



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

JANUARY 2014

January Program:

Susan Gerbic: Tales of a Wikipedia Editor: Crowd-Sourced Activism

Want to make a real difference in changing minds? Alone, it is difficult; together, with other like-minded people, you can affect what content people outside our "choir" see. Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia works to improve skeptical content on the 5th most visited website, world-wide. The Skeptic Action project performs one activity a day that helps to keep pseudoscience at bay.



Affectionately called the Wikipediatrician, Susan Gerbic is the co-founder of Monterey County Skeptics, a steering member of the Independent Investigation Group (IIG), and a self-proclaimed skeptical junkie. Susan is also founder of the "Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia" project and the "World Wikipedia" project.

When: Saturday, January 18th, 2014

Where: Patio Room at Vista Del Monte. **(Park ONLY in spaces marked "VDM".)**

Time: Doors open at 2:30pm. Program begins at 3:00 pm

Cost: \$2 members/\$5 non-members

Dinner: Vista Del Monte. \$22 includes tax and tip. RSVP judithannfontana@yahoo.com or 967-7911.

For More Info: Activities@SantaBarbaraHumanists.org or call 769-HSSB

Welcome New Members!

Steven Faulstich, Santa Barbara

Activities Judy Fontana

Don't forget to join us for dinner following the January 19th HSSB program at Vista Del Monte. The menu is not available yet, but will consist of a buffet with assorted desserts, beverages and wine. And all for the unbelievable price of \$22 per person, which includes tax and tip. Please RSVP to judithannfontana@yahoo.com or call 967-7911.

President's Column: Our Intelligent Universe Richard Martin

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

Lovely poetry Will, but were you serious? In the play Macbeth has risen to the top, and now has lost everything. But of course in the end, we personally also lose everything. Does that mean that our subjective lives signify nothing? And if so, does that also mean that life itself signifies nothing?

We can look at "life" in various ways. In a cosmic sense, consider the phenomenon of self-replicating forms of living things, arising spontaneously from a chaotic universe devoid of life, and continually evolving into millions of

different species. We only know of such life on our own planet. However the astronomy of exoplanets around other stars in our galaxy is rapidly advancing, and it is now possible to guesstimate how many planets with life may exist in our galaxy and in the universe.

The Columbia University astronomer Caleb Scharf writes in *The New York Times* that "roughly 15 percent of all suns could, in principle, be hosting a place suitable for life as we know it." Our Milky Way galaxy has about 100 billion stars ("suns"). If I assume more conservatively that only 1 percent of stars have planets with the conditions suitable for life, and that only 1 percent of those actually have life, that would give 10 million planets with life in our galaxy. If only one in 10 thousand (0.01%) of these planets with life has intelligent life, that would be 1000 planets in our galaxy with intelligent life. This is what the scientists in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) research programs have been searching for since 1960.

If the above assumptions are applied to the entire universe the result is at least 100 trillion planets with intelligent life in the universe. There is of course much uncertainty in these order of magnitude guesstimates, and the field of exoplanets is still young. But for this discussion it hardly matters whether there are 100 trillion or 100 billion or 100 million planets with intelligent life. The conclusion is the same: We intelligent beings are not alone in the universe, and there is a good chance that we are not alone in our galaxy.

Now let's go from the occurrence of cosmic life to molecular cellular life. For humans, when a sperm cell fertilizes an egg it forms the zygote cell containing their separate genomes. The spherical zygote is one millimeter in diameter, about the diameter of the point on a round toothpick. In nine months this one cell leads to the development and birth of a baby with more than a trillion cells, with countless different cell

structures specialized for each different body function such as blood, the circulatory system, nervous system, immune system, skin, brain, etcetera. The brain has about 100 billion nerve cells, with each connected to about 10,000 other brain cells.

There is of course a great amount of direct observational information on the development from the zygote to the baby at birth. There is also a great deal of information on the molecular and cellular mechanisms by which this process takes place. Briefly, DNA is a biomolecule that holds the code for how living organisms are built. A gene is a segment of DNA that is passed down from parents to children and confers a trait to the offspring. Genes are organized and packaged in units called chromosomes. Humans have 23 pairs of chromosomes: one chromosome for each pair from the mother and one from the father.

Even with very detailed information on both the macroscopic (observational) and microscopic (molecular and cellular level) steps in fetus development, there is not yet as far as I can tell any overall understanding or theory of how the molecular structural information in DNA leads to the complex forces needed to construct a baby. If I believed in a miracle, this would be it.

Most of the above knowledge has been discovered within the last 85 years. Confirmation of galaxies other than our own was made in 1929. The structure of atoms was not known until 1932 with the discovery of the neutron. The molecular structure of DNA was discovered in 1953. We live in a golden age of scientific discovery, which has vastly increased our understanding and appreciation of life on earth, and now predicts the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in our universe.

Human nature has not changed significantly in the 400 years since the death of Shakespeare, but because of science, our knowledge of the

universe and of life is entirely different. This amazing and profound knowledge leads me to the (non-religious) metaphysical idea of intelligent life as the ultimate significance of the universe. Intelligent life produced by the universe first proceeds to know itself. And then to know and understand the universe. In this way, one can say metaphorically that the universe comes to know itself. It becomes intelligent.

What's Going on Here? Andrew Hankin, still somewhere

The Vermont Novelty Toaster Corporation says that its Daily Bread toaster — which **toasts an image of Jesus into bread slices** — was ranked as the 32nd top-selling toaster on Amazon this holiday season. But after a dispute with the online retailer, the Jesus toaster, along with the company's other novelty toasters that produce toasty images of President Obama, the Virgin Mary, Sarah Palin and assorted other icons, won't be sold on Amazon any longer.

Full story and picture:

<http://money.msn.com/top-stocks/post--company-pulls-popular-jesus-toaster-from-amazon>



Winter Solstice Party!!

Many thanks to Judy Fontana for our wonderful Winter Solstice party! We enjoyed a delicious meal, great company, several fun games, plus an entertaining video program put together by Ray Stone. Also thanks to Suzanne Spillman, Nan Cisney, Phil Holland, and our carvers, Roger Schlueter, Colin Gordon, and Bob Molinari.

All photos by Marian Shapiro.



Hugh and Helen



Richard and Penny



John and Suzanne



Robin and Jim



Jill and James

See all the photos at
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/marians Shapiro/3942/sets/72157638905221284/>

Handel's Messiah - 2013

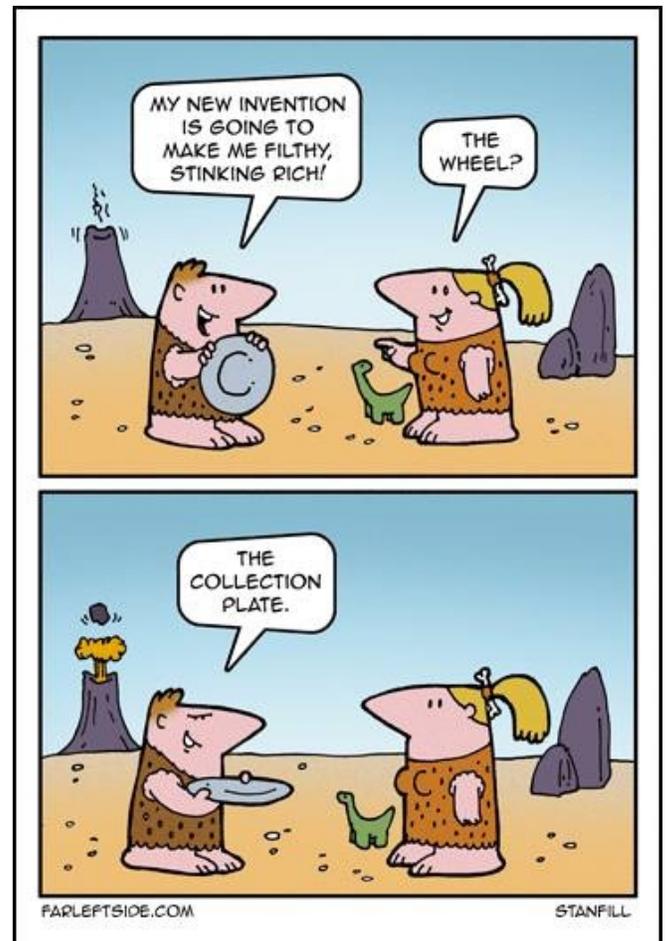
Dick Cousineau

What a setting: a dark, cool evening; a huge white mighty fortress-like church on the hill; a warm invitation to enter; a 3-story, gold-covered metal Jesus structure flanked by 25-foot high pine trees on the large semi-circular altar; numerous green wreaths with red garlands encircling the stage ; a 900-voice choir practicing the powerful, repetitive, almost patriotic, *Messiah Oratorio* by G.F. Handel; a small yet fine 20-person orchestra; and an elderly fellow (me) surrounded by many friends who have sung the work 35 to 75 times. Imagine the warm inclusiveness of the setting and the comforting sights and sounds.

The whole scene was a mesmerizing, solemn and impressive one announcing that the fables, myths and wishes of my childhood are still alive and are at your command. How comforting, how embracing, how secure one can feel. How beautiful it is just to relax and let it flow over and enter again into my pores, my eyes, my voice, and my mind. I AM A CHILD AGAIN with no worries, no responsibilities, with no effort needed, relying on one ancient book to think for me, to make beautiful music, to answer all my questions, and make everything fine.

But wait ! WAIT ! Something's not right and it begins to gnaw on me - No one is coming to save me, or to answer any questions, or to deliver me into another world where problems are non-existent, no mythical fables, no miracles, no matter how comforting. It's the spiritual world that is non-existent. The blessings we pray for are only wishes for things we don't have, even though we have more of everything than any nation on earth. Most of all that happiness and fulfillment and joy are within us only waiting to be shared, not held onto.

I will continue to get my mythical, magical, and religious childhood beliefs back for an hour or so each year, smiling in nostalgia and knowing full well that I cannot, nor do I want to, live there as a thinking adult who must face the world on its grounds. It becomes a breather, a break in the action of life that lasts but seconds until reality thankfully returns. I truly know that only deeds performed for others in need or which help improve my own knowledge will make any difference to me in this world. I can only acknowledge my unending thanks to nature to have experienced a miniscule fraction of the life of this planet at this time. I will stand in perfect awe of this experience without asking for any reason or rational for existing, just being so is enough.



The Trouble with Assumptions

Rev. Charlie Archibald

(Editor's Note: The Freedom From Religion Foundation [FFRF] filed a lawsuit on November 1, 2013, in California state court against the city of Pismo Beach, challenging prayers at city council meetings and the city chaplaincy post. The following letter was sent by HSSB member Rev. Charlie Archibald to Marga Cooley, Managing Editor of the Santa Maria Times.)

Pismo Beach is in the national news for something controversial other than the dune buggies on the beach. Just like many people find nothing wrong with THAT, I'll guess a number of you find nothing wrong with a Christian prayer being given at innumerable NON-RELIGIOUS meetings. You might even say that it should be accepted like the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. Oh, didn't you know that some people haven't yet accepted that unconstitutional act created during that shameful period known as the McCarthy Era, when one senator ruined the lives of many with the accusation of being a COMMUNIST. At such time, any congressional representative who voted against religion would run the risk of being among the ruined. So they could not only add "Under God" to the pledge but "In God We Trust" to our money as well. Today, these two examples have become proof to many that this is a Christian country, although they are still being appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. We frequently hear the Declaration of Independence being quoted as though it was the U.S. Constitution, because it does declare God to be on our side, just as the Germans had on their belt buckles in World War II. Read your U.S. Constitution again.

But back to the Christian proselytizing through prayers at secular gatherings like the Pismo Beach City Council meeting. Of course, the majority who are Christians have no reason to complain. But what of the 2/3 of the people in

this world who do not share Christian beliefs; literally thousands of religions, possibly slightly different for each individual, as I found as a Baptist and then Methodist minister, over fifty years ago. It is their freedom from religious persecution that is being defended by the largest freethought organization in the country, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, of which I am proud to be a member. Admittedly, it is freedom from Christian intrusion in secular affairs, because ONLY this religion is being forced on all the people, with no regard for **their** religious beliefs.

Such is the case of the Pismo Beach City Council. They have actually established an official chaplaincy in 2005, appointing a Pentecostal preacher, Rev. Paul Jones. Rev. Jones has delivered 122 of 126 prayers between January 1, 2008 to October 15, 2013. All but one of the prayers was addressed to the Christian god. In virtually every City Council prayer, Jones pressured citizens to live a Christian life style, to vote for "righteous" leaders, and to make decisions that honor Jones' particular god. At least 54 of the prayers contained a "Christianized" view of history. The FFRF legal complaint documents several egregious examples, including Jones' claim that:

- The Constitutional Convention approved a prayer motion (*There was no such prayer*)
- James Madison said our government was based on the Ten Commandments (*He did not*).
- George Washington claimed it was impossible to govern without the Bible (*Fabricated quote*).

FFRF seeks a declaration that the prayers violate the California Constitution's No Preference and Establishment clauses, as well as a Civil Rights provision. The complaint also alleges that the prayers violate the Civil Rights laws by coercing and forcing citizens to undergo Christian worship if they wish to

participate in their government. As in the case of the dune buggies, it will be said that the custom of Christian prayers at non-Christian meetings is traditional, and even that MOST people do not openly complain. Is that enough if the practice is against the law, and even against the civil rights of all citizens? It certainly is not a good example of practicing the Golden Rule, which most people, across religious lines, accept as a valid barometer of social behavior.

Non-HSSB Events of Interest

Upcoming Events in California:

- January 5: Caitlin Doughty: *Death Rituals for the Secular*. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles. <http://www.cfiwest.org/calendar/FeedYourBrain.htm>
- January 18-20: Area 51 and Alien Landscapes: Tour the geologic wonders of natural history of the Great Basin. A Skeptics Society geology tour. http://skeptic.com/geology_tours/2014/Area-51-and-Alien-Landscapes/
- January 26: Jennifer Ouellette: *Me, Myself and Why: Searching for the Science of Self*. Skeptics Society, Cal Tech, Pasadena. <http://www.skeptic.com/upcoming-lectures/>
- February 16: Dr. Charles Adler: *Wizards, Aliens, and Starships: Physics and Math in Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Skeptics Society, Cal Tech, Pasadena. <http://www.skeptic.com/upcoming-lectures/>

Upcoming Events Outside of California:

- April 17-20: American Atheists National 2014 Convention. Speakers include Chris Kluwe, Greta Christina, Brian Keith Dalton, Rev. Barry Lynn, PZ Myers, and many others. Salt Lake City, UT. <http://www.atheists.org/convention2014>

HSSB Contact Information

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Newsletter Deadline:

Deadline for submissions to the Secular Circular is midnight, the last day of each month.

HSSB meetings are held on the 3rd Saturday of each month at 2:30 pm, usually in the Patio Room of Vista Del Monte, 3775 Modoc Rd., Santa Barbara. More information is available at our web site: www.SantaBarbaraHumanists.org. At meetings, a donation of \$2 from members and \$5 from non-members is appreciated. First-time visitors are welcome on a complimentary basis.

Annual HSSB membership dues are \$36 for a single person, \$60 for a couple, and \$100 (or more) to become a Society Supporter. One may subscribe to our newsletter only for an annual fee of \$20.

To join HSSB, please send your contact information and a check for your membership dues to HSSB, PO Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130, Attn: Mary Wilk. For membership information contact Mary Wilk at 967-3045, or mwilk@cox.net.

Copies of this newsletter are posted on the HSSB website. Photos are on the website and available via the link

<http://picasaweb.google.com/Humanist.Society.of.Santa.Barbara>

See us on Facebook::



HSSB Calendar

Tuesday, January 14: Board Meeting, 5:30 p.m. Home of **Mary Wilk**. Members invited to attend.

Saturday, January 18: Monthly Meeting : Susan Gerbic: Tales of a Wikipedia Editor: Crowd-Sourced Activism. Vista Del Monte, Patio Room, 2:30 p.m.

Sunday, January 26: (and the last Sunday of every month), 10 a.m., **Secular Sunday Brunch** for humanists, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, freethinkers, singles, couples and families without religion. No cover charge; membership not required. Pay only for your food, drink and tips. Cody's Cafe, 4898 Hollister Ave. in the Turnpike Center, Goleta in the room to the right as you enter the restaurant. For information phone Board member, Mary Wilk at 805-967-3045.

Tuesday, February 11: Board Meeting. 5:30 p.m. Home of **Mary Wilk**. Members invited to attend.

Saturday, February 15: Monthly Meeting: Floyd Sanford, Channeling Darwin, Fe Bland Auditorium at SBCC, 2:30 p.m.



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