



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

AUGUST 2025

Theistnormativity: The Normalization of the Belief in God in the United States

Our Speaker: Dr. Kristina Lee, is an Assistant Professor in Communication Studies at the University of South Dakota. Her research focus is on religious and political rhetoric, interfaith dialogue, Christian nationalism, the marginalization of atheists, and theistnormativity. She has generously agreed to visit us here on the Central Coast to share her work. Dr. Lee has an M.A. and a Ph.D in Communication Studies from Colorado State University and a B.A. from Kent State.



Dr. Kristina Lee

When: Saturday August 30, 3:00 – 4:30 pm PST.

Where: Join us **IN PERSON** at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 820 North Fairview, Goleta, CA

OR ON ZOOM: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>



Also in August: HSSB Excursion to Mt. Wilson Observatory

HSSB is hosting an excursion to historic Mt. Wilson Observatory on Saturday August 16.

A few spots are currently available for the **evening viewing through the 100" telescope**. Cost is \$125 for a half night (~7pm - 1am) of telescope viewing (note that the HSSB daytime tour of Mt. Wilson Observatory is fully subscribed). If interested in viewing the cosmos through this historic telescope, please contact Gary Noreen (Yoda@ardio.com) for current availability & excursion details.

Half Night Viewing Through Historic Mt. Wilson 100" Telescope



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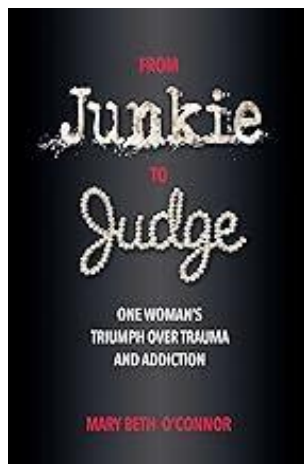
Mary Beth O'Connor: From Junkie to Judge...Without God - 7/26/2025

By Robert Bernstein

Judy Flattery introduced Judge O'Connor's talk by relating the topic with two of the Affirmations of Humanism by Paul Kurtz:

- "We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.
- "We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems."

Mary Beth O'Connor is a Board Member for She Recovers Foundation and a Director of LifeRing Secular Recovery. She regularly speaks on behalf of these organizations and about multiple and secular paths to recovery. She had an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal, [*I Beat Addiction without God*](#) and is the author of [*From Junkie to Judge*](#).



Even though O'Connor is a retired judge, she invited us to just call her 'Mary Beth'.

Mary Beth jumped right in describing her challenging childhood that led to childhood addiction. Her mother didn't give her attention, and could be violent. Her mother married her stepfather, who was also violent and sexually abusive.

At age 12 Mary Beth started drinking alcohol: Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill wine. She was soon addicted. She loved it. She felt better. She even stole beer from her dangerous stepfather.

She went on to use weed and pills. She was shooting methamphetamine by age 17. Meth became her drug of choice.

She left home in central New Jersey to attend UC-Berkeley and did graduate. She was not doing well, but she was doing better. She was mostly using alcohol in ways that mostly did not disrupt her life.

But then she had a horrific kidnapping that included six hours of being raped. Then she moved in with a violent boyfriend during college.

She didn't get sober until she was 32. That was in 1994. She climbed down the corporate ladder. She couldn't hold a job, and her partner was ready to throw her out. She realized she needed rehab.

Mary Beth went into a 90-day minimum women's program. She viewed it as 'medical treatment'. The program wanted her to focus on her 'defects'. But they also wanted her to enroll in a 12-step program. That can be a good fit for some people, but not for her. She didn't believe in a higher power, which is essential for these programs.

The rehab program told her there was no other way; that her best thinking got her where she was, and that same thinking would not get her out. She was paying them for treatment, figuring "they are the experts." She looked for the parts that she could use. She didn't like to feel powerless over addiction, but she agreed that it was hard to moderate.

In January 1994 she got home from rehab. There was no Google then, so she went to the library. She learned there were, in fact, other options. She found Women for Sobriety, SMART Recovery, and LifeRing. She was relieved to know that other people had recovered without a 12-step program.

She read books about these programs to understand them. She attended their programs and was always “synthesizing and filtering” them. She wanted to control her own recovery on her terms.

That was not so common then, but now LifeRing calls it a ‘personal recovery plan’.

She has been sober since 1994 so she thinks she did a pretty good job with her personal recovery plan!

She realized part of her recovery involved dealing with her underlying trauma. She found a therapist who diagnosed her with PTSD. Recovery from that took more work and was quite complicated.

She had been accepted to attend Berkeley Law directly out of college, but she had started using meth again during her senior year so she did not feel prepared to go to law school at that point. She passed up attending a Top Ten law school.

She worked at part-time low-level work after she got sober. She worked her way up from there to middle management. She did eventually go to Berkeley Law in 2000 at six years into being sober. She worked in ‘big law’, then was a class action lawyer for the government.

When she was 20 years sober, she was appointed to be a Federal Administrative Law Judge. She took early retirement in 2020, and she is plenty busy!

She is on the board of several recovery organizations: LifeRing Secular Recovery, She Recovers Foundation, and the Hyer Calling Foundation. She has published a book and essays in notable publications.

All of this was by way of introduction! “Let’s get to the meat!” How does secular recovery work?

She uses the term Substance Use Disorder (SUD). This is the current medical terminology for addiction in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

SUD is a mental health disorder. The definition of SUD has changed over the course of her 31 years of being sober. This slide shows some of these definitions.

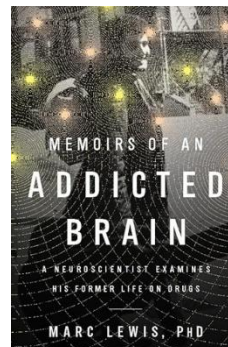
SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER DEFINITION

- NIDA (National Institute of Drug Addiction)
 - Chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking (including alcohol), continued use despite harmful consequences, and long-lasting changes in the brain.
- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
 - Recurrent use of alcohol and/or other drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.
- Learning Disorder
 - Unbroken Brain, Maia Szalavitz
- Bad Habit
 - Memoirs of an Addicted Brain, Marc Lewis

She emphasized that drugs include alcohol. Alcohol is still the most widely abused drug. A key element of SUD is “continued use despite notable negative consequences”. Is SUD a ‘disease’? This is debated.

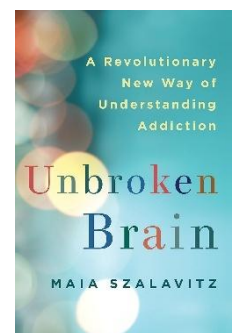
She says that another way to look at it is as a type of learning disorder. Maya Szalavitz uses this idea in her book *Unbroken Brain*.

It can also be seen as a bad habit.



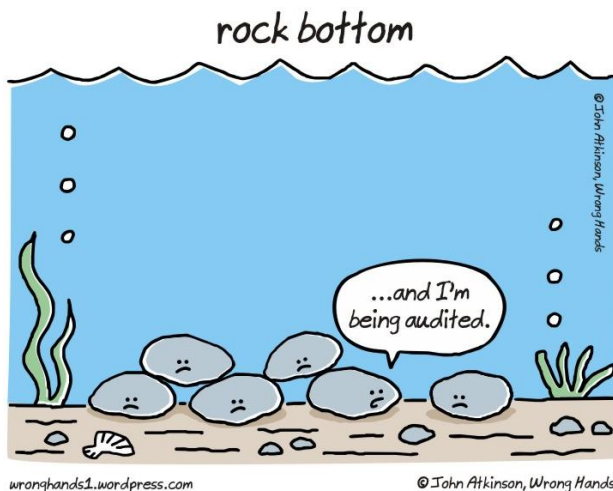
Neuroscientist Marc Lewis uses this idea in his book *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*.

No matter what, it is a mental health disorder, and it can occur on a spectrum of mild, moderate, or severe.



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Hitting bottom is not necessary and is not recommended. That is how people die. More years are lost that way. Better to get out of SUD as soon as possible. There is less to repair the sooner the problems end. Quitting or reducing drug and alcohol use can be beneficial even if you don't meet the SUD criteria.



Mary Beth had very severe SUD according to the DSM test. She was using meth almost daily. Alcohol has negative effects even at moderate use levels: Cancer, liver disease, and heart disease. Drugs can lead to other risky behavior like driving under the influence or regrettable sexual behavior. Hangovers can interfere with work or living your best life. Drugs are often an escape from a bad partner or job. Those underlying issues need to be solved.

There is good news. You may hear that only 10-15% of people with SUD recover. She said that is not true. Perfect abstinence from day one is rare. She used meth three times in the first five months. That is not a failure. 75% of people with SUD will recover. Sobriety after five years means an 85% chance of full recovery.

She said that medically supervised withdrawal is sometimes necessary. It is possible to die from withdrawal of alcohol or benzodiazepines. This can be a challenge. Insurance may only pay for 28-30 days if you are lucky enough to have that. Maybe you can't leave your job or kids.

Not everybody needs inpatient treatment. Intensive outpatient (IOP) is an option. Some people work with a recovery coach. Medications can help with opioid and alcohol withdrawal to reduce pain and craving and to increase the odds of staying sober after withdrawal.

Harm reduction is another issue. If drug use continues, it is important to reduce risk: Use test strips to confirm drug identity and to avoid fentanyl. Have Narcan available. Use clean syringes. Harm reduction actions helps people get into treatment.

Mary Beth spoke about peer support options.

Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous/Other 12-steps

- Higher power
- Powerless
- Turn over will and life
- Follow 12-step program

LifeRing Secular Recovery

- Sobriety
- Secularity
- Self-help
- Personal recovery plan

SMART Recovery

- Cognitive behavioral therapy approach
- Includes other behavioral disorders (eating, gambling, etc)

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There is no hard line: atheists and agnostics can make 12-step programs work; and some religious people may succeed with a secular plan.

[LifeRing](#)

emphasizes that self-help can work with a personalized plan.



[SMART Recovery](#) uses a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach. It can also work for gambling and other behavioral addictions.



[She Recovers](#) is a peer support program led by trained members. It is not just for SUD. It can help with trauma and other mental health disorders. It focuses on strengths on a journey to wholeness.



[Women for Sobriety](#) emphasizes that women in recovery are “capable and competent, caring and compassionate” with a focus on positive reinforcement.



[Recovery Dharma](#) is Buddhist based and focuses on inner wisdom and the individual journey.

There are other approaches, but these five, plus AA/NA, are the largest. Research them and one or two will feel like “my people are there.”

About 20% of SUD people recover without a peer support group. A personal recovery plan means you are gaining self-knowledge. Where am I? Who am I? Where do I want to go? How do I get there? It is a way to learn self-efficacy, a sense of confidence, and competence. Plans can and should be adjusted over time.

Sarah Zemore published a study of the effectiveness of different peer organizations. She found that 12-Step, LifeRing, Women for Sobriety, and SMART are all about equally effective. If you participate in designing your plan, you will have a greater chance of success.

There are many reasons for people to be aware of multiple options. The U.S. is increasingly becoming secular: 21-32% are secular now. Secular people used to be primarily in cities, but now they are everywhere. They are in all demographics of age, class, and ethnicity.

Many treatment programs include 12-step ideas and don’t inform clients in advance, so it is important to ask and to make sure multiple pathways are supported.

One recovery obstacle for a secular person can be friends or family who only know about 12-step programs. Mary Beth holds monthly meetings for LifeRing to educate friends and family about other options.

Courts are not supposed to mandate religion-based programs, but some still do. The [Appignani Humanist Legal Center](#) (the legal arm of the American Humanist Association) fights back. This comes up with diversion from prison, sentencing, probation and parole, family law and visitation rights.



Judges don’t like to be restricted so Mary Beth trains them. She points out that the best success

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will come when the person can select the program that is the best fit for them.

Mary Beth recommends the resources available through the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) as a good starting place.

[The National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\)](#) is part of the National Institute of Health and offers science-based information.

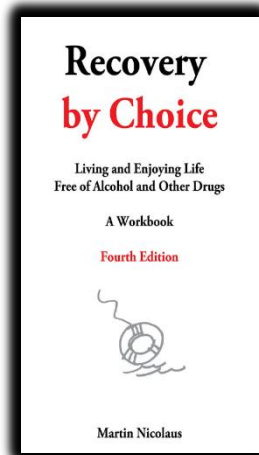
The California Department of Public Health has a [Substance and Addiction Prevention Branch](#).

Santa Barbara County has a [Behavioral Wellness Department](#).

Mary Beth emphasized that she makes herself available for contact with questions. She is on social media, narrowly focused on SUD issues. She is also reachable through her web site, [Junkie To Judge.com](#)

Mary Beth then took questions.

Judy Fontana asked what a personal recovery plan entails? It depends on how severe the SUD is. It depends on the person's financial resources. Whether they are working. Whether some people may need to be cut out of their lives for a while. She recommended the LifeRing Workbook, *Recovery by Choice*.



Wayne asked whether it is possible to cut back vs. total sobriety? A minority can make that work if the SUD is mild.

Wilma asked how to help a family member struggling with food addiction? Mary Beth said

the commonality in all addictions is dopamine. People sometimes switch addictions. The key is to find out what underlies the addiction. Perhaps trauma or other mental health disorders.

David W shared that he wanted to get sober and psychiatrists and therapists all recommended AA. He got sober without a peer support group. But he did have support from friends, family, and other professionals. He wondered if the mental health community is becoming more aware of these alternatives? She said, yes, but more awareness is needed.

Judy Flattery described her experience recently on East Hastings St. in Vancouver BC, where Gabor Mate famously promoted harm reduction strategies. She was surprised by the extensive open drug use in a city she expected to be a model community for addressing SUDs. Mary Beth said most major cities have these problems and housing is the big issue. [Note: [Gabor Mate explains](#) that Vancouver has the best harm reduction and recovery services in Canada. Traumatized people with SUD issues from all over Canada come to Vancouver for support.]

Mary Beth added that supervised consumption sites are helpful. Criminalization is **not** helpful. It costs 3-4 times as much to incarcerate someone as to treat them. There is not enough voluntary treatment available. There are also racial disparities in enforcement.

Rhett from Orange County asked what happened to the people who kidnapped her. She said she never reported it. She grew up in a violent household and had learned that the police would not care. She had no names or license plate numbers to report.

Dr. Andy Thomson asked about the current situation with the Trump administration, which has slashed funds for SAMHSA with lots of firing and some rehiring, turmoil and changes, trying to recriminalize homelessness and drug use.

Mary Beth recommends normal political action. Donating money and supporting good candidates. RFK Jr. is a 12-step kind of guy. He does not understand evidence-based treatment. He opposes medications. A major impact is slashing funding to local organizations.

Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

Submitted by Diane Krohn & Melanie Jacobsen

- **August 10, 10 am:** *A Summer's Chat with the Minister.* Rev. Jonathan Young will respond to all sorts of submitted questions, from philosophical to humorous. Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation ([LOUUC](#)), 820 N. Fairview Avenue, Goleta, CA 93117.
- **August 17, 10 am:** Michael Eselun, inspirational speaker, chaplain for the Simms-Mann/UCLA Center for Integrative Oncology. He is neither an ordained minister, nor particularly religious in any conventional way. He speaks from the place we sometimes find ourselves-- in the place of the outsider, in the margins, misunderstood, isolated, abandoned, perhaps doubting long held beliefs, and now holding more questions than answers. [LOUUC](#)
- **August 17:** Anthony Pinn: *What is Black Humanism and Why Does it Matter?* Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles. [Anthony Pinn](#)
- **August 22-23:** SkeptiCal: Northern California's Science and Skepticism Conference 2025, Oakland, CA. Speakers include Ross Blocher, Erica Byrne, Jim Underdown, and others. [SkeptiCal 2025](#)
- **August 24, 10 am:** 2024-2025 Intern Minister of the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara and recently called settled minister at a Central Coast area UU congregation, Rev Carolyn Bjerke will share her wisdom with Live Oak this morning. [LOUUC](#).
- **August 31, 10 am:** *Natural Splendor.* Rev. Jonathan Young will reflect on how time

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

To Join or Donate to HSSB: Annual Membership dues \$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 QR code below). At the PayPal site, select 'Send' then log into your PayPal account to complete the transaction. Or
- Zelle (HSSBpayments@gmail.com) or
- Checks made out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara* and mailed to Mary Taylor, HSSB, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130.
- Please include your name and contact information when submitting payments.
- Membership questions? Contact Mary Taylor at HSSB.Membership777@gmail.com

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



- spent outdoors can reveal ordinary elegance and remind us of the fresh good place within.
- **October 16-19:** Freedom from Religion Foundation 2025 National Convention, Myrtle Beach, SC. Speakers include Mary Trump, Katherine Stewart, Bailey Harris, Herb Silverman, and many others. [FFRF 2025 National Convention](#).



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

HSSB Calendar

Tuesday August 12. 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

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

Saturday August 16. Private HSSB Tour of Mt. Wilson Observatory *Plus* Half Night Viewing through 100" Telescope. Space is limited to 15 on the tour and 20 for the viewing. Contact Gary

Noreen at Yoda@ardio.com to reserve your spot.

Saturday August 30. 3:00 pm. USD Asst. Professor Kristina Lee. *Theistnormativity*. In person at Live Oak UU, 820 N. Fairview, Goleta AND on Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

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

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

Saturday September 20. 3:00 pm. Dr. Christopher DiCarlo. Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity. Hosted jointly by HSSB and The Freethought Society. Zoom link:

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