



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

MARCH 2024

Two Programs in March!!



Dr. Leo Igwe

Critical Thinking and Why it Matters in Africa

Our Program: Critical thinking is necessary for growth, development, and enlightenment in Africa. To combat religious extremism, ignorance, and superstition-based abuses, it is important to foster these cognitive skills in African schools. Dr. Igwe's organization, the Critical Thinking Social Empowerment Foundation, is leading efforts to promote critical thinking skills in schools. It is campaigning for the introduction of the subject of critical thinking in primary and secondary schools.

Our Speaker: Dr. Leo Igwe is a board member of the Humanist Association of Nigeria and of Humanists International. He holds a master's in philosophy, and a doctoral degree in religious studies from the University of Bayreuth in Germany. He wrote his doctoral thesis on witchcraft accusations in Northern Ghana. Dr. Igwe directs of the Advocacy for Alleged Witches and the Critical Thinking Social Empowerment Foundation. He is visiting the Central Coast as part of a 2-month international speaking tour. **Come share a meal and meet him in person!**

When: Thursday March 21, 2024 5:30-7:30 pm PST. Pot luck dinner; bring a dish to share.

Where: IN PERSON At Encina Royale Clubhouse, 250 Moreton Bay Lane, Goleta, CA

(no emotional support animals permitted in the facility; service animals only)

and on Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>

Will California's End-of-Life Law Help You If You Need It?

Our Program: California is one of 11 jurisdictions in the United States that provides Medical Aid In Dying (MAID) for its citizens. Do you know who qualifies for MAID in California, and who does not? We will discuss the current law, its restrictions, and what might be done to amend it to include the many people who are barred from accessing it.



Dr. Marcia Hofer

Our Speaker: Marcia Hofer, Ph.D. is a retired clinical psychologist, a former professional dancer, and an avid gardener and traveler. In 2021, she and her family accompanied her husband, Ricardo, to the Pegasus clinic in Switzerland, where he was able to have a peaceful and painless death. Diagnosed with dementia, Ricardo wished to end his life at home but did not qualify for California's End of Life Option Act. After returning to California, Marcia began to think about the many people who are denied the right to make end-of-life decisions due to the restrictions in the current law. This concern led to the creation of *A Better Exit*.

When: Saturday March 23, 3:00 pm - 4:30 pm PST

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

The HSSB Secular Circular – March 2024

Jeff Jackson: Atheism Goes To The Movies

By Robert Bernstein

Jeff Jackson, a screenwriter and filmmaker from Los Angeles, gave an intriguing talk to HSSB (at the Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation's sanctuary) about the portrayal of atheists in the movies.



Jeff Jackson began his career in the world of advertising. He wrote, directed, and starred in the acclaimed short film, *Our First Fight*, a romantic comedy which toured film festivals around the world. His feature-length screenplay, *White Collared*, a black comedy set in corporate America, won Best Screenplay at the 2010 Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

Jackson is also a playwright. He has also directed theatrical productions in the New York area.

Jackson began his talk noting that he had given this talk several times, but this was the first time he's ever given it in a church! Some audience members replied that the Unitarian Society is not your typical church.

Jackson's presentation began by showing some key ways that entertainment and pop culture have influenced social change.



HSSB President, Judy Flattery and, Jeff Jackson at Live Oak UU 2-18-2024

Photo by Robert Bernstein

He then showed a photo of Elton John performing in the USSR in 1979. Elton John was not the first to do so, but he was the most famous. Others followed his lead: David Bowie, the Eurythmics, Genesis, and others performed at the Berlin Wall in 1987, broadcasting over the wall. Billy Joel performed a six-city tour in the USSR in 1987.

The Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Perhaps there is a connection?

Jackson went on with another example of "entertainment" preceding revolutionary change. *Modern Family* was a sitcom that ran from 2009-2020 featuring a committed gay couple with an adopted daughter.

In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that gay couples could marry in all 50 states in the case *Obergefell v. Hodges*. "There is an irrefutable connection between entertainment and societal change."

What about for atheism? Not yet.

It is rare for atheism even to be mentioned in the movies or on TV. There are a few examples, but they're all negative. Gregory House MD is an atheist. He is also a narcissist, a curmudgeon and "a general asshole".



Jeff Jackson

Photo by Robert Bernstein

In *Dead to Me*; Christina Applegate plays an atheist. She is an alcoholic with anger management issues. *Sunset Limited* stars Tommy Lee Jones and Samuel L. Jackson. The Tommy Lee Jones character is an atheist. He is suicidal and throws himself on subway tracks. The Samuel L. Jackson character is a Christian and rescues him.



Then, in 2011, *The Ledge* was presented as the first pro-atheist feature film ever released in the US. It scored 14% on Rotten Tomatoes, which is probably a good thing. The atheist “hero” Gavin meets a couple. He sleeps with the

religious man’s wife. Of course! Atheists have no morals.

Perhaps the film maker Matthew Chapman is a “self-hating atheist”. The religious husband proposed an Old Testament remedy for adultery: kill the adulterers. The “hero” is faced with the choice of jumping from a ledge or seeing the wife murdered. Not the best promotion of atheism. It seems “atheist” has become convenient shorthand in Hollywood for people with serious emotional problems.

Meanwhile, Hollywood is constantly actively promoting religion, which is the exact opposite of what the Right accuses Hollywood of doing.

In rapid succession Jackson named a series of films that promoted religion and showed images depicting many of them, including these horror movies: *The Exorcist*, *The Conjuring*, *The Shining*, *Evil Dead*, *Carrie*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *The Blair Witch Project*.

Then there are plenty of “regular” films also promoting religion, including: *Heaven Can Wait*, *Bruce Almighty*, *It’s A Wonderful Life*, *Angels in the Outfield*, *Beetlejuice*, *Sister Act*, and, of course, *Oh, God*.

Then there is an entire genre of Bible Stories films, including: *Ben-Hur*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Noah* and *Exodus*.

There are also religious movies made by religious organizations such as Pure Flix (now Pinnacle Peak). Their slogan: “Have faith in your entertainment.” They have 229 feature films, including *God’s Not Dead 1, 2 and 3*!

The deck is clearly stacked against atheism. What is to be done?

Jeff Jackson explained that he was raised Christian: the basic garden variety Protestant

type of Christian. He took it seriously into his 20s. It went away through a slow process of erosion until he was tipped over the edge by meeting his co-worker, Bob.

Bob was a nice guy with a baby. They shared interests. One day Bob mentioned he was an atheist. Bob simply said, “I don’t believe in God.” Nothing dramatic. No arguments. He was not trying to convert anyone.

But that was enough. Jackson saw that this guy, Bob, was clearly a moral family man. And an atheist. There was no turning back.

Performing arts are Jackson’s passion. He is from the New York area. He worked with many people in the industry with good creative talent, including himself. He’s worked with Disney Animation. He knows how to make a good movie. He decided he should stop waiting for someone else to do this. He should make a movie showing atheism in a positive light.



17 attended in person and 41 others on Zoom
Photo by Robert Bernstein

He kicked around story ideas for years. For many years he had a “live and let live” attitude about religion and atheism.

His ex-wife was very Catholic yet didn’t seem to take her faith very seriously. She wanted a Catholic wedding. He knew that a Catholic wedding is a big deal. You have to be interviewed by a priest and go to Pre-Cana classes. He did not want to lie about his beliefs. His fiancée was sweating bullets, afraid of what

the priest might ask. He stayed cool. He would just answer honestly. The priest did not ask any tough questions. Looking back, he wonders what would have happened if that interview went differently?

This experience inspired him to write a romantic comedy. The female star, Melissa, wants to marry a nice young man, Charlie, who is an atheist. Melissa’s mother wants a religious wedding. A young priest interviews Charlie. The priest ends up losing his faith!



The title: *Our G*ddamn Wedding*. The primary goal of the film is to have the audience meet a nice, normal atheist. Jackson’s screenplay got a 90% score from WeScreenplay (a professional screenplay feedback service), which is about as good as it gets.

One reviewer wrote, “There’s a mixture of kooky comedy and strange thematic poignancy here that stands out and showcases that the script is not being too self-important in its thematic cause.”

Another: “You’ve crafted a story that tells a touching, unique story about family and faith.”

Jackson made a short film as a proof of concept. He is now raising money to make the full length feature film. He has put in \$100,000 and needs about \$1 million total. He is about half way there. He hopes others will invest and/or offer connections for him.

He made the case for a very large potential audience. The “Nones” are people who don’t identify with any religion. They are the fastest-growing “religious” category. They make up about 29% of the U.S. adult population!

PEW RESEARCH CENTER | DECEMBER 14, 2021

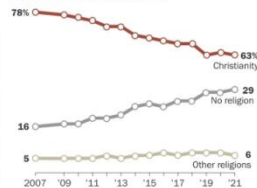
About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated

Self-identified Christians make up 63% of U.S. population in 2021, down from 75% a decade ago



In U.S., roughly three-in-ten adults now religiously unaffiliated

% of U.S. adults who identify with ...



Many streaming platforms are available that would give a chance to such a film.

Watch the [short video](#) on Jackson’s web site and [consider donating to help make the film!](#)

Jackson asked, “Can my low budget indie film change everything? Of course not.” But Elton John was not the first to play in the USSR. Cliff Richard was a minor star who played there first, thus opening the floodgates that would bring about real change. Jackson hopes he can be the “Cliff Richard” in this cause.

Jackson then took questions and comments.

Nancy noted that the title will project humor. Jackson said humor is the best weapon. Romantic comedies are popular, especially on streaming platforms. She also noted that atheists are a growing group. Jackson made a distinction between Nones and atheists. Nones are a rapidly growing demographic, although many identify as “spiritual but not religious”. Self-identified atheists are still a small minority.

Hal asked if he is getting the word out to other Humanist societies in the U.S. Jackson said he attended the Atlanta American Atheist Convention last year and got a good mailing list.

Judy Fontana asked if the people with money and power in Hollywood include many atheists. Jackson said there are some noted figures who are, but they may not come forward. Obviously, there is Bill Maher, Seth McFarlane, Brad Pitt, and Rob Reiner.

Jackson doesn’t want to preach to the choir. His pet peeve isn’t the nasty fundamentalists. His ex-wife bugs him. She goes to church and doesn’t know why. These people don’t examine their beliefs. If religion is so important, it should constantly be reassessed.

A woman in the back said she was raised with religion and brainwashed as a child. She suggested that children should not have religion forced on them until they are of an age where they can decide for themselves.

Jackson said “brainwashed” may be too strong. It’s more about becoming “familiar”. Religion becomes woven into your identity, and it becomes hard to turn your back on your life connections. He talked of people who had to move to another part of the country to escape.

One man asked if Jackson planned to put forth moral behavior that is not church based. Jackson said he didn’t want to get that “heady”. Morality is best done by example. In his case, religious people wanted him to lie to the priest!

Bonnie talked about Bill Maher’s concern that comedians can get canceled for their jokes. She expressed that young people are so quick to cancel others. Jackson said this is true. Ricky Gervais is an atheist comic who talks openly about poking fun at sacred cows.

I asked if GoFundMe can work at this scale. He said it can and he may try it again.

Ron noted that Lennon’s song, *Imagine*, is a well known atheist anthem. Jackson said the Moral Majority tried to ban it from radio stations. *Imagine* speaks of a better future without

religion. This may have helped create the rise of the Nones. It is a great accomplishment. But we still need to take the next step to get to atheism.

One man liked the idea of the priest having a crisis of faith. This really is a thing. Judy Flattery reminded the group of [The Clergy Project](#), which supports clergy who no longer believe. The Clergy Project helps them heal and to get on with their lives. We learned about this in [a talk by Lon Ostrander](#) in January 2022.

This attendee said words (like “atheist”) matter. He claimed Bernie Sanders lost half his possible followers by calling himself a socialist. I said it was just the opposite. Calling himself a socialist was his best selling point. Even people who did not imagine supporting a socialist supported him for his honesty and courage.

Jackson indeed said that he “leans into it” with “atheism”. In an ideal world we don’t even need a word for it. There is no word for people who don’t believe in leprechauns or vampires!

Jackson’s wife, Beth, talked of “chipping away”. Think about *Will and Grace*, or Ellen de Generes; having one gay friend, or one atheist friend like Jackson’s friend, Bob. Jackson agreed. We are not trying to convert people. We are just trying to change perception. I suggested that we are trying to “normalize” atheism and Jackson agreed that is a good term.

Nancy claimed it is an uphill battle to “prove” atheism. Judy Flattery said that the burden of proof is on the person who is making the extraordinary claim.

Jackson made another point: He can’t prove there are no vampires. But he lives his life *as if* there are no vampires.

This was true in my case. In college I had a friend who called himself an atheist. He was the first atheist I had met. I asked him how that could be. He said exactly those words, “Every day I live my life as if there is no God.” From

that day forward I realized I was an atheist. I would claim that most religious people also live their daily lives as if there is no God!

I will add one more personal point. If you tell someone you think God with a capital G doesn’t exist, it is taken as a kind of insult. Like saying, “God is a poopy-head.” In recent years I have been saying, “I don’t believe in any gods.” It makes it more generic and less personal. Nothing personal about your god. I just don’t believe in any gods.

Gary Noreen asked if Jackson had talked to any big atheist organizations. They spend a lot on legal battles. Jackson said he talked to Nick Fish of American Atheists. Their top priority is with legislative battles. And maybe it should be.

Judy Flattery ended the talk noting that “everyone is an atheist”. We just believe in one less god than most religious people do. [Note: Please consider donating to the *Our G*ddamn Wedding* movie project at <https://ourgoddamnwedding.com>.]

Movies for Humanists: **On Earth As In Heaven** (*Sur La Terre Comme Au Ciel*)



I was only able to see one film at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival (SBIFF) this year: *On Earth As In Heaven*, a French Canadian drama, which explores the journey of a teen girl from an isolated, ultra-conservative

Christian fundamentalist ‘cult’ to the big city of Montreal, in search of her wayward older sister.

The isolated cult existence portrayed had a predictable routine (praying as a group all dressed the same, worshipping the same, chanting the same words, etc.). There was certainty. Everyone knew what was expected of them, what they were to believe, and to do, who was part of the group, who could be trusted, and who were the outsiders. There was stability, unity, and reliable certainty—until 18 year old Sarah, decided on a whim to hitch a ride to Montreal to explore the outside world.

Her younger sister, Clara, fearing for Sarah’s safety and eternal soul, (and maybe feeling a little guilty for not alerting anyone to the possibility of Sarah’s escape), also heads to Montreal to find Sarah and to bring her back.

There Clara connects with her mother’s long-estranged sister and learns how her mother and aunt’s relationship was fractured when her mother joined the cult, and the devastating impact this break had on the aunt.

In the city, Clara is enchanted by the beauty of music, experiences the thrill and freedom of riding a bike, the rich variety of wonders Montreal offers. She also learns about scams, people taking advantage of her trust and naivete to further their own ends, the prevalence of substance abuse, and the loneliness of making your way in a city full of busy people with diverse agendas.

Eventually, Clara finds her sister, who urges her to return to the cult until she is of age to make her own decisions.

The movie poses the question of which is better: living a predictable and comfortable but deluded, authoritarian life in the cult or dealing with the richness of opportunities, the risk of

harm, and all the ‘other stuff’ in the modern world.

The movie was well done with fine performances, particularly by Lou Thompson who portrayed young Clara searching for her sister with brave determination in the city of Montreal. Well worth seeing.

Review of
Man Created God
Worldview For These Times
A Book by Albert G. Carter
By Wayne Beckman

In this book, Carter places great emphasis on how people join different “tribes” based on their worldview. We have to be aware of how our worldview shapes how we interpret what we see and read.



Hundreds of different religions are based on what their believers are convinced is the accurate reading of the Bible, but of course they cannot all be right. Carter is making the point that the book doesn’t create the beliefs, the beliefs create the interpretation of the book.

He promotes what he calls the Mythopoetic Natural Worldview. He thinks that all of the religious texts should be used for inspiration, not as sources of authority. A point he makes is that we need to always question our beliefs and think about the validity of our worldview.

A unique aspect of the book is that a very large percentage of the text is direct quotes from many sources. There are 532 quotes listed in the end notes. They are quotes from a wide variety of religious and philosophical authors. It is good to see exactly what these authors wrote, rather than just Carter's interpretation of what they wrote. It supports the idea that you don't convince people by stating your opinion, you convince them by presenting evidence.

This book is not your typical strident atheist refutation of religion, but an explanation of why people believe what they believe, and why an alternative worldview, rather than a traditional religious one, would be better for the world.

[Note: Al Carter, the author of *Man Created God*, will be our HSSB guest speaker on Saturday May 18 **in person** at Fellowship Hall, Live Oak UU Congregation, 820 North Fairview Road in Goleta **and on Zoom** for those unable to attend in person.

Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

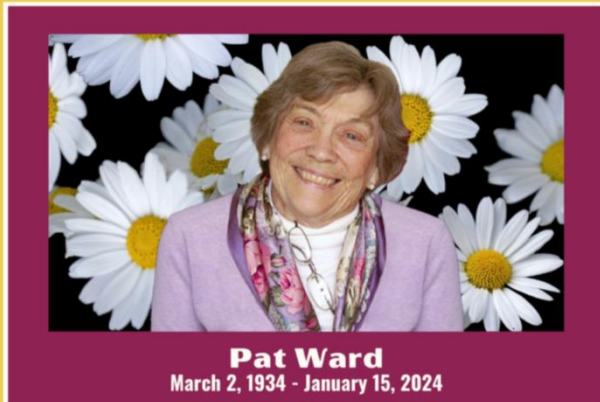
Submitted by Diane Krohn

- March 6: Rev. Kevin Jagoe: *Practicing Compassion in Community*. Zoom presentation sponsored by The American Humanist Association. [Practicing Compassion in Community](#)
- March 13: SFR365 Webinar: State of the States: *Christian Nationalism in State Legislatures*. Hosted by the Summit for Religious Freedom and Americans United for Separation of Church and State. [State of the States](#)
- March 16: Emily Escobar: *The State of Abortion Rights*. Zoom and in-person event sponsored by AU Orange County. [Emily Escobar](#)

- March 28-31: American Atheists 2024 National Convention, Philadelphia, PA. American Atheists [2024 National Convention](#)
- April 3: Robert B. Reich: *What Really Happened to the American Dream? (And How Can it be Restored?)*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Robert B. Reich](#)
- April 13-16: *Summit for Religious Freedom*. This is a virtual event and in-person in Washington, DC. This event is convened by Americans United for Separation of Church and State. [Summit for Religious Freedom](#)
- April 16: Cristina Mittermeier: *Between Land and Sea: Saving Our Oceans to Save Ourselves*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Cristina Mittermeier](#)
- April 24: Evan Osnos: *Two Superpowers: Navigating China and America in the New Age of Uncertainty*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Evan Osnos](#)
- May 1: Suzanne Simard: *Finding the Mother Tree*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Suzanne Simard](#)



- May 7: Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson: *What if We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Ayana Elizabeth Johnson](#)
- May 8: Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross: *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross](#)
- May 19: *Seth Andrews vs. God: Who is the Better Intelligent Designer?* Center for Inquiry West event, Los Angeles, CA. [Seth Andrews VS God](#)



Farewell to longtime HSSB members Pat Ward (who died January 15, 2024) and to Marty Shapiro (who died February 22, 2024).
You will be deeply missed!

HSSB Contact Information

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President: Judy Flattery,

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Secretary: Diane Krohn, DJKrohn1@gmail.com

Treasurer: David Flattery,

david.flattery@post.harvard.edu

Board Members at Large:

Wayne Beckman, Robert Bernstein, Judith Fontana, Gary Noreen, Mary Wilk

Newsletter Editor & Submission Deadline

Judy Flattery, sbhumanisteditor@gmail.com

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*. 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 or Donate to HSSB: Annual Membership dues are \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter, and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Dues payments and other donations can be made via PayPal (Paypal.me/SBHumanists) or check. Include your name and contact information when submitting payments. Make checks out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara* and mail to Mary Wilk, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130. mwilk@cox.net. Dues, donations, and payments can also be remitted via this PayPal QR code. Once at the site, select 'Send' then log into your PayPal account to complete the transaction.:



Watch our speaker videos on [YouTube](#). Subscribe to our [Meetup](#) page to be notified of upcoming events.



LIVE OAK
Unitarian Universalist
Congregation of Goleta

820 N. Fairview Ave., Goleta, CA 93117
805.967.7867 | <https://liveoakgoleta.org>

Live Oak invites HSSB members to join us Sunday mornings at 10:00 am.

We welcome kindred spirits and keen minds as we continue the ongoing search for truth and meaning. Below is the lineup for our...

...March 2024 Sunday Services



March 3 - Wholly Holy - Drew Carter

What do you believe to be holy in your life? What does holy even mean in a UU context? Where should we look for a connection to something bigger than ourselves?

March 10 - The Value of Connection - Rev. Jonathan Young

Our search for kindred spirits led us to Live Oak. We will consider the beauty of our commitment to this beloved community.

March 17 - No Good Deed Goes Unpunished - Elaine Harbison

Twelve years ago, after her daughter's college graduation, Elaine began to examine the pitfalls of self-sacrifice in her own life. What did her mother, her daughter, her Live Oak friends, and Unitarian Universalism have to say about it?

March 24 - Spring Fever - Rev. Jonathan Young

We will explore how the mythic stories of the season signal a rising of enthusiasm and abundance.



Rev. Jonathan

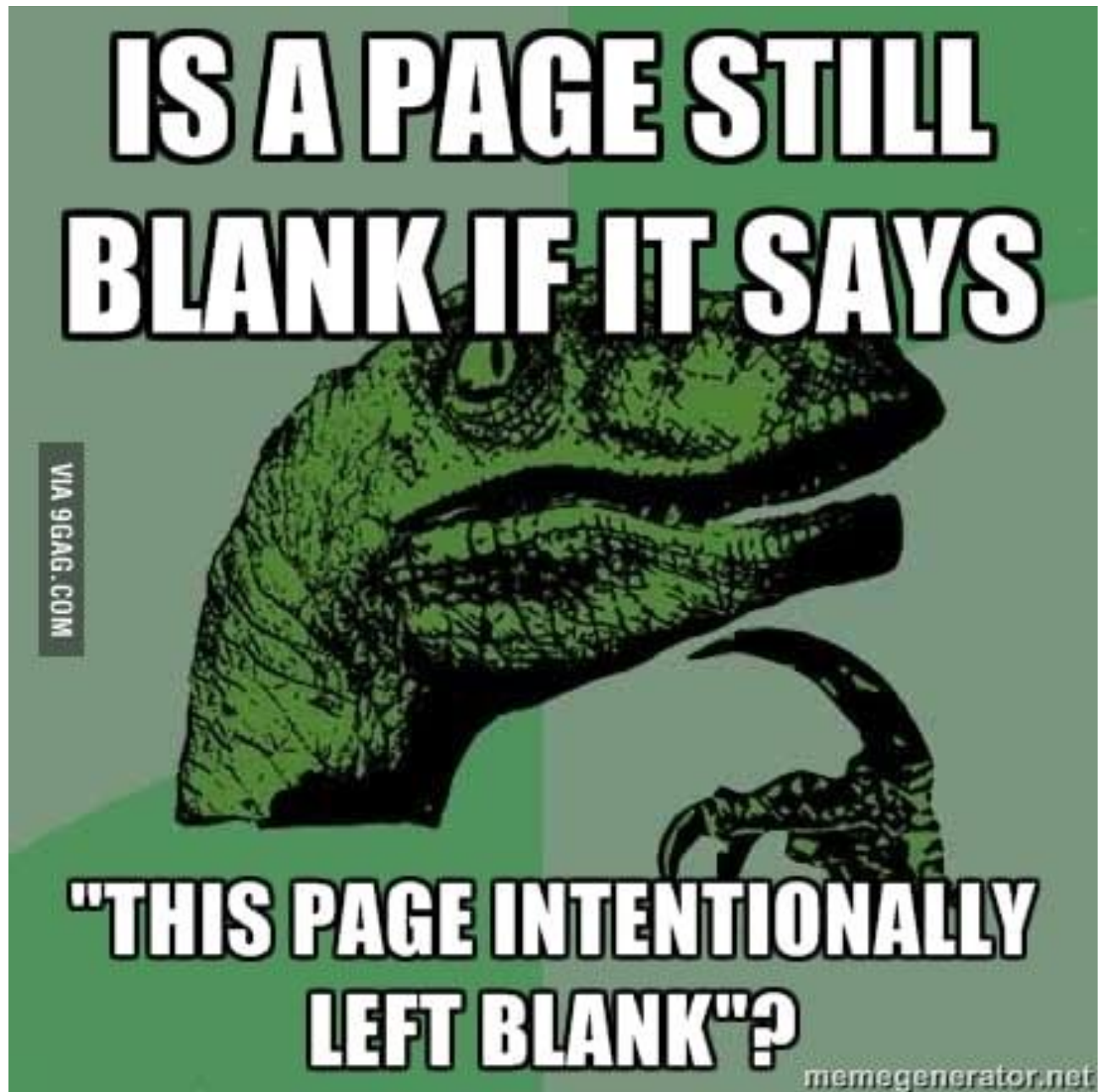


Our Mission: Live Oak is an open, welcoming, inclusive community, grounded in love, providing opportunities for spiritual growth for seekers of all ages. We actively live our values of diversity, compassion, and justice to earth & humanity.

Our Minister: Rev. Jonathan has been a minister since 1981. His certification is through the American Humanist Association. He is also a psychologist, who teaches archetypal and religious studies at the Pacifica Graduate Institute. He studied with Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow and Joseph Campbell. International fieldwork shaped his awareness of cultural diversity. "My own idea of a cathedral is hiking in the redwoods. Meaning can be found in the vastness of the cosmos, a child's smile, or a caring group of people, like Live Oak."

We carry the light of our chalice into the world.







Humanist Society of Santa Barbara
P.O. Box 30232
Santa Barbara, CA 93130

HSSB Calendar

Tuesday March 19, 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Thursday March 21, 5:30-7:30 pm. Dr. Leo Igwe, International Human Rights Activist & Humanist.
In-Person presentation and potluck dinner. Encina Royale Clubhouse. *Critical Thinking and Why it Matters in Africa.*

Saturday March 23, 3:00 p.m. Marcia Hofer, A Better Exit. *Will California's End-of-Life Law Help You If You Need It?* Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

Tuesday April 16, 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Saturday April 20, 3:00 p.m. Peter Compo *Harnessing Darwin To Get Shit Done.*

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

Tuesday May 14, 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Members always welcome to attend.

Saturday May 18, 3:00 p.m. Albert Gleason Carter, retired habilitation psychologist and author of *Man Created God, Worldview For These Times.* In-person at Fellowship Hall Live Oak UU Congregation, 820 N. Fairview Ave., Goleta CA 93117 AND on ZOOM: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.