



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

JULY 2026

Humanists Consider the Death Penalty

Abraham (Abe) Bonowitz is the co-founder and executive director of Death Penalty Action, an organization headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, that works to stop executions and abolish the death penalty through advocacy, education, and action. He has been one of the leading organizers in the death penalty abolition movement.

In the 1980s, Abe Bonowitz was a strong supporter of the death penalty. He worked to collect evidence and develop compelling arguments to support his pro-death penalty position. Instead, based on the evidence, he came to realize that he could not, in good conscience, support his own pro-death penalty position, and he switched sides.



Abe Bonowitz
Executive Director Death Penalty Action

Abe has dedicated the past 35 years of his life working to ending the death penalty in the United States.

And progress is being made! The total death-row population is down significantly. The U.S. national death-row population has declined for over 20 consecutive years, from a peak of nearly 3,600 at the turn of this century to 2,004 as of January 1, 2026. More than half of these condemned people are incarcerated in California, Florida, and Texas.

Come interact with Abe and consider how Humanist values and principles inform our views and actions regarding the death penalty.

When: Saturday July 18 at 3- 4:30pm

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

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HSSB Friends Travel the Freethought Trail with Freethought Society Allies

by Judy Flattery

Five HSSB Members (Diane Krohn, Wayne Beckman, Judy Fontana, Phil Holland and myself) attended the Center For Inquiry's 50th anniversary convention (CSIcon) in Buffalo, New York on June 11-14, 2026. Three of us (Judy, Phil, and Judy) also accepted an invitation by Margaret Downey (founder and president of the Freethought Society), to join her at a celebration honoring Thomas Paine in New Rochelle the Sunday before CSIcon and to cross New York state by car, stopping at several sites along the historic Freethought Trail. Below is Margaret's report on the trip along with photos we took along the way. Next month we'll report on the CSIcon's 50th anniversary conference.

Celebrating Liberty, Equality, and Democracy: Thomas Paine Day & Traveling The Freethought Trail

by Margaret Downey

Supporters of Thomas Paine's legacy gathered in New Rochelle, New York on Sunday, June 7, 2026 to commemorate the 217th anniversary of Paine's death and celebrate the enduring influence of one of history's most important advocates for liberty, democracy, and human rights. The annual event, hosted by the Thomas Paine Historical Association (TPHA), was held under the theme *Liberty and Justice for All: 250 Years of Progress Since 1776*.

The afternoon program brought together scholars, students, elected officials, and members of the public at the historic Thomas Paine Memorial Building, located on land closely connected to Paine's life and legacy. The event highlighted both Paine's contributions to the American Revolution and the continuing relevance of his ideas in the twenty-first century.

Three local high school students read selections from the Declaration of Independence, reminding attendees of the revolutionary spirit that animated the struggle for American independence. Following the readings, TPHA President Gary Berton and TPHA Board Member Scott Cleary discussed Paine's pivotal role during the revolutionary era and explored new scholarly insights emerging from the publication of six volumes of *The Collected Writings of Thomas Paine*, a major achievement in Paine scholarship.

A special presentation honored elected officials whose support has helped preserve and promote the historical sites associated with Paine in the area. New York State Senator Shelley Mayer, State Assembly Member Amy Paulin, and Congressman George Latimer accepted *Thomas Paine Legacy Award* certificates recognizing their commitment to protecting the community's rich historical heritage ensuring that future generations can learn about Paine's life and contributions.

One of the afternoon's most thought-provoking presentations was an imagined dialogue between Paine and the late Reverend Jesse Jackson. The presentation explored themes that united them across centuries: democracy, civil rights, equality, and the ongoing struggle to expand freedom and opportunity to all people.



New Rochelle City Councilman Davis Peters portrayed Jesse Jackson and Rick Hartung portrayed Thomas Paine.

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The imagined dialogue underscored how Paine’s vision of human rights and representative government continues to inspire social reform movements today.

Following the formal program, attendees reflected on Paine’s remarkable legacy and the continuing importance of civic engagement, free inquiry, and democratic participation.

The 2026 observance was particularly significant because it occurred during the nation’s broader commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution.

Few individuals contributed more to that revolutionary movement than Thomas Paine, whose pamphlet, *Common Sense*, helped persuade ordinary Americans that independence from Britain was both necessary and achievable.

His later writings championed representative government, religious liberty, universal human rights, and social justice; principles that continue to resonate around the world.

As participants departed the event, the message was clear: more than two centuries after his death, Paine remains a powerful voice for reason, liberty, and human dignity. His words and ideas continue to challenge each generation to expand the boundaries of freedom and to work toward a more just and democratic society. For TPHA and the many individuals who



Margaret Downey spoke about efforts to build a Thomas Paine memorial in Washington, D. C. through the endeavors of the Thomas Paine Memorial Association. She currently serves as its president.

gathered in New Rochelle on June 7, Thomas Paine Day was not merely a remembrance of the past — it was a reaffirmation of the principles Paine championed and a call to carry those ideals into the future.

Our group of five then embarked on a four day field trip to explore some of New York State’s most important historic sites along [The Freethought Trail](#).

We experienced a remarkable journey through the lives and legacies of Thomas Paine, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Susan B. Anthony, Amelia Jenks Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, Robert Green Ingersoll, and many other champions of liberty and equality.

On June 8 we drove four hours north to Fayetteville, New York, arriving at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Museum, her former residence. We were met by Ciarrai Eaton, the executive director of the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation. She provided an informational video for us to view and further discussion highlighting the life and accomplishments of Gage.

Gage was one of the most important — yet often overlooked— leaders of the women’s rights movement. Gage was a tireless advocate for women’s suffrage, the abolition of slavery, religious liberty, and the separation of religion



Judy Flattery, Dave Carter, Margaret Downey, Phil Holland, and Judy Fontana at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Museum. A 19th century feminist, abolitionist, and Native American rights activist, Gage was also the mother-in-law of Frank Baum, author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

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and government. Her writings and activism influenced generations of reformers and continue to resonate with freethinkers today. Touring her beautifully preserved home offered a glimpse into the life of a woman whose courage and intellect helped shape American social progress.

On Tuesday June 9, we explored the Seneca Falls area, the birthplace of the women's rights movement in the United States. We toured the Women's Rights National Historical Park which includes the historic Wesleyan Chapel, where the landmark Seneca Falls Convention for Women's Rights was held in 1848. The convention produced a *Declaration of Sentiments*. Charlotte Woodward Pierce, a teenager in 1848, attended the convention and was a signer of this *Declaration of Sentiments*. She was the only signer who lived to see the ratification of the 19th Amendment which granted women the right to vote, although she was too frail to cast her ballot in 1920.

Our day in Seneca Falls included a stop at the Amelia Bloomer historical marker. We also spent time at the Anthony-Stanton-Bloomer Statue, situated overlooking Van Cleef Lake. These sites commemorate the pioneering efforts of three important women who challenged legal and social barriers, transforming American society.

On Wednesday, June 10, we traveled to Dresden, New York, to visit the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum. Robert Green Ingersoll, known as 'The Great Agnostic', was one of America's most celebrated advocates for freethought, secular government, scientific inquiry, and human rights. His powerful speeches drew enormous audiences and helped popularize the principles of reason, skepticism, and religious liberty.

The museum preserves his legacy and offers visitors an opportunity to learn more about one of the most influential voices in American

freethought history. We were met at the Museum by Jeff Ingersoll who is a distant cousin (7th cousin, 4 generations removed) to Robert Ingersoll. Jeff answered questions about many items on display.



Our host, Jeff Ingersoll at the Robert Ingersoll Birthplace Museum in Dresden, NY.

We also saw the gazebo that was installed in the backyard of the Museum to acknowledge the life and work of Tom Flynn—a dedicated Museum director, author, journalist, novelist, executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, editor of its journal, *Free Inquiry*, and a co-founder of the Freethought Trail.



Phil Holland, Judy Fontana, Dave Carter, Margaret Downey, and Judy Flattery, at the Tom Flynn Memorial Gazebo at the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum

Our journey continued to Rochester, New York where we explored several significant sites connected to suffragists and abolitionists. At the Susan B. Anthony Museum and House, we

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learned more about Anthony's decades-long struggle for women's suffrage and equal rights. The house stands as a testament to Anthony's perseverance and dedication to social justice. A



Margaret Downey 'serves tea' to Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass.

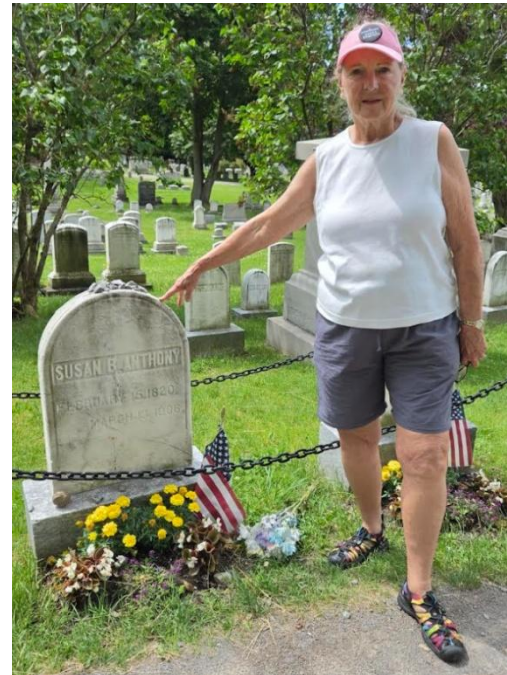
short distance from the Museum and House, we found a beautiful bronze sculpture of Anthony having tea with Frederick Douglass. We had some fun taking photos!



Judy Flattery at Frederick Douglass' grave (above); Judy Fontana at Susan B. Anthony's grave (below), both at Mt. Hope cemetery.



Phil Holland fist-bumping Frederick Douglass



Judy Fontana considers the impact of Susan B. Anthony's life's work while Frederick Douglass looks on.

At Rochester's Mount Hope Cemetery, we visited the gravesites of Anthony and Douglass. The entire cemetery was fascinating and I personally look forward to returning with more free time to just wander about.

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Many members of the Upstate New York Freethinkers (UNYF) group met us at Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery. They arranged a tour that included a back room visit to see beautiful sketches of Douglass scheduled to be on display later this year.

We shared a meal with UNYF members before heading to Buffalo to attend CSIcon. We carried with us a deeper appreciation for the individuals who advanced freedom of conscience, equality, democracy, and human rights.

This journey highlighted the interconnected stories of Americans who challenged convention and expanded the promise of freedom for future generations. The trip served as a powerful reminder that the struggle for liberty, equality, and free inquiry continues — and that the lives of these historic figures can still inspire us today.



Thomas Paine's famous pamphlets, *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, archived at the Center For Inquiry's Library in Amherst, NY.

Why Traveling the Freethought Trail Matters More Than Ever

by Margaret Downey

The Freethought Trail in New York state is much more than a journey through history. It is a reminder that many of the freedoms Americans enjoy today were won through the courage of

people who challenged tradition, questioned authority, and demanded equal rights.



At a time when women's rights and democratic principles are once again being debated, the Freethought Trail offers important lessons that are surprisingly relevant today.

The Freethought Trail links the homes, meeting places, gravesites, and historic landmarks associated with some of America's most influential reformers. Among them are suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass, freethinker and women's rights advocate Matilda Joslyn Gage, and the celebrated orator Robert Green Ingersoll. Their work helped transform American society by expanding liberty, challenging religious orthodoxy, and advocating for equal rights regardless of sex, race, or creed.

Today, those achievements can seem secure. Yet recent public discussions suggest otherwise. A widely discussed article in *The Atlantic*, 'The Men Who Want Women to Be Quiet', by Helen Lewis, examines the growing influence of a Christian based movement known as 'masculinism' which argues that feminism has gone too far and seeks to restore traditional gender hierarchies.

The article describes figures who openly advocate limiting women's political influence and who even discuss repealing women's suffrage as a long-term goal. According to the article, these ideas are no longer confined to obscure corners of the internet but have gained attention among some political and cultural influencers.

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For instance, Douglas Wilson, a Christian Nationalist pastor and co-founder of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, based in Moscow, Idaho has become an opponent of women's rights and a leader in the growing masculinism movement. Prominent quotes and positions attributed to Wilson include advocating for 'household voting' where male heads of household vote on behalf of the family.

To that end, he wants to repeal the 19th Amendment. When discussing the repeal, he said, "In my ideal society, we would vote as households." In Wilson's book *Fidelity: How To Be a One-Woman Man*, he describes his view of traditional marriage writing, "The sexual act cannot be made into an egalitarian pleasuring party: A man penetrates, conquers, colonizes, plants. A woman receives, surrenders, accepts." Regarding the role of wives and mothers, Wilson stated in a CNN interview: "Women are the kind of people that people come out of." He continued with, "Biologically, the wife and mother, who is the chief executive of the home, is entrusted with three or four or five eternal souls."

Wilson's views have faced intense public debate and criticism, with many scholars and critics arguing they are regressive and harmful to women's rights. To learn more, listen to this [interview of Lewis by Terry Gross](#) (host of National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* program).

The fact that serious conversations are taking place about rolling back rights that generations fought to secure should concern anyone who values democracy. The 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920 after decades of activism, guarantees that the right to vote cannot be denied on the basis of sex.

It was achieved only after relentless campaigning by reformers, many of whom are honored along the Freethought Trail. For visitors to Seneca Falls, Rochester, Fayetteville, Auburn, and other locations along the trail, the

struggle for women's equality becomes tangible. Standing in the places where Anthony organized, where Stanton wrote, where Gage challenged both church and state, and where Douglass supported women's suffrage at a time when many men would not, visitors gain a deeper appreciation of how difficult progress can be.

The Freethought Trail also demonstrates that advances in human rights are rarely permanent. Throughout American history, every expansion of liberty has faced resistance. The abolition of slavery was met with backlash. Women's suffrage was opposed for generations. Civil rights legislation encountered fierce opposition.

History shows that progress is not a straight line; it requires constant vigilance and civic engagement. Traveling the Freethought Trail encourages visitors to see themselves as participants in that ongoing story. It reminds us that the rights many Americans take for granted today were once considered radical demands. The reformers honored along the trail were often ridiculed, attacked, and dismissed as dangerous. Yet they persisted because they believed that reason, evidence, and equality were stronger than prejudice and tradition.

In an era when some voices call for women to be quieter, less influential, or less politically engaged, the Freethought Trail offers a powerful counter message. The Trail celebrates individuals who refused to be silent. It honors those who expanded democracy rather than restricted it. And it reminds us that the defense of liberty is never complete. The Freethought Trail is not simply a collection of historic sites. It is a living lesson about the importance of free inquiry, equal rights, and the courage to challenge injustice. For anyone concerned about the future of democracy, women's rights, and freedom of conscience, there has never been a more important time to walk in the footsteps of the freethinkers who helped shape modern America.

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In Memoriam: Mary Wilk

By Judy Flattery

Mary Wilk died last month, just shy of her 102nd birthday. She was an extraordinary human being and a member of HSSB since January 1996. She became membership chair in 1998, a position she held for 27 years until 2025 when she was 100 years old!



Mary Wilk, 5/18/2013
Photo courtesy of
Marian Shapiro.

Pre-COVID, Mary hosted dozens of board meeting potluck dinners at her lovely Hope Ranch home, enabling us to come together as both HSSB leaders and as friends.

She kept track of our members, caring about each one, sending out renewal notices, and encouraging us to invite others to join our Society. At peak membership in 2011, Mary was responsible for over 170 dues-paying members.

Mary was born in England to a British mother and a German father. Her husband came from Poland, and they emigrated to the United States as 'stateless' persons. They settled in Los Angeles and started several small manufacturing businesses. After moving to



Last year's HSSB picnickers with Mary Wilk, 6/22/2025. Photo courtesy of Marian Shapiro.

Santa Barbara, they started a metal-finishing company. Mary served as president of the company until just a few weeks ago.

Her favorite book was *The Ancestor's Tale* by Richard Dawkins; her favorite author was H.G. Wells. Her favorite movie was *The Bridge On The River Kwai*, and her favorite TV host was Fareed Zakaria. Mary graduated from school when she was just 14, got a job in accounting at age 16, and has worked ever since. Her longevity as HSSB Membership Chair underscores that point! Last year, she reluctantly resigned the HSSB Membership chair position supported by her children, Diana, Jennifer, and Michael, in coming to that difficult decision.

Mary was also a poet. Here is one of her poems expressing her atheist and humanist worldview. Thank you, Mary, for your friendship and for all you did for HSSB over the past decades.

Secular Sonnet

By Mary Wilk

I have no need for God or priests or church
To tell me what to think and how to act.
If I have questions, I can make my own search
For answers based on truth and proven fact.

I do not waste my time in abject prayer,
Or bow my head or kneel upon the ground,
But I stand tall and fearlessly declare
There is no deity to whom I'm bound.

I don't rely on faith to guide my way,
For I have been endowed with all I need
To fill my life with beauty, work and play,
Without religious dogma, myth or creed.

So free from superstition I remain,
Rejoicing in the liberty I gain.

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David Echols and Mary Wilk, 6/22/2025.
Photo courtesy of Marian Shapiro.

Robert Green Ingersoll & Incarceration

By Judy Flattery

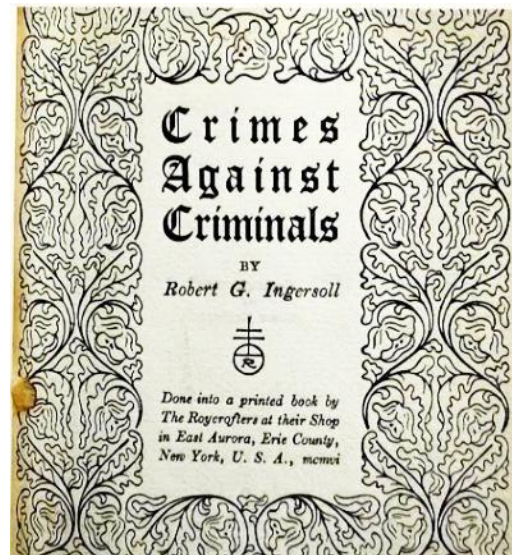
I was one of the Freethought Trail travelers last month and was very pleased to learn that 19th century statesman Robert Green Ingersoll expressed very progressive views on criminality and incarceration in a popular speech and essay in 1890; views that would not be commonplace until the mid to late 20th century.



Judy Flattery at the Robert Ingersoll Museum discovering his 'ahead of his time' views on prison reform.

The Prison Reform poster at the Ingersoll Museum says, "Criminal behavior is rooted in social circumstance, not inherent wickedness: 'Let us remember that criminals are produced by conditions and let us do what we can to change the conditions and to reform the criminals.'" His lecture on the topic, *Crimes Against Criminals*, was very popular and often reprinted.

He scathingly criticized the justice system, arguing that harsh retributive punishments (like imprisonment and execution) fail to address the root social causes of crime and are therefore inherently cruel.



It was surprising and inspiring to read his views on this topic (for those of you interested in learning more about the effort to abolish executions, please join HSSB's Zoom meeting on July 18, 2026 or read the March 2026 issue of this newsletter (pp 4-6).

Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

Submitted by Diane Krohn & Judy Flattery

Sunday, July 5, 10:00 am. Alice Fulmer-Zelinka: *Hyperactivity as Divinity*. Drawing from personal experience, pop culture, and Unitarians' embrace of neurodiversity, this service celebrates the joys and strengths of

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hyperactivity as well as its sorrows and challenges. In person at Live Oak UUC, 820 N. Fairview Rd, Goleta, CA or on Zoom: <https://zoom.us/j/991200709#success>

July 19, 10am. *Rev. Jonathan Young: Meeting the Wizard.* In person at Live Oak UUC, 820 N. Fairview Rd, Goleta, CA or on Zoom: <https://zoom.us/j/991200709#success>

July 19, 11:00 am – 12:30 pm: *Phil Zuckerman: Being Secular in Trump's America.* Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles. Although Trump's



reign has been an ongoing disaster for secular Americans in many ways, there is still some cause for hope. In this talk, Phil Zuckerman will discuss the legal and political damage of the current era, as well as cultural and demographic

factors that may serve to offset this current crisis. [Phil Zuckerman](#)

July 26, 2026, 10am. *Skyelar Peterson: Community & Heart for All.* In person at Live Oak UUC, 820 N. Fairview Rd, Goleta, CA or on Zoom: <https://zoom.us/j/991200709#success>

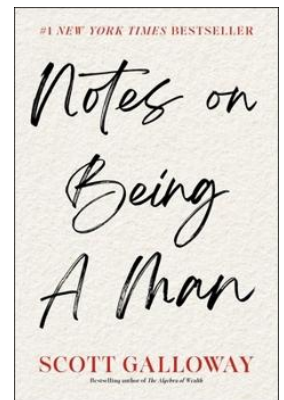
August 7-9: World Humanist Congress 2026, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Speakers include Greg Epstein, Maggie Ardiente, Leo Igwe, and Evan Clark. This event is organized by Humanists International and Humanist Canada. [World Humanist Congress 2026](#)




September 19: Humanity Now: AHA's 85th Annual Conference. Online conference by the American Humanist Association. [Humanity Now: AHA's 85th Annual Conference](#)



September 25. *Scott Galloway: Notes on Being a Man.* Author Galloway brings his sharp wit and unflinching candor to an urgent conversation about masculinity, loneliness and purpose in modern America. [UCSB Arts & Lectures event. Scott Galloway](#)



Charlotte Lundley Woodward Peirce



Born Charlotte Woodward
January 14, 1830
[Waterloo, New York](#)

Died March 15, 1924 (aged 94)
[Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.](#)

Known for Only woman to sign the Declaration of Sentiments and live to see the passing of the 19th Amendment

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HSSB Celebrated the Summer Solstice at Tuckers Grove Park in Goleta, June 21, 2026.
Thanks to Judy Fontana and Phil Holland for Organizing this event.

HSSB Contact Information

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Board Members at Large:

Wayne Beckman, Robert Bernstein, Judith Fontana, Gary Noreen, Roger Schlueter

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.

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Humanist Society of Santa Barbara
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HSSB Calendar

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

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

Saturday July 18, 3:00 pm Pacific. Abe Bonowitz: *Why I Support Abolishing the Death Penalty*. On Zoom. <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

Tuesday August 18. 5:00 pm Pacific, HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

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

Saturday August 22. 3:00pm Pacific. Bee Bloeser: *Fighting Smallpox in Africa Amid Tribalism, Terror, and the Cold War*. Co-sponsored by Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation (LOUUC) in Goleta. **In person at LOUUC** (820 North Fairview Road, Goleta) and on Zoom at: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.