infanticide are sometimes justified—and even moral. When a religion can make someone call those things "good," that's scary.

>Bible_Boy: I'll pray that you'll understand & accept God's Word one day.

>Atheist_E: I think it's pretty easy to understand. It's the "accept" part I'm having trouble grasping.

[ I SAMUEL 15:3* ]