



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

NOVEMBER 2016

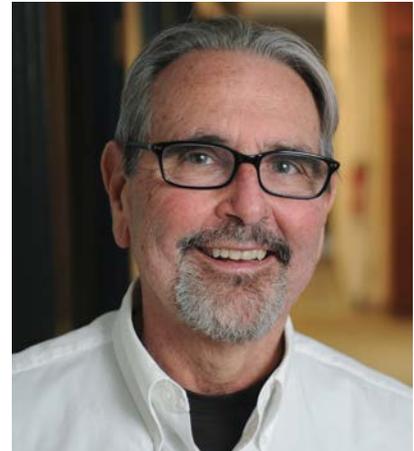
November Program:

Jerry Roberts:

What Just Happened: Analysis of the 2016 Elections

The extraordinary campaign for president spotlighted by the startling rise of Donald Trump, revealed giant fissures and powerful cross-currents shaping the U.S. political landscape that are likely to have long-range national economic and cultural impacts.

At the same time, California remains the antithesis of Trumpism, and ever-deeper blue state that stands as a bastion of Democratic Party dominance, progressive ideas and policies, representing the left-liberal boundary in an increasingly polarized country.



Veteran political journalist Jerry Roberts will discuss the results and implications of November's national and state elections at the Humanists Society November meeting.

Jerry Roberts has covered California and national politics for more than 40 years, as a reporter, editor, author, blogger and broadcast commentator.

When: Saturday, November 19th, 2016

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

Time: Meet at 2:30pm for socializing and light refreshments provided by HSSB. Program begins at 3:00 pm

Donation: \$2 members/\$5 non-members. Students with ID are free.

Optional Buffet Dinner: Dinner buffet at Vista del Monte. \$25 includes tax and tip. RSVP to Nan Cisney by 12 noon on Thursday, November 17th: cisneynan@gmail.com

For More Info: Call 805-769-4772 (769-HSSB)

Activities

Don't forget that we have a wonderful buffet dinner following the Saturday program on November 19th. The menu is mixed green salad, pork chops with mushrooms, vegetable quiche, rosemary potatoes, acorn squash, capri vegetables and herbed breadsticks, accompanied by red, white and rose wines, and followed by chef's choice dessert. Cost is \$25 per person, which includes tax, tip and wine. RSVP to cisneynan@gmail.com no later than 12 noon, Thursday, November 17th. You can submit your payment to Nan before 3 p.m. on Saturday, before the program begins. If you are paying by check, make it payable to Humanist Society. **Please note:** It is very important to RSVP for the dinner and then attend it if you have signed up for it; otherwise, HSSB has to pay for no-shows.

Sunday Brunch

The Sunday Brunch, which normally has occurred on the last Sunday of every month and takes place at Cody's Restaurant, will be temporarily suspended for the months of November and December, due to the various holiday activities at this time of the year. Watch for announcements for the brunch starting in 2017.

Welcome to New Members!

Jill Breedon, Santa Barbara

President's Column: It's Rigged! It's Rigged! Roger Schlueter

You've probably seen the headlines or seen various political pundits on TV make the claim that the 2016 president election is rigged, although exactly how this is being done or by whom is left quite vague. We do know that Donald Trump himself is referring to voter

fraud because he has been recruiting people to monitor certain (**wink* *wink**) polling places. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott recently claimed, "The fact is voter fraud is rampant."

This type of fraud involves people voting multiple times or impersonating some other voter. Other types of voter fraud, such as dead people still on the voter rolls or people being registered in multiple places, may also take place but cannot be detected by monitoring polling places on election day.

How big a problem is voter fraud? A widely cited study looked at 14 years of voting and found 31 incidents involving 241 *possibly* fraudulent ballots. I stress "possible" because not all of these examples were proven to be actual fraud. That's out of 1 billion ballots cast. To put that number in context, on average you are 1000 times more likely to get hit by lightning than a case of voter fraud taking place.

So, no problem. Right? Grab your ballot and go cast your carefree vote.

NO! Not so fast. Significant rigging of election has taken place and will substantially affect the results of the 2016 election. Voter fraud is indeed insignificant but gerrymandering of districts in 2010 after the census has, in my opinion, created a case of electoral fraud. Let's take a look at this type of political slight-of-hand starting with a short history of how current district lines have been drawn.

Obama was president in 2008 for the 2010 mid-term election, which historically favors the opposition party. This tilt was exacerbated by the fact that Obama was quite unpopular at the time. The GOP realized that it was also the election which would, to a large extent, affect the redistricting process after the 2010 census. They seized the opportunity and, by spending over \$30 million at the state level, took control of two-thirds of state legislative chambers.

This gave them control of the redistricting process in most of those states. They then used the emerging technology combining extensive census data and mapping software to carve out the most advantageous district lines possible. The result on the House of Representatives was and remains quite dramatic.

For example, in Michigan, Obama won the state by 10 points and incumbent Senator Stabenow won by 20 points, yet the Michigan House delegation included nine Republicans out of a total of 14 seats. In Ohio, Obama also won the state, but sent 12 Republican Representatives to the House, compared to just four Democrats. Finally, in 2012, a year Obama won a convincing victory, Democrats earned 1.4 million more votes than Republicans yet only gained eight more seats.

We can see two side effects of this undemocratic imbalance. One is the increased partisanship now evident in the current election. Second, because so many seats are basically “safe” for either party, both parties tend to elect more extreme candidates in the primaries, who then have an easy path to victory in the general election.

We Humanists include in our principles a strong support for the small-d democratic process. We should be firmly opposed to the gerrymandering that exists in our nation. One solution to the problem is to take the redistricting process out of the hands of the politicians and give it to a nonpartisan

commission on a state-by-state basis. California, among other states, has successfully done that. I hope our fellow Humanists nationwide have a similar success.

November 15 is “Openly Secular Day.” Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are!

John Rafferty

Here’s a fun idea: On November 15, tell someone you know, someone who doesn’t know much about you—say a co-worker, doorman, bartender, friend-of-a-friend—“I’m a humanist” (or “atheist,” “agnostic,” “freethinker,” “rationalist,” “skeptic,” or the all-inclusive “secular”).

Openly Secular Day, brainchild of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, is a celebration of secular people opening up and coming out about their secular worldview, and an opportunity for theistic allies to show their support for secular friends and family. It’s a day to help others understand who we are, what our values are, and how we think. The Openly Secular movement—including the American Humanist Association, the Secular Student Alliance, the Center for Inquiry, the Secular Coalition for America, the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, the Richard Dawkins Foundation and American Atheists—is dedicated to overcoming real and perceived anti-atheist prejudice.

Therefore, Openly Secular Day will help people realize they already know good and compassionate atheist, agnostic, humanist and nonreligious people. So celebrate Openly Secular Day by sharing your secularism with someone else in your life.

Who knows? Their reaction may surprise you.

<https://openlysecular.org/>



**October Program:
Donna Lewis:
Scaliageddon? Chaos or Status Quo
after Scalia's Last Term
Robert Bernstein**

Lawyer and engineer Donna Lewis said she has been a Humanist ever since reading Kurt Vonnegut as a young woman. She had already left the Catholic church a few years earlier.

She began her talk on the Supreme Court by establishing some terms of “legalese,” and then some “Scalegalese” to contrast with the terms that Justice Scalia used. Scalia used terms like “argle-bargle,” “pure applesauce,” “interpretive jiggery-pokery,” “somersaults of statutory interpretation” and “mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie.”

He used these terms to criticize the positions of his fellow court members. Quite a contrast to the tradition of politely saying you believe your colleague is mistaken.

Jeffrey Toobin of the *New Yorker* characterized Scalia as “belligerent with his colleagues, dismissive of his critics and nostalgic for a world where outsiders knew their place and stayed there.” Margaret Talbot of the *New Yorker* described his opinions as “the jurisprudential equivalent of smashing a guitar on stage.”

Where did Scalia get his information? Lewis described him as “living in a bubble.” He got his news from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Times* (not the *Washington Post*) and “conservative talk radio.”

What did Scalia do on the Court?

He helped “eviscerate” the Voting Rights Act. Hundreds of counties immediately responded by changing their voting laws, apparently to disenfranchise voters. There are not enough

ACLU’s and NAACP’s to check the effects. Scalia also blocked Obama’s climate change legislation.

In larger terms, Scalia changed the entire way the Court interpreted statutes. Before Scalia, the Court looked at the legislative history of statutes and saw the Constitution as a living document. Scalia invented the idea of “originalism” which was nearly the opposite. He would only look at the language in the statute. Yet, for Constitutional matters, he would only apply the beliefs of the framers at the time it was written.



HSSB President Roger Schlueter (L) and our October speaker Donna Lewis (R). Photo by Robert Bernstein.

Scalia cavalierly said that if Congress wanted a change in Constitutional interpretation, they should amend the Constitution itself. Obviously, that is impractical every time a new device is invented or a new industry develops.

Lewis went on to give some detailed accounts of cases where Scalia's position was rather shocking to those who are sensitive to basic civil and human rights.

Montgomery v. Louisiana involved a 10th grader, Henry Montgomery, who committed a murder. He was sentenced to death. On appeal, it was pointed out that the prosecutor had used racial epithets to speak of Montgomery's lawyers. There were Klan cross burnings announced in

advance of the trial. These and other racial bias factors got Montgomery re-sentenced to life without parole.

The Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that it made no sense to give life without parole sentences to juveniles. Their brains are not fully formed. There has to be at least the possibility of later release. In the case of Montgomery, he was 69 years old and a model prisoner as of 2015.

Scalia dissented, saying, "It will be very difficult for judges and juries to decide whether defendants were incorrigible decades after they were originally sentenced." He thought Montgomery should die in prison.

Then there was *Fisher v. University of Texas*. The case involved consideration of race in admissions, and it came before the Supreme Court twice. Scalia shocked the nation by saying out loud in his oral argument, "It does not benefit African Americans to get into the University of Texas where they do not do well, as opposed to having them go to a less-advanced school, a slower-track school where they do well."

In this case and in the other cases Lewis cited, Scalia's vote (or his absence) did not actually make any difference. In the Fisher case, Scalia died before the final ruling was made. Most decisions of the Court are not ideological.

Why did Scalia's vote make so little difference? Because close Supreme Court votes are not as common as most people think. Since Scalia's death, there have been 54 Supreme Court rulings. Only four of them were 4-4 ties. Mechanisms exist for avoiding most deadlocks, e.g., making narrower rulings. Justice Elena Kagan credits Chief Justice Roberts for working harder for consensus. She predicts far less chaos in the future than the status quo.

Lewis was intrigued by the 91% correlation between Scalia's votes and Justice Thomas'. She

wondered if they were buddies outside the court. After all, Scalia and Ginsburg were opera fans together outside the court even though they were polar opposites ideologically. Lewis did extensive Google image searches and could only find one photo showing where Scalia and Thomas were together, other than an official Court photo. It was during the inauguration of President Obama. They were not even seated in the same row.

I asked Ms. Lewis why Justice Thomas says almost nothing on the Court. She thinks he is not stupid. She thinks he just does not want to have to do the work necessary to make his case in oral argument. He is happy to let other conservatives do that work. He would not resign, though, because he wants his vote to count.

Later I asked a bigger question: Even though Scalia's actual vote mattered very rarely, what about his rhetoric? Was he like Donald Trump in breaking through barriers of what could be said? More important: Did Scalia change the entire view of the Supreme Court's role?

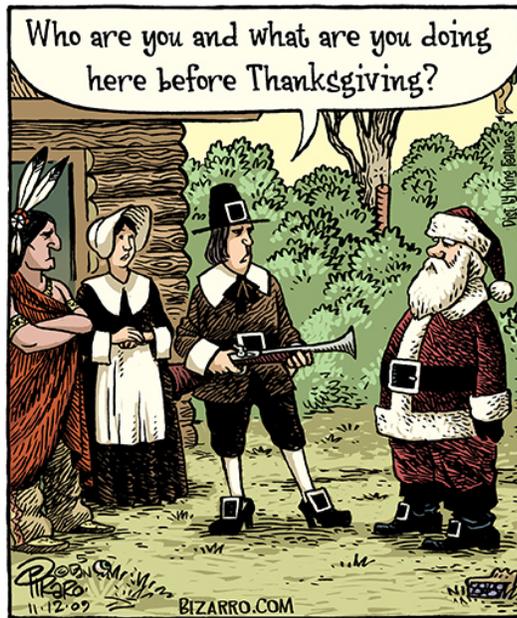
Lewis affirmed that these are both very real effects. "The court has already applied his originalism approach enough to make it a Supreme Court norm. The good news is that the remaining justices are not likely to push this further than Scalia already did, in her view.

If Hillary Clinton wins, Lewis said, we will end up moving to a more balanced court, either with confirmation of Garland, a centrist, or with a more liberal appointee.

If Trump wins? She fears the most dire situation for our country in every way.

Note for readers of our newsletter: You can listen to Donna Lewis's talk here:

<http://www.santabarbarahumanists.org/article/9778-audio-of-donna-lewis-oct-2016-about-supreme-court>



Secular Academy

SecularActivism.org is a non-profit educational project which offers online webinars, forums, and workshops on important projects vital to non-religious people and leaders advancing the secular movement.

The November class is *Naturalism as a Worldview: How to Build a Sound Philosophy of Life*, with Dr. Richard Carrier. In this class, you will learn how to develop and defend your own naturalistic worldview from studying and critiquing a model example, and how to employ a naturalist worldview in your daily lives and your understanding of the world. Learn the basics of how to develop and test a philosophy of epistemology (theory of knowledge), metaphysics (theory of existence), ethics (theory of morality), aesthetics (theory of beauty), and politics (theory of government), using logical, evidence-based reasoning.

The class is based on assigned readings, lectures, and weekly class discussion online with Dr. Carrier, who has a Ph.D. in the history of philosophy from Columbia University.

Registration is \$69 and the deadline for the November class is November 10th.

Information about the class is at this link: <http://secularactivism.org/?p=850>

Secular Academy information here: <http://secularactivism.org/>

CSICON Las Vegas 2016 Diane Krohn

Wayne Beckman and I attended the CSICON 2016 in Las Vegas, NV, October 27th to the 29th. As usual with these conferences, it presented a wide variety of topics and many good speakers. Here are some summaries of some of the talks.

Carol Tavris: Why We Believe Long After We Shouldn't.

Carol Tavris is a social psychologist and author. Probably her best-known work is the book, *Mistakes Were Made, (But Not By Me)*, published in 2007.

Tavris' talk focused on cognitive dissonance, the state of discomfort one feels when two beliefs contradict each other, or when a deeply-held belief is disconfirmed by evidence. There are three fundamentals of cognitive biases:

- The bias that we are unbiased;
- The bias that we are smarter, kinder, better educated, etc. than average;
- The confirmation bias; the tendency to search for, interpret, or believe information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs.

As we go through life, we make many choices; and as soon as we make a decision, we see only what makes that decision right. The more we see ourselves as good skeptics, we become more certain in our choices.

As skeptics, we need to know when to let go of our beliefs and opinions. This can be done by admitting the mistake, and separating it from your self-esteem. It does not make you any less worthy, but you should try to correct for any harm. Tavriss ended with a memorable quote from Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, when addressing the fact that his friend, Ronald Reagan, had visited the cemetery at Bitburg, Germany, where 49 Nazi-Waffen SS officers were buried. Peres did not condemn Reagan personally nor minimize the seriousness of the action, but he took a different course. He stated, "When a friend makes a mistake, the friend remains a friend and the mistake remains a mistake." Something we should all keep in mind in these days of polarizing politics!

Maria Konnikova: Confidence Games: Why We Fall for Them Every Time.

Maria Konnikova is a contributing writer for the *New Yorker* magazine and is author of several books, including the bestseller, *The Confidence Game*.

Konnikova started her talk with a story about a young girl who was found in Dublin and led authorities to believe that she was a teenage sex-trafficking victim from eastern Europe. She did not speak English, and she drew pictures of herself apparently being raped. The Irish police released a picture of her in an effort to find her identity, and the Irish authorities spent \$375,000 on the investigation before finding out that she was a 26-year old Australian con-artist, Samantha Azzopardi.

Konnikova then went on to discuss how stories can usually be good, but can also be used for bad things. A con artist is an actor, tells a good story, and the victim wants to be the good guy and helpful. Stories transport us emotionally and make it harder to view something critically.

Con artists aren't always in it for the money, but sometimes for power and control. Konnikova gave another example of a famous

con artist, Ferdinand Demara, known as "The Great Imposter." Demara's many impersonations included a ship's doctor, a civil engineer, a Benedictine monk, a Trappist monk, a cancer researcher, and a teacher. The most interesting impersonation, that of a ship's surgeon in the Royal Canadian Navy during the Korean War, resulted in him performing surgery on 16 combat casualties, including one requiring major chest surgery. None of the injured men died as a result of the surgeries – Konnikova said probably due to the generous use of antibiotics. He never seemed to seek or get monetary gain from his various impersonations, but he got power and respectability.

Interview: Richard Dawkins interviewed by Jamy Ian Swiss.

Magician Jamy Ian Swiss talked with evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dawkins, covering topics ranging from the origins of life, skepticism vs. atheism, and the big question in biology – which, according to Dawkins, is the neuroscience of consciousness. Evolution has achieved it, but we don't understand it.

On the origins of life, the origin of self-replicating molecules is still a mystery. We probably will never know the answer because of the time span (approximately 4 billion years) and different earth conditions. The current top theory is the RNA world theory, because RNA can do the same job as proteins, and it can also replicate. But this question may never be resolved.

Swiss and Dawkins engaged in a lengthy discussion of whether one can be considered a skeptic, yet still have some false beliefs. The example is that of Bill Maher, who is an outspoken atheist, yet he is an anti-vaxxer. I'm not sure they resolved this question, and it's something that we all need to consider for our own beliefs as well.

Stuart Vyse: Is Brain Training a Scam?

Stuart Vyse is a psychologist and writer, whose articles have appeared in the *Washington Post*, and the *Atlantic*, among others. He has a column in the *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine.

Vyse focused his talk on Lumosity, which is a big business. It had 70 million members as of January 2015. Lumosity claims that its various games improve memory, attention, and problem-solving. In October 2014, a statement put out by 70 neuroscientists said that these brain-training programs have no demonstrated value. But in December 2014, a statement put out by 100 neuroscientists said that yes, these programs do have value.

How to determine if the program works or not? The studies need to be looked at, with respect to who is sponsoring the studies? Is there a conflict of interest? Why was the study done?

In January 2016, the Lumosity company agreed to a \$50 million settlement to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) over claims of false advertising.

In September 2016, an article was published in the *Journal of Science in the Public Interest*, "Do Brain Training Programs Work?" The results of this reliable, controlled study showed that Lumosity-style games does make one better at other Lumosity-style games, there is no broad transferable cognitive effects to any other areas of life. The best thing to do to stay sharp at a specific activity is to practice that activity directly.

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More talk summaries will show up in the December issue of *The Secular Circular*. But where else, other than a skeptics conference, could your view of the stage be blocked by Richard Dawkins (he sat right in front of me!!).

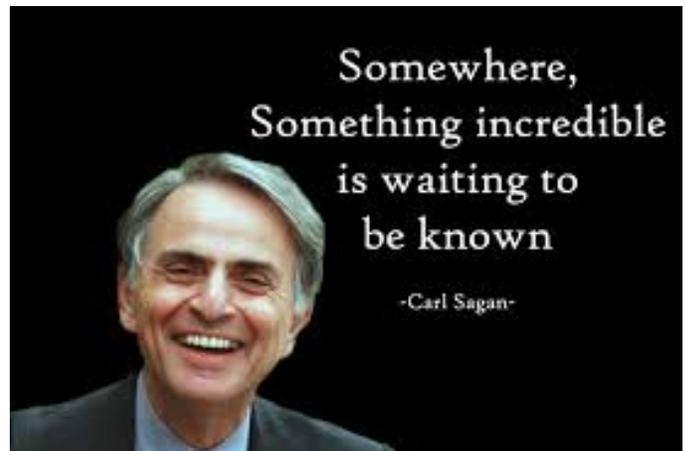
Carl Sagan Day

November 9th is Carl Sagan Day, a day to honor Carl Sagan and celebrate the beauty and wonder of the cosmos he so eloquently described.

Carl Sagan was a Professor of Astronomy and Space Science and Director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell University, but most of us know him as a Pulitzer Prize winning author and the creator of COSMOS. That Emmy and Peabody award-winning PBS television series transformed educational television when it first aired in 1980, but now, thirty years later, it's gone on to affect the hearts and minds of over a billion people in sixty countries.

Carl Sagan Day is a day of celebration of space exploration. A day to wear turtleneck sweaters and brown jackets. A day to eat apple pie and sing whale songs. A day to look at the stars and be flabbergasted by the awesome machinery of nature.

November 9th, a day to remember Carl Sagan and promote critical thinking while having billions of fun.



Non-HSSB Events of Interest

Upcoming Events in California:

- November 6: Tom Flynn: *The Trouble With Christmas*. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles.
[http://www.centerforinquiry.net/la/events/The trouble with christmas/](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/la/events/The%20trouble%20with%20christmas/)
- November 20: Rachael Bernstein: *Cults: How Mind Control Enslaves, and How to Help People Break Free*. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles.
[http://www.centerforinquiry.net/la/events/cults how mind control enslaves and how to help people break free/](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/la/events/cults%20how%20mind%20control%20enslaves%20and%20how%20to%20help%20people%20break%20free/)
- December 4: Marty Klein: *On Sex and Porn: Two Perspectives*. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles.
[http://www.centerforinquiry.net/la/events/on sex and porn two perspectives/](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/la/events/on%20sex%20and%20porn%20two%20perspectives/)
- January 13-15, 2017: Logical LA: Changing the World Through Skepticism and Critical Thinking. Speakers include Sean Carroll, Donald Prothero, Eugenie Scott, Dan Barker, and many others. Los Angeles.

Upcoming Events Outside of California:

- November 11-19: Skepticon 9: The annual skeptics conference in Springfield, MO. Speakers include Greta Christina, Rebecca Watson, Laura Thomas, Carrie Poppy, and others, of course. Springfield, MO.
<https://skepticon.org/>

"We can judge our progress by the courage of our questions and the depth of our answers, our willingness to embrace what is true rather than what feels good."

--Carl Sagan

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. Students are free with a Student ID.

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 805-967-3045 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





Humanist Society of
Santa Barbara
PO Box 30232
Santa Barbara, CA 93130

HSSB Calendar

Tuesday November 15: Board Meeting: 5:30 p.m. Home of **Mary Wilk**. Members invited to attend.

Tuesday November 15: Openly Secular Day! Tell one person that you are openly secular.

Saturday November 19: Monthly Meeting: Jerry Roberts will speak on the 2016 National elections; the Patio Room at Vista del Monte. Meet at 2:30 p.m. for socializing and light refreshments. Talk starts at 3:00 p.m. Optional buffet dinner after the talk at Vista del Monte.

Tuesday December 13: Board Meeting: 5:30 p.m. Home of **Mary Wilk**. Members invited to attend.

Saturday December 17: Winter Solstice Party! Plans are still being formalized. The December Secular Circular will have further information.