



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

MARCH 2026

What the Heck is Objectivism?

Our Program: Charlie Painter will make the case that philosophy moves the world. He will outline why a rational philosophy, like those of the Founders, is necessary to preserve liberty and freedom in the 21st century.

He'll argue that Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism provides just such a rational basis. Painter will highlight how Objectivism pertains to all five branches of philosophy:

Meta-physics,
Ethics,
Politics,
Epistemology, and
Aesthetics.



Charlie Painter

There will be time for discussion.

Our Speaker: Painter has been a teacher in Madison, Wisconsin since 2007. In 2019, Charlie developed a deep passion for rational, liberty-minded philosophy, which motivated him to organize a local MeetUp group in 2021. The success of this group led to Painter becoming a returning guest on YouTube podcasts, and a featured presenter in other local MeetUp events. He is also an award-winning guitarist and band leader.

Painter adheres to reason as our most important guide to knowledge and agrees with Ayn Rand that "Anyone who fights for the future, lives in it today."

When: Saturday March 14, 3:00-4:30 pm Pacific

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

This event is being cosponsored by HSSB and the Freethought Society.

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How Valentine's Day Became Secular

Thomas A Dixon Jr 2-15-26

By Robert Bernstein

Thomas A Dixon Jr. spoke to the Humanist Society and the Freethought Society via Zoom about the history of Valentine's Day. First he was introduced for his own unique history.

In November 2010 Dixon was struck by a car and nearly killed. He had many injuries, including a traumatic brain injury that caused permanent problems with his episodic memory.

Episodic memory is memory of events in your life. Everything from what you had for lunch to remembering that you performed in a school play in seventh grade. He retains his pre-injury memories, but he does not retain new memories.

Dixon, a native of Philadelphia, has not let this slow him down. He spends New Year's Eve in a different country each year, inspired in part by having taught middle school in Seoul.

Dixon has overcome his memory challenge by creating digital memory strategies. Notably, inventing the ME.mory app to record, store, and recall life experiences via search-by-date, text, or location.



Dixon started his talk noting that his New Year's Eve travels will be the subject of his next book. New Year's Eve is his favorite holiday. He showed a

photo of himself on New Year's Eve as a child, holding his father's beer! He noted that he did not drink any of the beer. Unlike me. I often drank beer given to me by my father when I was a child! This had the effect of making alcohol 'no big deal' for me and now I rarely drink.

Dixon then started his Valentine's Day talk asking what was Valentine's Day back in the day? How far back was that?

Short answer: We don't really know. He said there may be multiple saints named Valentine. It's a multi-billion dollar industry in the U.S. now!

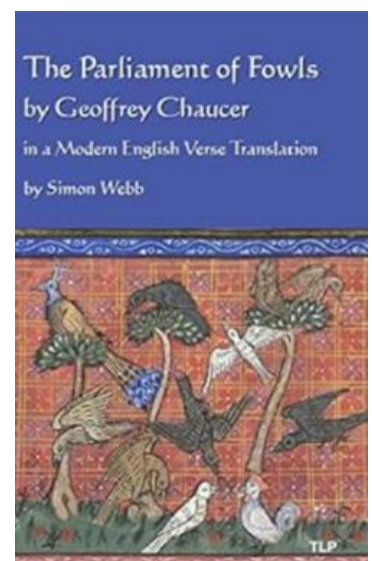


What holiday was it before? Lupercalia: a Roman holiday dating back to 600BCE, celebrated on February 15. This was a celebration of fertility and spring. One Lupercalia tradition involved striking young women with animal skins to increase their fertility!

During the 5th century, this holiday was absorbed into Christianity. It took hundreds of years for it to have romantic meanings.

What about romance? Dixon noted the Parliament of Fowls story from Chaucer. Three male eagles court one female eagle. She can pick any or none. She rejects them all. That book is from the 1300s.

When was the earliest Valentine



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card? 1415. Long before the Valentine's Day card industry! Charles d'Orléans was captured by the English at the Battle of Agincourt. He was just 21 years old, and he would be held captive for 24 years. When he was first captured, he sent a love poem to his wife from prison.

In 18th century England Valentine's notes and gifts first became a thing. The tradition came to the U.S. in the 1840s. Valentine's Day is the second biggest card holiday, after Christmas. A billion cards each year.

What about the symbols of this holiday? Red roses as a symbol of passionate love originated in Turkish "flower languages". Brought to England in the 18th century by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who may have misunderstood the specific meanings in Turkey.

It wasn't until the 19th century that this flower language became more widely known. [note: per Google AI, Turkish flower language, known as Sélam, is a historical, symbolic communication system where flowers and objects, often chosen for their rhyming names, were used to convey secret, romantic, or coded messages. Originating in the Ottoman Turkish court, it enabled nuanced, often silent conversations, especially by women in harems. – ed.]

What about Cupid? Eros was the Greek god of love, desire, passion, and affection. The Romans adopted Eros as Cupid. They presented him as a chubby boy shooting arrows, representing the whimsical and sudden onset of passionate attraction.

Chocolates? This started as a drink. In 1861 Richard Cadbury made Fancy Boxes. The first heart-shaped boxes of chocolate. Spending for



Valentine's Day is now \$28.5 billion a year in the U.S.

There are many cultural variations. Denmark has pressed snow drop flowers.



Japan has chocolate gifts. Different types for co-workers and for romantic interests. Mexico calls it a Day of Love and Friendship. In South Africa, women write the name of their crush on their sleeve.

Valentine's Day has adapted to people being single now. Many ads are about friendship and fondness. Also love for oneself.

Most people don't consider Valentine's Day to be a religious holiday. How did this happen? We became increasingly secular in general.

What's next? Dixon noted that secular culture often absorbs rather than eliminates religious traditions.

He ended by suggesting we go out and buy chocolate and flowers and enjoy ourselves!

Dixon then took questions.

Judy Flattery asked for more information about Saint Valentine. Dixon said that the original Valentine's Day was a feast day rather than

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about adoration or love. Judy noted that growing up Catholic in Buffalo, they did not go to church for Valentine's Day.

Clyde D. asked about finding more information about Dixon. Dixon said to Google *Thomas Dixon Memory* and he'll learn a lot. There are even fan pages!

Margaret Downey of the Freethought Society said that Saint Valentine secretly conducted marriages for young men before they would be sent to war, to keep them from being sent. It was believed that single men made better soldiers. I looked this up and legend indeed has it that he defied Emperor Claudius II's ban on marriage for young men, and that Claudius ordered Valentine to be executed on February 14 for defying him. Note that this is legend and may not be actual history.

I asked if Valentine's Day was ever a religious holiday. He said it was originally about fertility and spring. In the 5th century it was Christianized by the Pope. One of many attempts by the Church to subvert Roman holidays. As happened with Saturnalia and Christmas.

Dinner with Abe Bonowitz, Co-Founder of Death Penalty Action

By Judy & Dave Flattery

Several HSSB members joined us at our home to share a meal with Abe Bonowitz of Death Penalty Action, an organization headquartered in Columbus Ohio, that works to stop executions



Dave prepares hamburger stroganoff,
his signature dish.

Photo by Merlie Samonte.

and abolish the death penalty through advocacy, education, and action.

Abe Bonowitz was visiting the west coast on personal business and graciously agreed to make a side-trip to Santa Barbara to meet us. Susan Shields, who is supportive of both our organizations, connected us.

We plan on inviting him to share his work and his story at one of our upcoming monthly meetings so that all our members can have an opportunity to interact with him.

Abe shared that he formerly was a strong supporter of the death penalty. As he worked to develop arguments and collect evidence to support his pro-death penalty position, he found that he could not actually support his own position, and he switched sides, dedicating the past 30 years of his life working to end the death penalty in the United States.

He shared that only 2% of counties in the U.S. account for more than half of the nation's death row population. "It is so expensive to prosecute a death penalty case that only wealthy counties can afford to do it."

He said that the 8th amendment prohibiting 'cruel and unusual punishment' is the amendment upon which death penalty opponents base their argument; however not the 'cruel' part (courts have apparently ruled that executions are not cruel). The strategy is to base the argument on the 'unusual punishment' phrase since so few counties pursue it.

Abe also broke down the application of the death penalty. Approximately half of the murders in the U.S. are 'solved' and proceed to trial. Of those that go to trial, only 2% seek the death penalty.

Death sentences are delivered in ~10% of those trials and then over half of those sentences are ultimately overturned.

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Finally, more than 200 people sentenced to death in the U.S. since 1973 have been exonerated (statistics from Death Penalty Information Center).

Analysis of exoneration frequencies concludes about 4% of all condemned individuals would ultimately be exonerated (Gross S, et.al. Rate of false conviction of criminal defendants who are sentenced to death. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2014 Apr 28)

We were surprised to learn that, as of early 2026, twenty-three states and the District of Columbia have formally abolished the death penalty! Recent legislative abolitions include Virginia, Colorado, New Hampshire, and Washington. Several other states, including California, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, have active moratoria, meaning the death penalty is legal but not practiced.

Bonowitz also spoke of the methods of execution used in the U.S.: lethal injection, electrocution, nitrogen asphyxiation, and firing

squad. He spoke about some of the issues associated with these methods, noting that even execution by firing squad is not instant if the marksmen (intentionally) shoot at non-vital areas.

One practice that Death Penalty Action takes is holding live virtual vigils on Zoom for executions. Participants can join the vigil from their home and sometimes a volunteer will go to the prison gate and participate/broadcast from there. One of those 'at the prison gates' volunteers, Julie Rinker, a graduate student committed to Human Rights and education, accompanied Abe to Santa Barbara. Zoom links to attend one of these vigils can be found on this [Death Penalty Action Calendar](#).



Marian Shapiro and Abe Bonowitz.
Photo by Robert Bernstein.



Julie Rinker & Abe Bonowitz.
Photo by Robert Bernstein.

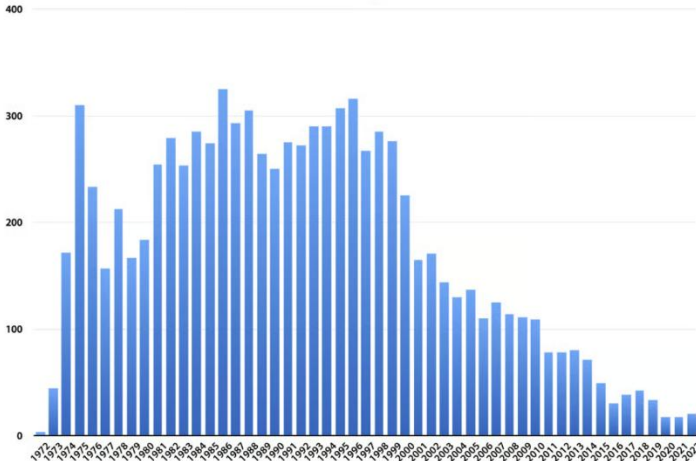


Robert, Dave, and Judy listening to Abe.
Photo by Marian Shapiro.

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Dave Flattery reports that death sentences in the U.S. peaked in the 80s and 90s and have been declining during the current century, as shown below (spans the period 1972 – 2022).

Death Sentences by Year Since 1972



Globally, over half of all countries have abolished the death penalty; however, the most populous countries have not. The most populous country to have abolished the death penalty is Mexico (10th most populous). This means that nearly 80% of the world's population, including everyone in the U.S., could be legally executed by their government.

Abe considers himself to be “spiritual but not religious.” His organization finds common ground with both faith-based and non faith-based organizations and has collaborated with both Unitarian and Humanist groups.



Abe Bonowitz.
Photo by Marian Shapiro.

Abe left us with some anti-death penalty swag. Looking forward to hosting him again.



Abe left us with a supply of these advocacy buttons. Let us know if you want one.

HSSB Contact Information

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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](https://www.youtube.com). Subscribe to our [Meetup](https://www.meetup.com) page to be notified of upcoming events.

[meetup](https://www.meetup.com)  YouTube



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Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

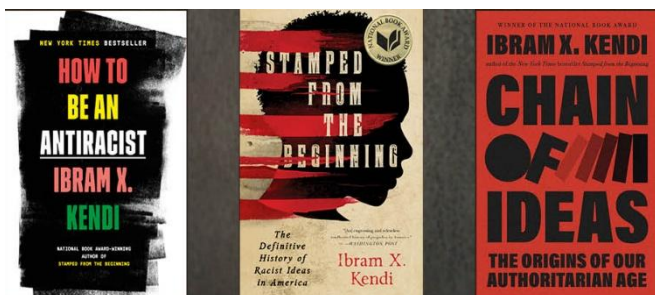
Submitted by Diane Krohn

March 5, 7:30pm PT: *Caitlin Dickerson: Deported: The Price of Our Prosperity.* UCSB Arts & Lectures. Investigative journalist Caitlin Dickerson has spent more than a decade covering deportation and migration.



She received the Pulitzer Prize in 2023 for reporting on the forcible separation of children from their families at the southwest border. Her work has also earned a Peabody, an Edward R. Murrow award, and honors from the National Association of Black Journalists. Deportation, and the threat of it, have affected millions of Americans, including children, over recent decades.

A staff writer at *The Atlantic* and formerly with *The New York Times* and NPR, Dickerson will illuminate how Immigration and Customs Enforcement carries out its mandate. [UCSB Arts & Lectures Event.](#)



Books by *Ibram X. Kendi*

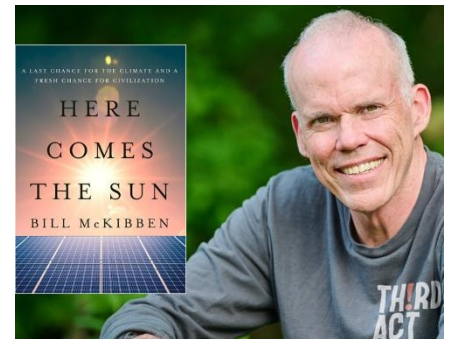
April 7, 7:30 pm: *Chain of Ideas: The Origins of Our Authoritarian Age.* UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Ibram X. Kendi](#)

April 14, 7:30 pm: Masha Gessen: Politics of the Past; Politics of the Future. UCSB Arts & Lectures Event. [Masha Gessen](#), author of *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin.*



April 21, 7:30 pm: *Bill McKibben: Here Comes the Sun: A Last Chance for the Climate and a Fresh Chance for Civilization.*

UCSB Arts & Lectures Event. [Bill McKibben](#)



April 25-27: Summit for Religious Freedom, virtual event and in-person in Alexandria, VA and Washington, DC. Sponsored by Americans United For Separation of Church and State.

[Summit for Religious Freedom](#)

May 6: Ed Yong: The Amazing Nature of Animal Senses. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Ed Yong](#)

June 11-14: CSIcon 2026, Buffalo, NY. Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of CSI (Center for Skeptical Inquiry). Speakers include Mary Roach, Bill Nye, Stuart Vyse, Benjamin Radford, Banachek, Eugenie Scott, and many others. [CSIcon 2026](#)



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

HSSB Calendar

Tuesday March 10. 5:00 pm Pacific. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

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

Saturday March 14, 3:00 pm Pacific. Charlie Painter: *What (the Heck) is Objectivism?* On Zoom.

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

Tuesday April 14. 5:00 pm Pacific. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

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

Saturday April 18, 3:00 pm Pacific. Dr. Jeremy Berg: *The Best of Times – The Worst of Times.* On

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

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

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

Sunday May 17. 3:00pm Pacific. Dr. David Orenstein: *Humanity's Debt to Africa.* On Zoom.

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