



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

SEPTEMBER 2020

Please join us for our September Speaker Meeting on Zoom...

Mark Boslough – Climate Literacy Toolkit



Mark Boslough

Where do you stand on the issue of climate change? How effectively do you speak to others about it? Would you consider yourself to be: 1) Alarmed, 2) Concerned, 3) Cautious, 4) Disengaged, 5) Doubtful, or 6) Dismissive? These labels describe the “Six Americas” as defined by the [Yale Program on Climate Communication](http://www.yale.edu/ClimateComm).

Mark Boslough’s talk will describe the “Six Americas” and provide useful tools for communicating with people who are in other climate change “belief” groups- skills which can also be applied to other realms of “belief” differences (religious, political, etc.). Three lucky volunteers will be assigned roles to demonstrate the communication skills for all attendees. For more background, review the Yale Report at the link above.

Mark Boslough is a Caltech-trained physicist and CSI Fellow who works at Los Alamos National Laboratory on planetary defense. He previously worked at Sandia National Laboratories researching hypervelocity impacts, energetic materials, explosions, global risk of asteroid impacts, and climate change. He has participated in many science documentaries with field expeditions to airburst locations including the Libyan Desert of Egypt (2006), Tunguska (2008), Chelyabinsk (2013), and the Nevada Test Site (2017). He is now a research professor at the University of New Mexico. He developed a Climate Literacy Toolkit course to enable Earth & Planetary Science graduate students to communicate more effectively with non-science acquaintances. His asteroid research is focused on computational modeling of airbursts, their physical effects, and their contribution to the global hazard. Asteroid 73520 Boslough (2003 MB1) is named after him.

When: Saturday, September 19, via Zoom. Log in as early as 2:45 pm. Program begins at 3pm.

Where: Zoom link <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89880418328>. For those ONLY joining with phone audio, dial 1-669-900-9128 then enter meeting id 898 8041 8328#

COVID-19 Pandemic Models Update

Dave Flattery will present his 8th update on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sunday September 27th at 3pm. All are invited to attend.

When: Sunday September 27th at 3pm Pacific/6pm Eastern.

Where: Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82598900099>.



Dave Flattery

The HSSB Secular Circular – September 2020

Bruce Gleason

Examining Woo – August 15, 2020

By Robert Bernstein

Bruce Gleason described his talk as "A presentation about all things magical, mystical, and absolutely, totally useless including non-scientific medical procedures, religion-based infomercial scams, homeopathy, GMOs, and gay conversion therapy."

As the founder of the Backyard Skeptics, Bruce Gleason has placed numerous billboards supporting the secular community. He also creates two conferences: LogiCal-LA, a scientific skeptics' event, and the Freethought Alliance Conference for atheists, agnostics, and church-state separatists.

In his talk overview he said he would talk about:

- Conspiracy theories
- Pseudo-science medical treatments
- Non-medical supernatural claims
- Why we believe weird things
- Why "woo" is dangerous
- How we can tell what is more likely true.

He said that we might feel uncomfortable when our own currently held beliefs are challenged. We can only know what is true through investigation and we must continually monitor our own confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is a tendency that we all have to notice evidence that confirms what we want to believe and ignore evidence to the contrary.

Gleason gave the Urban Dictionary definition of Woo-woo. It includes New Age theories such as energy work, crystal magic, bizarrely restrictive diets, conspiracy theories, and supernatural, paranormal, or psychic occurrences.

He defined Scientific Skepticism as a "practical, epistemological position in which one questions the veracity of claims lacking empirical evidence." He went on to talk about conspiracy theories. He said these involve an illegal or harmful act carried out by a government or other powerful actors. He gave

some examples of conspiracy theories involving: 9/11, who killed JFK, "chemtrails", the Moon landing, cell phones causing cancer, alien sex experiments, and even flat Earth theories.



If the Earth was Flat V01 Poster by Lidra.

Source: Redbubble.com

It is important to consider what else would have to be true if these conspiracy theories were true. In the case of the Moon landing, thousands of people worked at NASA and they would all have to be in on it.

People turn to such theories to have a sense of control and to express distrust for authority. It also provides a certain status to be in on something that most people don't know.

Gleason moved on to pseudoscience medical treatments. Pseudoscience has the appearance of science but involves practices that are incompatible with the scientific method.

He borrowed slides from a friend depicting "Foot Reflexology". This claims to map each organ of the body to a specific part of each foot. In general, parts higher on the body are closer to the toes; lower organs are closer to the heels.

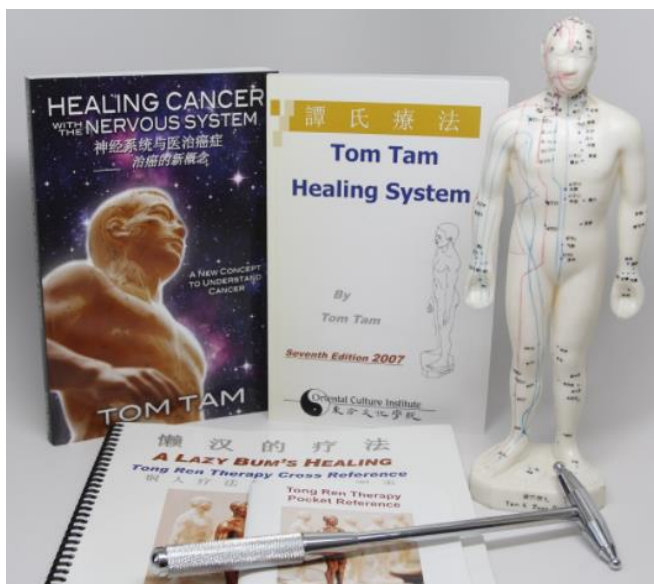
Reflexology may be harmless; but Train Track Therapy is a practice in Indonesia involving lying on railroad tracks and feeling the vibrations in the body as the train approaches. What could possibly go wrong?



Train track Therapy in Indonesia. *Source: AP*

Bruce lives near Knott's Berry Farm where crystals with claims of supernatural powers are sold.

How about combining acupuncture and voodoo? From the Tong Ren web site: "In a typical session, the Tong Ren practitioner uses a lightweight, magnetic hammer to tap specific points on a small anatomical model of the human body, which serves



Tong Ren Education System.
Source: Tongrenshop.com

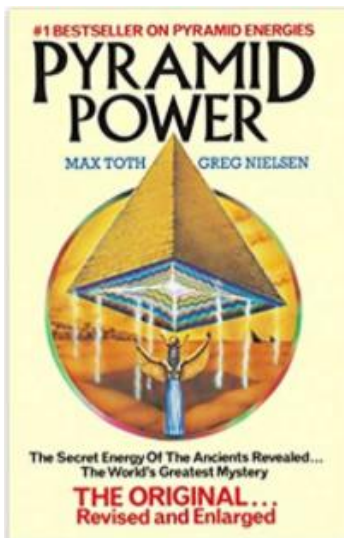
as an energetic representation of the patient." Really.

Gleason said that Kinesiology is "completely useless". The claim is that "energy" can flow from a practitioner to a child or dog through a responsible adult. But two Chat comments indicated there is a version that has a basis in fact.

[Editor's Note: *Careerexplorer.com* defines kinesiology as: "the use of muscle testing to identify imbalances in the body's structural, chemical, and emotional energy. Kinesiologists undertake years of training to be able to access the movement of energy - or what the Chinese call Chi - around the body and brain. They look for ways to improve the efficiency and performance of the human body while at work or at play by studying the factors that influence human movement. They establish the body's priority healing needs, and evaluate energy changes brought about by a broad spectrum of therapeutic procedures... Kinesiologists tap into energies that other modalities do not assess. They look beyond the symptoms, and do not diagnose or treat named diseases. In fact, they do not limit themselves to dealing with ailments, since energy balancing can bring a person closer to achieving any goal of their choice, whether in sport, relationships, learning or coping with life in general. They are concerned with imbalances in the body's energy, and in this respect, have close links with the acupuncture concept of energy flow. A kinesiologist recognizes that there are flows of energy within the body that relate not only to the muscles but to every tissue and organ that go to make the body a living, feeling being...."

Wikipedia defines kinesiology as "the scientific study of human or non-human body movement. Kinesiology addresses physiological, biomechanical, and psychological dynamic principles and mechanisms of movement. Applications of kinesiology to human health (i.e., human kinesiology) include biomechanics and orthopedics; strength and conditioning; sport psychology; motor control; skill acquisition and motor learning; methods of rehabilitation, such as

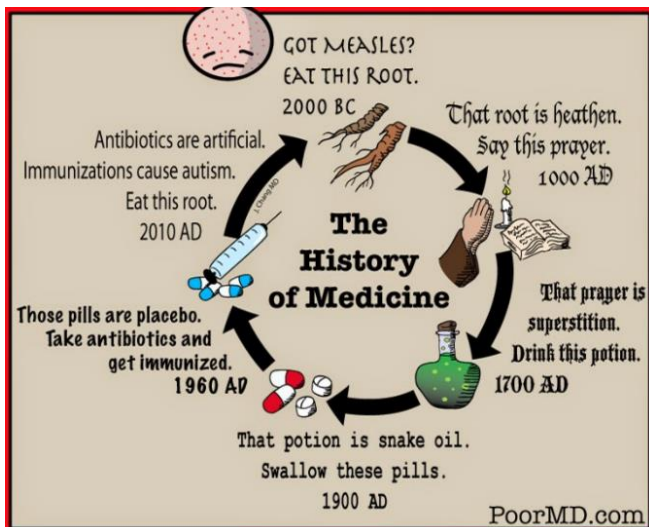
physical and occupational therapy; and sport and exercise physiology. Studies of human and animal motion include measures from motion tracking systems, electrophysiology of muscle and brain activity, various methods for monitoring physiological function, and other behavioral and cognitive research techniques.” It behooves one to know which flavor of kinesiologist you are working with! – ed.]



"Pyramid Power" was big in the 1970s, presumably based on the use of pyramids for burial in Egypt. The claim was that if you placed food under a pyramid it would be preserved like the mummies of old. It would also sharpen razor blades and enhance plant growth. I became aware of this from spoof article by

Martin Gardner in the June 1974 issue of Scientific American.

He quickly glossed over Herbal Medicine while admitting this should get more attention. It has been said that there is no such thing as "alternative medicine". There is medicines that work and those that do not.



"Ear Candling" is a technique I actually experienced. As some of you know I was hit by a car in 2002 and had a long recovery with a lot of pain. My doctors sent me for a number of treatments, including acupuncture. The acupuncturist did this practice of burning a hollow candle in my ear, supposedly drawing out bad substances.

"Taping" of muscles is another "energy" treatment with no basis in fact.

Gleason claimed that these oils were ineffective as treatments: Coconut, Palm, Fish and Cannabis. But he said Fish Oil may help heart patients.

Homeopathy is based on the claim that "like cures like" in a very special way: diluting a substance is supposed to make it more potent. Their dilutions can be so extreme that there would not be even one molecule in a container the size of the Earth's orbit. Homeopathy claims to treat a huge list of maladies. This in itself is a "Red Flag". France is outlawing homeopathic treatments, even though a majority of the population uses them!

As with many ineffective treatments, real harm is possible. Some products are contaminated. Proper treatments can be delayed and homeopathy proponents spread other dangerous false beliefs about valid treatments.

Notably, there are claims, sometimes based on correlations, that vaccines cause autism. Those same correlations will show that autism has increased with the rise in organic food sales! Measles and Whooping Cough are now on the rise as a result of anti-vax propaganda.

Gleason took special aim at celebrity anti-vax and pseudoscience promoters: Oprah gave us Dr. Oz and the fake "Doctor" Phil. Gwyneth Paltrow, Jenny McCarthy, and Jim Carrey have also done harm.

"Naturopathy" comes from a distrust of traditional medicine and uses diet, exercise and massage.

Are Woo medicine people stupid? Some are smart; some are doctors. Hydroxychloroquine for COVID-19 has been promoted by real doctors.

Listener Marilyn cut in to say that her son is in Pharma and says Hydroxychloroquine may be effective. Gleason answered that this is "anecdotal" and not evidence. Jim noted via Chat that it is evidence, just weak.

Gleason went on to discuss the Placebo Effect. A person will respond more to a ten dollar placebo than a five dollar placebo. Even if they know they are placebos!

Televangelist Peter Popoff claimed miracle cures. He roped people in by seeming to read peoples' minds. In fact, his wife was transmitting information via radio to him. Magician James Randi helped expose this fraud.

Randi appeared on the Johnny Carson show to demonstrate fraudulent medical practices. Notably "psychic surgery". Randi offered a million dollars for any proof of a supernatural phenomenon. CFI-Los Angeles is currently offering a \$250,000 prize "to anyone who can show, under *scientific testing conditions*, significant evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power." [The application is available here.](#)

The Amazing Randi also successfully challenged the ability of dowsers to find water.

Gleason mentioned the mythical vortexes in Sedona, Arizona. I was there recently and was invited to experience the vortexes personally. Maybe I am dull, but I did not sense them.

Gleason went on to talk about Gay Conversion Therapy. This is "really horrible". Some "pray the gay away". He talked of a group that had gay men play football together and shower together as a "therapy".

He gave a list of other non-medical pseudo-science claims: Astral Projection (intentional out-of-body travel/experience), Mental Projection, Dimensional

Awareness, Empathy, Mediumship, Psychometry, (the supposed ability to discover facts about an event or person by touching inanimate objects associated with them), Telepathy, Precognition, Oneiromancy (using dreams to foretell the future), Premonition, Astrological Divination, Numerology, Abacomancy (interpretation of the patterns in dust, dirt, sand, or the ashes of the recently deceased).



Abacomancy: reading the future by interpreting patterns in the dust. Source: ocultopedia.com.



Source: sassysybil.com.

GMOs (Genetically Modified Foods) have created a lot of attention. He said that there are no reports of ill effects from ingesting GMOs. GMOs are far more widespread than people may realize. He noted that many involve single nucleotide changes. Jim pointed out this still could have a significant effect.

GMOs may be engineered for several purposes such as using less insecticide, creating better texture or flavor, requiring less water, soil and energy, having better crop yields, better nutrition or longer shelf life.

Humans are easily fooled to believe "weird things" due to a fallacy "post hoc, ergo propter hoc". We see patterns and make associations even when there is no causal connection.

He recommends the site WhatsTheHarm.net to track the harm done by fake treatments in terms of deaths, injuries and economic damages.

In some cases the fake treatment practitioners will tell patients that the pain they are feeling is a sign that the treatment is working!

How do you know what is true? Anecdotal stories can be misleading. In general, a consensus of scientists in a field will give something close to the truth unless the field is very new, in which case evidence is still coming in.

One valuable tool is to look at studies of studies (i.e. meta-studies) and it is always important to look at the size of individual studies.

He recommends snopes.com to check suspect claims. I personally will never re-post something I have seen online until I have checked it there first.

He also recommends the BBC Radio 4 podcast [More or Less](#) and the podcast [Skeptoid](#) (note Skeptoid host Brian Dunning was our November 2017 HSSB speaker). Gleason also recommends the site [Science Based Medicine](#).

At this point Bruce took questions.

I noted that we have to be careful not to reject real conspiracies. I pointed out that when I was a child there were many stories of atrocities being committed by the CIA including torture, assassination, overthrowing democratically elected governments, and giving drugs to people without their knowledge. Senator Frank Church held

Senate hearings in the 1970s that showed these conspiracies were real.

Gleason's answer is that the truth eventually comes out, but I noted that this gets ever more difficult. Reagan sold weapons to one group of terrorists in Iran in order to fund another group of terrorists in Central America in the Iran-Contra scandal. The result of that scandal: new laws that made it illegal to reveal such unlawful activity in the future.

Gleason replied again that eventually the truth comes out.

Marian asked about Prevacen for treating Alzheimer's. A participant pointed out that Prevacen had to pay money for false claims.

Antoni asked about psychedelics as medical and psychiatric treatments. Gleason noted that in his youth he had positive experiences with psychedelics. He has seen these claims of successful treatments but is not yet sure. He noted that "60 Minutes" recently did a story on this that showed great promise.

What A Coincidence!

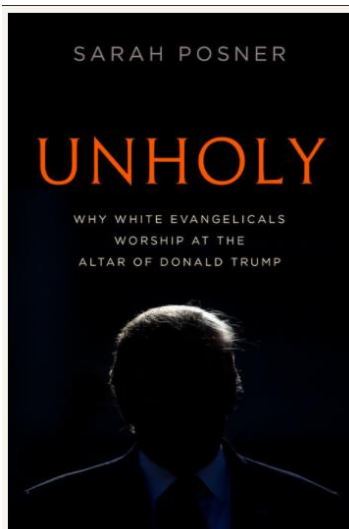
By Judy Flattery

Soon after the Bruce Gleason talk on fraudulent medical practices and other flavors of "woo", my husband, Dave Flattery, received an email about his great-great-great uncle, Dr. Jonathan Flattery, who was a graduate of the Cincinnati Eclectic Medical Institute. Dr. Flattery traveled from place to place in the mid-19th century, setting up shop in local hotel rooms, and advertising his services to cure anything that ails you. He had many addresses. From his ads and news stories about various legal proceedings, we learned he sometimes had a medical license, other times not. He was a saloon keeper in Reno for a while and had a wagon of patent medicine with a carnival style barker named Dexter in St. Paul, MN. Dave is continuing to research this colorful relative and will report his findings in an upcoming issue of *Secular Circular*.

Report on Sarah Posner's Talk: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump – 8/23/2020

By Judy Flattery

The August *Secular Circular's Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists* included a Zoom talk by journalist and author, Sara Posner, sponsored by Atheists United L.A. I attended this talk. Here is a summary of my notes covering key points. For a more complete (and probably more accurate!) discussion, read Sara Posner's new book, *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump*.



Sarah Posner claims that President Trump's strongest base of support are the Religious Right Evangelicals and the Alt-Right.

Religious Right Evangelicals have been organized for decades. They have a robust infrastructure to get out the vote.

81% of Evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016 and 65% to 80% approve of the job he is doing in office. 82% intend to vote for him in 2020. Although Evangelicals represent only 16-17% of all registered voters, they represent 24% of the electorate because they are very reliable in voting. She said they represent 30% of the Republican Party.

Evangelical leaders were skeptical of Trump but came around through "handshake deals". Their support was not only about judges or about overturning Roe vs. Wade. There was no "quid pro quo" on federal judge appointments. Evangelical leaders appreciate Trump well beyond these issues. They meet and pray with him in the White House. They believe "God's hand is on Trump to save America from

liberalism, feminism, and secularism. They feel God has anointed him, explaining that sometimes God picks an unlikely leader to save a nation at a pivotal moment in history."

She connected Trump to purveyors of the Prosperity Gospel (e.g. Florida televangelist and White House aide, Paula White) who say that if you are rich it shows you are in God's favor. "Sow a seed with me and God will give you a supernatural return on your investment. God bestows blessings on Believers, so if you are rich then God has blessed you."



Trump with Spiritual Advisor, Paula White.
Photo Credit: Insider.com

Posner commented that Mary Trump's recent book spoke of the connection between Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*) and Fred Trump. The celebrity status of Norman Vincent Peale and successful televangelists appeals to the President.

Posner said that Evangelicals believe that Christians should have control over spheres of life including government. They know they are not the majority and feel "under siege". They realize that the younger generation is less religious and less white. They want their religious freedom which, to them, means the freedom to use their religious beliefs to justify any actions (e.g. Colorado wedding cake bakery discriminating against LGBTQ customers). A

catch phrase Trump uses, “They will take your religious freedom away,” resonates with this well-organized demographic.

She spoke briefly of QAnon, which the FBI views as a domestic terrorist threat. Q claims to be “blowing the whistle on the ‘Deep State’ which is out to get Trump” (and allegedly, bizarrely involved with child sex trafficking—thus the 2016 “Pizza-gate shooting). QAnon’s catch phrase is “The storm is coming.” They feel that God anointed Trump, therefore the Deep State must be opposed.

Posner traces the modern roots of the evangelical-Republican connection to Barry Goldwater’s “New Right” which was right wing, populist, and Christian. Prior to that Republicans were seen as the gentlemanly “country club” set. The New Right felt their religious freedom was violated when prayer



“In Your Heart You Know He’s Right”
Source: LittleGreenFootballs.com

was removed from public schools and desegregation was imposed. The New Right responded with “segregation academies”.

Posner noted that Bob Jones University lost its tax exempt status due to their policy forbidding inter-racial dating.

Following the New Right came the Moral Majority (which she claims is neither moral nor a majority) founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979.

Social media has allowed these groups to organize and amplify their message out of proportion to their actual numbers.

In contrast, the Alt-Right was described as “disorganized, motley, and hateful”, and often the victims of the serious problem of economic inequality, which she said is getting worse. She mused about why the victims of economic inequality would find the Republican Party appealing. The Alt-Right clearly values Stephen Miller for his tough stance against immigration.

Posner felt that this Trump era is **not** an aberration. She felt that, having tasted power, the white Christian Evangelicals and Alt-Right will not give it up easily. She predicted that if Trump loses she expects that conspiracy theories, blame and scapegoating will intensify. They see Trump as the “Most Pro-Religious Freedom President ever.”

Finally, she recommended a few books for further reading on this topic:

- *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, by Jeff Sharlet
- *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* by Robert P. Jones
- *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, by Frances FitzGerald
- *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, by Kevin M. Kruse
- *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* by Kristin Kobes du Mez
- *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* by Michelle Goldberg

Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

All of these events are online:

- September 6: Dr. Hector Garcia: *Alpha God: Psychology of Religious Violence*. Southern California Secular Leadership Meet Up: [Dr. Hector Garcia](#)
- September 13: Roger Nygard on his new film, *The Truth About Marriage*. Southern California Secular Leadership Meet Up: [Roger Nygard](#)
- September 19: *A Pre-Election Look at the Intersection of Religion and Politics*, Dr. Rebecca Sager, hosted by Rhett Kuseski. Southern California Secular Leadership Meet Up: [Intersection of Religion and Politics](#)
- October 5: Andrew S. Curran: *Speaking of Humanism: Diderot and the Art of Thinking*



Skeptical Bear By Sandra Boynton

Freely. Sponsored by the American Humanist Association. [Speaking of Humanism](#)

- October 11: Andrew Seidel: *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American*. Southern California Secular Leadership Meet Up: [Andrew Seidel](#)

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Deadline for submissions to the Secular Circular is midnight, the last day of each month. Our web site, www.SBHumanists.org, archives current and past issues of the *Secular Circular*.

Annual HSSB membership dues: \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter, and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Non-members may subscribe to hardcopy of this newsletter for an annual fee of \$20. E-mail copies provided to members and interested non-members at no charge.

To join HSSB: Send your contact information and a check for your membership dues made out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara*, to Mary Wilk, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130. For further membership information contact Mary Wilk at mwilk@cox.net.

For more information about HSSB, contact any of the officers at the email or P.O. Box addresses shown above or call 805-769-4772.

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Humanist Society of
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HSSB Calendar

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Saturday Oct 17, 3:00 pm. Judy Flattery, Dave Flattery & Rev. Eileen Epperson. *Atheists, Believers & Anyone In-Between.* An interactive session of speaking & listening across the beliefs which divide us. <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83395449475>.