



Humanities and Public Life Conference 2023:

What's the Point?

Purpose, Meaning, and Value in Challenging Times

Monday, September 18

8:30-10, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Oran Magal

Title: Love can save us

Abstract: As an old saying teaches us, "not by bread alone can a person live" (Deuteronomy 8:3). What else do we need? If we read testimonials from people who survived the very worst that human beings can go through, for example: the writings of Holocaust survivors, we learn that to survive those hellish circumstances physical survival alone was not enough; it was crucial to find a *point for living*, a reason to go on despite it all.

Thankfully our own circumstances are nothing like that, but we too need *meaning* in and for our lives; where can we find it? Drawing on the work of two contemporary philosophers, Susan

Wolf and Martin Hägglund, I'll suggest that the key is to *commit* ourselves to something *beyond than our own satisfaction*. What gives life meaning is ultimately a certain kind of *love*.

Bio: Dr. Oran Magal teaches Philosophy and Humanities at Dawson College and McGill University.

10-11:30, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Panel Discussion with Jeff Gandell, Sarah Allen, Robert Stephens, and Daniel Goldsmith

Title: Critical Thinking about Generative AI

Abstract: This panel discussion will explore some of the issues around generative AI programs like ChatGPT. What impact could these powerful tools have for students at CEGEP and beyond? How could generative AI inspire us to change our education system?

11:30-1, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Pierre Morin

Title: Universal spiritual lessons for modern times

Abstract: Spiritual wisdom has emerged time and time again in periods of ordeal and crisis. The cultivation of composure, self-restraint and discrimination have been universally valued in countless cultures and worldviews as essential tools leading to true wisdom. The resulting combination of mental balance and emotional intelligence enables us to embrace reality in whatever form it manifests and to navigate it from a deeper place.

Bio: Pierre Morin describes himself as a seeker of truth. After a short-lived engineering career, he spent years on the road looking for the meaning and purpose of life, eventually

becoming an educator with young adults. He has had a daily practice of meditation for over 25 years and takes time for retreat every year.

1-2:30, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Aurélie Oran

Title: Nature Connection, Rites of Passage and Ancestral Wisdom

Abstract: As humans, we evolved among plants and animals, upon which we depended for our survival. Through living in a close relationship with nature, we learned to observe its cycles and connect with what surrounded us, drawing wisdom from it. In communities, we ritualized and celebrated the passage of seasons and life transitions.

For many of us, our lifestyle today is radically different from what our bodies and minds have evolved to adapt to. So many traditions, knowledge, and wisdom that have helped our ancestors feel they belonged to something greater are now being lost or forgotten.

How can connecting to nature help us find a sense of purpose? Can we learn from nature's resilience to find our resilience within?

Through stories, traditions, and experiences, we will explore ways to find wisdom in nature's teachings, as well as how rites of initiation facilitate a means to learn more about one's self, inner resources, gifts, and place within a wider community, and feel more confident about navigating the future.

Bio: Aurélie Oren A. is a clinical herbalist, teacher and facilitator of events and rites of passage. In 2016, she founded [Le Vent et la Tortue](#), as a way to help people to reconnect with nature and the innate wisdom that resides within each of us. Through various workshops on medicinal plants and earthskills, she encourages a sensitive, sensory, and intuitive approach to herbalism. Each year, she organizes and facilitates nature retreats, as initiatory quests designed to better know one's self and place in the world.

2:30-4, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Silvia Ortan

Title: Law as a Profession, Humanities as a Helper

Abstract: This presentation will touch on various critical thinking perspectives which can aid and inform attorneys and other players of the modern legal system in meeting its challenges, from the perspective of a Quebec attorney. In particular, the presentation will detail how viewing such contemporary challenges through the lens of a humanities background and education can offer unique insights and solutions, notably in respect to access to justice, ethics within the justice system and the public's confidence in same.

Bio: Silvia Ortan is a 2011 Dawson graduate and alumni of the Social Science "Law, Society and Justice" program. After subsequently graduating from Université de Montréal, she has been practicing as a labour law and litigation attorney since 2015. As part of her practice, she assists a wide range of clients in the management of labour relations, and frequently pleads before the Court of Quebec, the Superior Court and the Administrative Labour Tribunal. She is a published author and frequent conference speaker, and has been involved in various *pro bono* initiatives aiming to improve access to justice for all.



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Tuesday, September 19

8:30-10, Dawson Theatre

Speaker: John Hunting

Title: Ethics and the Enjoyment of Life

Abstract: To ask after the value of life is to also question what one should do with one's life. These questions imply that the value of life is not given, and that in some regard individuals are free to determine the value of life for themselves; in short these questions imply that individuals are free to think critically about their own values and worldviews. But does life really present as a philosophical question and freedom to think about our own thinking? Is the goodness of life not self-evident? The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas thought that it was and his ethics relies in part on this insight. This presentation retraces Levinas' understanding of the intrinsic value of life - or "love of life" - and our responsibility for the wellbeing of others that flows from this privilege.

Bio: John Hunting is a Humanities teacher at Dawson College and he is currently writing a manuscript on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, media witnessing and the photographic.

10-11:30, Dawson Theatre

In collaboration with Dawson Peace Centre

Speaker: K.B. Wagers

Title: **Writing Queer Lives**

Abstract: Join author K.B. Wagers as they talk about cosplaying as a straight woman for the first 42 years of their life, the realization of their true self, and how they strive to fit as much queerness into a traditionally cis, white, het, male dominated space like military science fiction. We will be giving out copies of KB Wagers's first trilogy, the Indranian War Series at several events.

Bio: K.B. Wagers is the author of the NeoG Adventures from Harper Voyager and the Indranan and Farian War trilogies from Orbit Books. They are genderqueer and love writing stories about queer joy and queer villainy. They are a fan of whiskey and cats, Jupiter Ascending and the Muppets. You can find them drinking coffee on TikTok @kbwagers, sharing plant photos on Instagram as @midwaybrawler, and hanging on to the shredding remains of Twitter as @kbwagers doing political commentary and video game play-throughs.

11:30-1, Dawson Theatre

Speaker: Donal Gill

Title: Understanding the World View that underlies White Power Terrorism

Abstract: This talk uses a social movement theory perspective to conceptually situate recent acts of white power inspired terrorism and political violence.

Through a close reading of the manifestos of perpetrators of white supremacist violence, the argument is developed that these actors should be understood as operating within a loosely affiliated transnational movement.

Despite considerable variance across the cases, including idiosyncratic traits that influence their respective attacks, perpetrators within this movement nonetheless share a core set of characteristics and beliefs derived from the white power movement. Most notably, these include a belief in imminent racial extermination, a commitment to a borderless transnational white nation, and the adoption of a defensive rather than triumphalist posture. Understanding this world view is critical if we are to prevent further instances of this fatal political violence.

This analysis builds towards an integrated theory of white power extremism that emphasizes the network effects and shared ideology that have propelled an ongoing wave of political violence. Laundered iterations of the aforementioned ideological traits in mainstream media and political discourse will also be addressed.

1-2:30, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Aidan Fisher

Title: The Human Purpose - a Journey to Consciousness.

Abstract: What is our life's purpose? If you're starving, naked and in the wilderness it's pretty clear your purpose is to get food, shelter and clothing! But we've come a long way since then, and in our hearts, we know that we are called to something more.

This presentation will be based on a worldview that the journey to consciousness is particular for human beings and seems to run hand in hand with our ability to use consciousness to change the nature of our experience and the world around us. Strange that the journey affects us all but often seems theoretical. Come have a practical experience to change that forever!

Bio: I am currently the practitioner & Director of the Montreal Institute of Core Energetics. My journey with Core Energetics started over 20+ years ago when I had a spiritual awakening that was so powerful, it took me 2.5 years of intense work on myself just to understand what

had happened. From that moment of discovery, I was inspired to eventually pursue the four-year training program to become a Core Energetics Practitioner, at the Institute of Core Energetics, in New York, followed by an additional year of post graduate work, and 2 more years as an assistant. Today, I am a passionate practitioner, teacher and Director of the Montreal Institute of Core Energetics, a certified Exceptional Relationship Mentor with the Embodied Couples Institute of New York, a Naturotherapist and member of the National Association of Naturopaths, and a powerful man, husband and father who strives to live my life with a full and undefended heart.

2:30-4, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Daniel Goldsmith

Title: *Escape from Plato's Cave: An Interactive Journey*

Abstract: Karl Marx famously wrote, "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it." I have recently begun to think along a similar vein: when we study philosophy, we are indeed *interpreting* the world, and this is undoubtedly important. The point, for me, however, is not only to think about philosophy, but to *feel* it too.

I'll be putting this approach into action- with your help! We will look back to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," not only to understand what Plato is communicating, but to *feel* the story in our cells. I will invite the audience to embody what I feel is the most important element- one which we will connect to our daily lives. Warning: it may get loud!

Bio: Daniel Goldsmith has taught in the humanities department at Dawson college since 2009. His courses focus on identity, enlightenment, and food ethics. An avid traveler, Daniel spent over 2 years in India, Thailand, and Indonesia, where he studied yoga and meditation.

4-5:30, Room: 5B.16

In collaboration with Dawson Peace Centre

Speaker: Kama La Mackarel & Maurice Riley Case

Title: Towards Liberation: Black, Queer and Joyful.

Abstract: Join us to witness a conversation between Kama La Mackerel and Maurice Riley Case, two Black and queer organizers, artists, and creators, as they discuss the intricacies of survival, resistance, and how to reconcile their wellbeing within an embodiment of emancipatory politics

Bios: Kama La Mackerel is a Mauritian-Canadian multilingual writer, visual artist, performer, educator and literary translator who believes in love, justice and self and collective empowerment. Their practice blurs the lines between traditional artistic disciplines to create hybrid aesthetic spaces from which decolonial and queer/trans vocabularies can emerge. At once narratological and theoretical, personal and political, their interdisciplinary method, developed over the past decade, is grounded ritual, meditation, ancestral healing modalities, auto-ethnography, oral history, archival research and community-arts facilitation.

Kama is a firm believer that artistic and cultural practices have the power to build resilience, to heal and to act as forms of resistance to the status quo. With wholehearted engagement in ocean narratives, island sovereignty, transgender poetics and queer/trans spiritual histories, their body of work challenges colonial notions of time and space as these relate to history, power, language, subject formation and the body.

Kama has lectured, performed and exhibited their work internationally in museums, galleries, theatres and universities. In 2021, they were awarded the Canada Council for the Arts Joseph S. Stauffer Prize for emerging and mid-career artists in Visual Arts. Their award-winning book *ZOM-FAM* (Metonymy Press) was named a CBC Best Poetry Book and a *Globe and Mail* Best Debut. Kama lives and loves in Tio'tia:ke, also known as Montréal.

Maurice Riley Case (He/Him/His) is the Manager of Concordia's Black Perspectives Office (BPO). His knowledge and experience in Black flourishing spans academic admissions, hiring, retention, teaching, learning and working environments. In his role, Maurice provides guidance to faculty who seek to embed anti-oppressive and anti-racist pedagogies in their classrooms and research. He also develops training, facilitates workshops and provides one-on-one consultations to faculty and staff.

Maurice's approach to advocacy is informed by the **Scarborough Charter** (on Anti-Black Racism and Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education), whereby he is committed to redressing anti-Black racism and fostering Black inclusion and flourishing. Of particular interest are the ways in which classroom environments, curricula and assessments reflect issues of experiential knowledge, access to education, justice, and collective action. It is Maurice's hope that through this consideration, all students can meaningfully engage in, access, and thrive in their learning environments.

Prior to joining Concordia's Black Perspectives Office, Maurice spent 12 years as an educator, and 3 years as the Instructional Coordinator for Black Student Flourishing at the Peel District School Board (PDSB) in Ontario. Maurice supported and trained educators on embedding racial, gender, sexuality, disability, and class justice in their pedagogies and practices at all levels in the PDSB. Maurice completed his Master of Education at York University where his research considered abolition and reform, and how Blackness is taken up in the education system. He also holds a Bachelor of Education and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Toronto.



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Wednesday, September 20

Reminder: This Wednesday follows a FRIDAY schedule

8:30-10, Room 5B.16

Speaker: Andreas Nicolaidis-Gagnon

Title: Humanities at Dawson Helped Me See What's Important

Abstract: Hello everyone and especially, hello to all current Cegep students! My talk is largely directed to all of you who are currently taking humanities courses at Dawson. I was in your shoes in the not-so-distant past.

In my presentation, I will describe how the humanities courses helped me personally and professionally. If you are currently wondering what the heck the point of taking humanities courses that are seemingly unrelated to your program is, don't worry!, You are not alone. Perhaps hearing my story will help you see what you may get out of humanities courses at Dawson and how positive they can be for your personal development and college experience.

Bio: Andreas Nicolaidis-Gagnon graduated from the Social Services program in May 2022 and is currently working as an educator in youth protection. He is also currently completing his Bachelor of Social Work at McGill University. Apart from his career in social service, he is also passionate about philosophy and spirituality.

10-11:30, Room 5B.16

Speaker: Brian Redekopp

Title: Why Should I Care About the News?

Abstract: In a world bombarded by negative headlines, would I be better off—less anxious, less paralyzed, less overwhelmed--not paying attention to the news? Would there be

something wrong with this? Do I have some sort of obligation to be informed? In this talk we'll apply some central theories in ethics to sort out why it's important to be informed, how the news so often fails us, and how we can engage with news in a healthy and constructive way.

11:30-1, Room 5B.16

Speaker: Marc-Andre Cright

Title: Creativity & AI: An Alliance?

Abstract: Has the advent of artificial intelligence sounded the death knell for human ingenuity? In this lecture-workshop, we'll explore the new perspectives emerging from neural systems, and ask whether these advances serve creators or, on the contrary, do them a disservice. Is it possible to establish an alliance between man and artificial intelligence, where each entity contributes to the creative act? Will you be one of those who embrace artificial intelligence and share your creative process with it? Will you participate in a collaborative exchange with this technology? Is it safe or risky? On the agenda for this presentation, we'll look at copyright and its components, highlighting the benefits it brings to creators. We will also examine the status of the creator in this new creative landscape, as well as the new threats and opportunities that technology offers in terms of creativity and intellectual property. Taking all these factors into account, what favorable attitudes should creators adopt in the face of artificial intelligence technologies?

Bio: Purely out of a passion for teaching and personal development, Marc-André has been guiding students at the college for the past two years as an illustration teacher. Drawing on his experience as an art director and project manager, where he also trained in web technologies, Marc-André uses his expertise to support creative entrepreneurs in developing and advancing their projects. His unique pedagogical arsenal, including in-depth training in graphic design, illustration and business start-up, enables him to overcome the obstacles that stand between an idea and its realization. In addition to teaching illustration at Dawson College, he gives lectures and training workshops. Always on the lookout for new knowledge, Marc-André encourages learning moments that offer a refreshing perspective, inviting participants to introspect and engage in authentic activities.

1-2:30, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Stephane Banfi

Title: 12 things you need to know and do if you want to adopt a more ethical, plant-based diet

Abstract: After eating like a consummate Italian for half a century, writer and *Explorateur culinaire* Stephane Banfi radically changed his nutrition and went vegan in 2018. As he fondly recalls, when he informed his family of his decision, «it was practically the equivalent of being excommunicated.» With a dynamic presentation, Banfi takes us through his nutritional journey, exploring the reasons, the science, the benefits and the challenges of pivoting to a plant-based diet. At a time when we often ask ourselves what's the point and purpose of what we do, this conference is a stark reminder that the greatest impact we can have on our health and planet begins with what we put on our plates.

Bio: Stephane Banfi worked 25 years in public and media relations before going suddenly bald and switching to journalism. He is the co-founder of [Les Explorateurs culinaires](#), an organization that helps people make more informed decisions regarding the food they eat, and the creator of the website [«Films. Food. And Stuff»](#), a space that discusses films, nutrition and other subjects. His passions include eating, watching movies and hydroponic gardening.

2:30-4, Room: 5B.16

Speaker: Noelle Sorbara

Title: Feeling your feelings: Transforming Pain into Wisdom

Abstract: Human beings have an instinctive tendency to move away from discomfort and seek

comfort. This often leads us to ignore or suppress unpleasant emotions and sensations. However, it is often these uncomfortable and painful feelings that carry valuable messages that can profoundly enrich our self-awareness and perception of the world around us. Drawing on somatic practices and Buddhist philosophy, this talk will discuss how one can foster an open and receptive relationship to all the facets of our experiences in order to allow us to pursue our dreams, make choices based on current reality, and generally live deeper and more meaningful lives.

Bio: A lawyer by training and a community builder by nature, Noelle has spent the last 25 years working at the crossroads of entrepreneurship, social activism, and leadership transformation. Using her background as a somatic practitioner and extensive study of Buddhist philosophy, she has dedicated the past six years to evolving a model of leadership that focuses on personal and emotional exploration.

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**Thursday,
September 21**

**8:30-10, Room
4C.1**

Speaker: Sophie Fernier

Title: Humanities for Mental Illness:

Contemporary Issues for Treatment and Recovery

Abstract: Psychiatric illnesses and their treatment represent a major challenge due to the special status that they occupy, both within medicine and private social settings. Affective disturbances or substance abuse, for instance, may become so devastating that their onset can precipitate what is described as a subjective "loss of meaning" or "life purpose"--impacting human and ethical values which hold crucial roles in allowing us to maintain meaningful relationships and professional roles. Sometimes, mental illness may also lead to loss of "dignity" via connected social institutions where treatment or counsel is offered, such as hospitals, clinics, courthouses, etc.

This talk explores the importance of preserving, restoring, and encouraging a broader notion of such "purpose" following mental disability, and discusses our inalienable rights to dignity as people. The conversation will focus on psychosis, as it offers a salient example of how illness

and stigma can interrupt the very fabric of the self—the seat of one's moral compass or ability to interact rationally with others and one's environment.

I suggest that the humanities may play a key role in the hope of recovering self-identity and one's life trajectory. Creative forms of writing such as poetry, as well as philosophical work with existentialist themes, both encourage and value human individuality. In so doing, they provide foundations for renewed personal meaning following severe "breaks" in the rational sense-making of experience. The humanities thus interact with a deeper layer of inner life, one that clinical psychiatry *alone* cannot rebuild.

Bio: I'm a current law student at McGill University, with an interest in medical ethics. My academic background lies in philosophy and literature. In my thesis, I discussed the perceived "loss of language" in the context of extreme life experiences, such as war. [My most recently published paper](#) explores this topic in the work of Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikail in dialogue with the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. I believe that the humanities are at the forefront of meaningful changes within our interconnected legal, social, and cultural spheres of life.

10-11:30, Room 4C.1

In collaboration with Dawson Peace Centre

Speaker: Kelsey Smoot

Title: **On Mirrors: A Curation of Black Queer Poetry, Narrative, and Thought**

Abstract: Kelsey will share excerpts from their dissertation project titled, "On Mirrors: Radical Musings of Black, Queer Masculinity & Boihood Worldmaking." They will engage attendees in an interactive conversation on interdisciplinary, community – based scholarship, while discussing his experience as a Black trans writer and thinker navigating academia. Kelsey will illustrate how his usage of oral history, auto-ethnography, poetics, and public-facing scholarship culminated in a dissertation project that rejects categorization and consciously blurs the boundaries between theory, art, and praxis.

Bio: Kelsey (they/them/he/his) is a PhD candidate in American Studies. Their work and writings explore the process of identity formation at the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality. He is a cultural and gender theorist, a writer, an advocate, and a poet. Having grown up bicoastal and spending the majority of their adult life in a state of transience, they draw from their eclectic

life experiences both deep fear and great optimism regarding what people are capable of. Kels seeks to illuminate the experiences of Black queer folks, navigating the contemporary US sociopolitical landscape.

11:30-1, Room 4C.1

Speaker: Darya Akulshyna

Title: Finding Meaning Through Genuine Connection

Abstract: The world seemingly connected at every seam amid countless social apps is grappling with a worldwide intimacy crisis, as many feel the void of genuine human connection. But amidst this challenge, an opportunity exists to redefine what true relating really means and what it takes to forge meaningful bonds. Let's navigate the journey of one immigrant's worldview amidst the hurdles of a nuclear family to discover what can be made possible. From tough conversations to the power of tribe, let's redefine what authentic relating can mean for you, and find out if perhaps (meaningful) connection may be one of your most untapped resources?

Bio: Darya is a Vision Design and Mindset Coach, facilitator, speaker, workshop author and the woman behind the unique Vision Cardio methodology. She works with business leaders, kicka** visionaries, and disruptive thinkers to redefine the next chapter of their business or personal life into masterpieces of intention, creativity, joy and massive impact.

A nerd at heart, Darya's multidisciplinary background allows her to skillfully combine western & eastern practices with the most to date research to marry what she calls "magic with science". Her clients appreciate her ability to demystify edgy spiritual concepts into grounded practical applications making the experience accessible and FUN. The Vision Cardio approach is rooted in Darya's 15+ years of exploration in neuroscience and behavioural science, positive psychology, and the mind-body-spirit energetics that unite us all.

1-2:30, Room: 4C.1

Speaker: Jordan Walters

Title: Different Worldviews on The Value of Humanity

Abstract: Our contemporary worldview has it that we are one another's equals, that we are of equal worth, and that we are owed equal concern and respect. Though governments and individuals often fail to live up to these ideals, hardly anyone would deny that, at rock bottom, everyone is equally valuable. Put simply: humanity matters. But what makes human beings valuable? The orthodox worldview has it that what's so special about humanity is that we are rational animals. Opponents of this worldview claim that we are not born equally valuable but made so through our ongoing political practice of treating one another as equals. Against both of these views, I argue that the value of humanity is grounded the fact that it is apt to feel a distinctive sort of love—which I call love of humanity—towards any human being.

Bio: Jordan Walters is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Philosophy at McGill University. His research is funded by the Joseph-Armand Bombardier SSHRC Doctoral Scholarship to Honour Nelson Mandela.

2:30-4, Room: 4C.1

Speaker: Tristan Tondino

Title: On the Interconnectedness of World Views: Mathematics and Visual Art -- A Presentation of Linear Perspective

Abstract: We can think of world views as ways of understanding or of picturing or of meaning. This presentation is about the interconnectedness of the mathematical world and the artistic world. We will look at the role of perspective and geometry in certain pictures, and at how math has changed art over time. We will consider a recent example in filmmaking using a popular series as an example. Hopefully, our many interconnected world views help to shape a brighter future.

Bio: Tristan Tondino is a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy at McGill University. He has two areas of specialization: (1) interdisciplinary research in the philosophy of language and linguistics, specializing in semantics. Questions he asks include: what kind of communication systems do various animals have, what is different about human neurology that allows for a radically different kind of language skill, in what way is language innate, how is truth related to meaning, how do the arts and sciences contribute to understanding the world,

why is promoting linguistic diversity important? (2) Tristan works on the interconnectedness of human 'languages' or worlds. For example, he has been doing conferences that promote STEAM over STEM by tracing the relationship between mathematics, geometry, and the visual arts. Tristan is also a working painter and art director (HBO's *The Last of Us*). His work on multilingual children's books has been studied at the University of Ottawa because it allows children to map parts of speech from more than one language effectively. He has been touring his presentation "Meaning in Artistic Practice – On the Interconnectedness of Mathematics and Visual Art: A Presentation on Linear Perspective" most recently at the Vrije Universiteit in Brussels and he will be giving the talk at Dawson College and Harvard University in the fall of 2023.

4-6: Reception at Olivers (2C): Everyone invited for Wine and Cheese!