



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

AUGUST 2026

Sending Smallpox Into History



Bee Bloeser

A Witness to Medical history.
Author of *Vaccines & Bayonets*

Our Program: Bee Bloeser will provide a picture of the historic achievement of eradicating smallpox, the first and only time in history a human disease has been wiped off the face of the earth. After touching on background about the disease and the scope of its devastation, she will discuss the domestic and Cold War rivalries that delayed, and finally launched, the global Smallpox Eradication Program. From her vantage point as an embedded spouse with the U.S.-led West Africa phase of the global campaign, she will share on-the-ground operations and their complexities along with the eventual successful human victory over the disease.

Key takeaway: Vaccines without effective systems and political buy-in save no one.

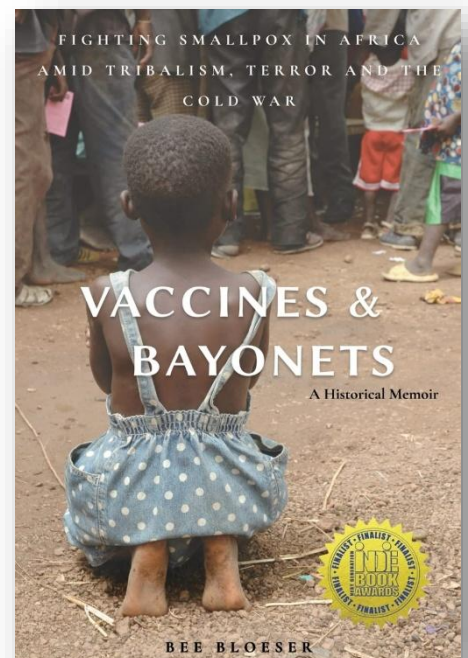
Our Speaker: Bee Bloeser, M.A. lived in West Africa, the Middle East, and Native American nations supporting her late husband's global public health work, and in her own career as a medical speech-language pathologist. Her award-winning historical memoir, *Vaccines & Bayonets: Fighting Smallpox in Africa Amid Tribalism, Terror and the Cold War*, has been praised by editors with *The Economist* and *Foreign Policy* as well as by the late Dr. William Foege, former director of the CDC.

When: Saturday August 22 at 3 - 4:30pm

Where: In Person at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 820 N. Fairview Ave. Goleta CA

AND On Zoom at:

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



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HSSB - Execution is Not the Solution - Abraham Bonowitz - 7/18/26

by Robert Bernstein

In the 1980s, Abraham Bonowitz was a supporter of the death penalty. He thought that the U.S. had the best justice system in the world and he trusted it. He said that he might have opposed the death penalty in places like South Africa or the USSR because of their corrupt legal systems.

What changed his mind? He learned that the single biggest factor for whether the death penalty is sought is whether the jurisdiction has the finances to afford a death penalty trial! Fewer than 2% of U.S. counties account for nearly all executions. With rare exceptions, rural counties don't have those resources. Lake County, Ohio bankrupted itself putting one person on death row.

Can the death penalty can help victim families heal? Imagine you are a victim family member. How would you feel knowing that the death penalty might have been possible if the murder happened somewhere else? It makes them feel their loved one counts less. And only half of murders are even solved.

In 1972 the Supreme Court ruled in *Fuhrman v Georgia* that the death penalty as it was being used violated the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. Not that the death penalty itself was necessarily unconstitutional. But that it was being applied in an arbitrary and inconsistent manner. All existing death penalty laws were invalidated. Everyone on death row at the time had their sentence changed to imprisonment in some form.

The 1976 Supreme Court Case *Gregg v Georgia* allowed the resumption of executions. But the process would be split into two trials: The first would determine guilt. The second would be a separate sentencing trial.

Some states did rewrite their death penalty laws under the new rules. New Jersey wrote theirs in the 1980s. 630 cases were eligible for the death penalty. 230 were tried as death penalty cases. 60 got that sentence. All but 8 death sentences were overturned by the time New Jersey abolished its death penalty in 2007... meaning about 1% got the death sentence.

The U.S. Supreme Court building has the phrase 'Equal Justice Under Law'. Clearly this is not equal justice.

Bonowitz considers himself an organizer, not just an activist. An organizer brings about change. Ideally, an organizer puts himself out of business!

The Speaker of the House is like a god in many states because they decide whether a bill even gets heard. Virginia was the first of the former Confederate states to abolish the death penalty.

Bonowitz 'group, Death Penalty Action, has an annual four day vigil at the Supreme Court from June 29 (the anniversary of the *Furman* case) to July 2 (the anniversary of the *Gregg* case).

Bonowitz was speaking to us on July 18. He noted it is the 8th anniversary of the last execution in Ohio under Governor Mike DeWine. DeWine is a consistently pro-life Catholic. Ohio has 30 executions scheduled, but DeWine keeps putting them off.

In June Governor DeWine announced he had changed his mind and now opposes the death penalty, because it is not a deterrent. There were 6.6 murders per 100,000 people in Ohio in 2018. For eight years there have been no executions in Ohio, yet the murder rate is the same.

There have been more than 600 executions in Texas since 1982. Florida currently is the state with the most executions. On July 28, two executions are scheduled for the same day in Florida: One case had 'inconclusive' DNA

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evidence. The other person is 80 years old. What is the point?

One man who is currently scheduled for execution in Tennessee on August 13 had a stroke and can barely even move.

In the case of the man now trial for the killing of Charlie Kirk, the evidence is questionable.

The Governor has the power of commutation in some states. California has almost 600 people on death row, who have been dispersed to the general prison population across the California corrections system. Governor Newsom said there would be no executions on his watch. The execution chamber at San Quentin has been disassembled.

Bonowitz said there is a campaign in California to urge Governor Newsom to commute all of the death sentences before his term ends.

In Florida a jury does not have to rule unanimously in death penalty cases. In Florida 8 out of 12 jurors is enough. The 2016 Hurst ruling by the Supreme Court said that 7 out of 12 is not enough!

Bonowitz talked about methods of executions. Pharmacological methods raise a problem because drug companies don't want to be associated with executions! He predicts more states will switch to firing squads. Idaho made this their primary method and spent \$1 million on a facility for this purpose.

September 30 is the first scheduled execution of a woman in many years. She is not fully mentally competent.

An injunction was achieved against suffocation with gas. But then the Supreme Court overturned that 6-3.

Amnesty International says that death row is itself torture. Bonowitz said you could argue the torture starts with an officer saying, "You will fry for this."

One approach is to chip away at the death penalty in different ways. In *Atkins v Virginia* in 2002 the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to execute a person who is not mentally competent. Consider that juvenile offenders have brains that have not fully matured.

Bonowitz said this is not a good time to challenge the death penalty before the Supreme Court, given that Trump has filled it with right wing ideologues. Some Supreme Court members have said that executions are going to hurt; get over it. Some want it to hurt more.

Abuse, neglect, addiction in childhood are common themes for those who end up on death row.

What is the best way to prevent murder? All sides claim that is what they want. He gave the example of Lois and Ken Robinson. Their son Larry was discharged from the Air Force for mental illness. They put him in a mental hospital, but he was released after 30 days, even though he was hearing voices. He went on to kill. There was no treatment bed for him, but Texas has the resources to kill him instead.

Since 1972 there have been no executions under the military code. Four people are currently on military death row.

Trump is the most executing president since FDR. He has presided over 13 Federal executions. He wanted to do more.

FDR executed 16 people over his 13 years in office. Some were spies during WWII. Trump did 13 in 6 months. Trump loves the power to kill people, Bonowitz explained. You can see it in his

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rush to war. His Catholic base actually doesn't like the death penalty.

A former prison warden who oversaw electric chair executions described the people he executed appearing in his dreams. He talked about the trauma taken on by participating in executions and that is why he joined the movement to abolish the death penalty.

Bonowitz told of a case where the execution needle was passed right through the vein and out the other side. So the drugs were being injected into the man's muscle. It was agonizing for him. He didn't die of the drug overdose. He died of a heart attack.

In another case the wrong drugs were ordered. This caused a pause in Oklahoma. Slowing the rate of executions is some progress to seek. It is difficult to willfully kill someone who is in captivity and can't harm anyone.

Behind Bonowitz was a poster: 'Executions are Legalized Lynchings.' I noted that ICE has been given immunity for their killings, meaning there is no accountability when they simply execute someone with no cause. At least in the case of the death penalty there was some kind of trial.

Bonowitz noted that in the George Floyd case they called it 'extrajudicial execution'.

Right now they are asking Governor Newsom to commute people on death row in California. Catholic Mobilizing Network is another group opposing every execution.

Death Penalty Action holds a virtual sit-in days before each execution. They also ask people to flood the governor's office with calls.

Kae asked about the risk of people wrongly being executed. Doesn't this bother people?

Bonowitz said he has a sign "Are you willing to be the innocent person being executed?" He

doesn't bring that sign in cases where there is no question of guilt, but in the case of the next scheduled execution there is plenty of doubt.

DNA has exonerated only a small percentage of the over 200 people who have been freed from death rows after their convictions were overturned. They do get it wrong. Some people are OK with that. Others are not.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the talk came next in response to a question by Judy Flattery. Bonowitz told of the case of Anthony Apanovitch. He was on death row for the rape and murder of Mary Ann Flynn in 1984. He always said he was not guilty.

Since the early 1990s Bonowitz became a pen pal and friend of Apanovitch. DNA evidence was later found that had never been shared with Apanovitch. It determined that Apanovitch was not the rapist. The prosecution had claimed that Apanovitch was the sole rapist and murderer. But the DNA proved it was not Apanovitch.

A judge ordered Apanovitch released to his wife and family and ordered a new trial. Apanovitch had to wear an ankle monitor for the next two years.

The prosecution appealed, noting a bizarre loophole in the Ohio law. The DNA evidence could only be used if it had been requested by the accused and this DNA evidence had been ordered by the prosecution. This seems to be a direct violation of the 1963 Brady v Maryland Supreme Court decision. That decision ruled that the prosecution is obligated to share all evidence that challenges the guilt of the accused.

Apanovitch was seized and sent back to death row! How is that possible? An appeal is on to Governor Mike DeWine to pardon Apanovitch, or at the very least to commute the sentence to time served. Here is [a petition](#) with the relevant information.

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<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/dna-proves-innocence-free-anthony-apanovitch-now>

It is shocking to learn of cases with such bizarre injustice. We only know of these cases because of the persistent work of anti-death penalty advocates. Note that even when a wrongfully convicted person is released after decades in prison they may not get any compensation. Sometimes the state will force the person to plead guilty to a lesser charge or face spending more time in prison while the case crawls its way through the system.

For more information, please visit [the Death Penalty Action website](https://deathpenaltyaction.org/):
<https://deathpenaltyaction.org/>

CSICon, Buffalo, NY
June 11-14, 2026
By Diane Krohn

Wayne Beckman and I attended the Center for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) convention, celebrating their 50th anniversary, in Buffalo, NY. Judy Flattery and Judy Fontana also attended. Phil Holland accompanied them to Buffalo and accompanied them along The Freethought Trail, as described in the July Secular Circular.

As is typical with the CSI conventions, there were multiple speakers with a variety of topics. Most presenters speak for 30 minutes, so every talk is packed with information. Here are a few summaries of some of the talks:

Bertha Vazquez and Melanie Trecek-King:
Don't Believe Everything You Believe.

This was a workshop in which everyone participated in several exercises, including T/F questions, looking at real photos vs. AI photos, and a quiz about evolution. The point was that being wrong about something you don't care about doesn't matter very much, but the more emotional you are about something, then that is

something with which you have the strongest belief. We interpret new information through our existing beliefs. And belief is more often a reflection of the beliefs of our 'tribe', rather than an indication of our individual intelligence.



Vazquez and Trecek-King's advice was to be skeptical of news sources, know yourself and your vulnerabilities. Sources should be fact-checked, and you should be willing to change your mind on issues if the facts do not support your position. Humility and curiosity are what we need most to find the truth.

Andrea Love: Sanitizing Snake Oil
Harms Public Health

This talk was about the process of legitimizing 'snake oil'. Wikipedia defines 'snake oil' as "a fake product, a scam, or empty talk that promises to solve all problems but has no real value." Typically, legitimizing it starts with the Snake Oil salesperson presenting a science topic with the "both sides" argument, so that it seems there are legitimate concerns about a topic, with both sides being positioned as equal (ignoring actual evidence). This approach has the public questioning the science, and it scares people. A lack of trust in experts follows, then, "you know

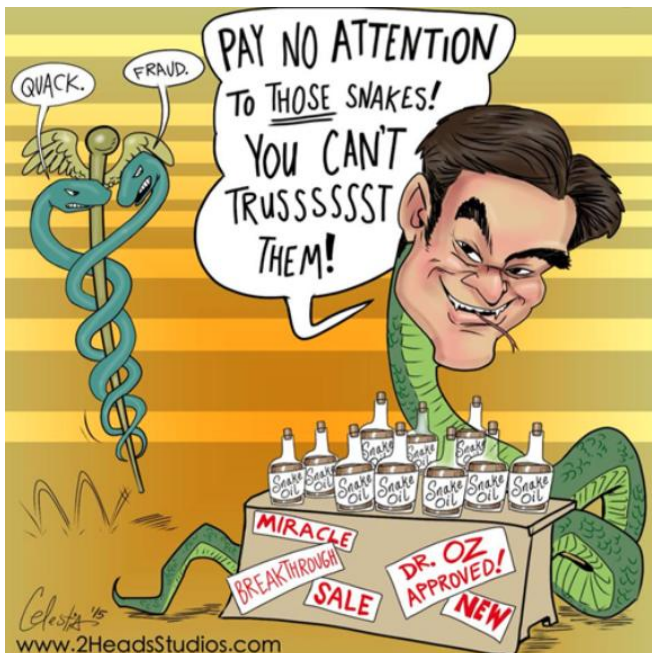
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yourself best,” followed by “I have something to sell to you that is endorsed by this expert” (an MD, a PhD, celebrity, etc.).

Then, unfortunately, many professional organizations and even mainstream physicians start parroting the snake oil claims; for example, “organic food is better for you than conventionally grown food;” or “you should avoid GMO’s for your baby’s health.” Love calls this “institutional laundering.”

The alternative products are not fringe, sold by some little mom-and-pop company. The alternative products are a market—and a **huge** one. The complementary and alternative medicine market was estimated to be \$52 billion in 2025, and it is projected to be \$375 billion by 2033.

Love suggested how to be better at communicating science and facts to those who believe otherwise. Validate their feelings and have empathy; for example, “I understand why that’s concerning to you. Here’s what the evidence shows...” Don’t mock or shame them, and don’t overload them with facts.



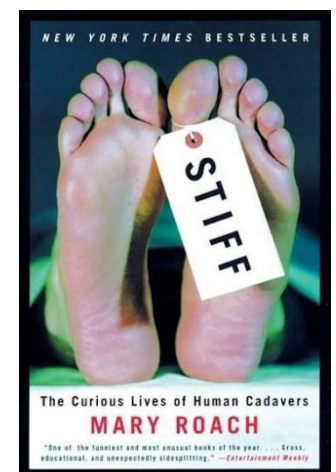
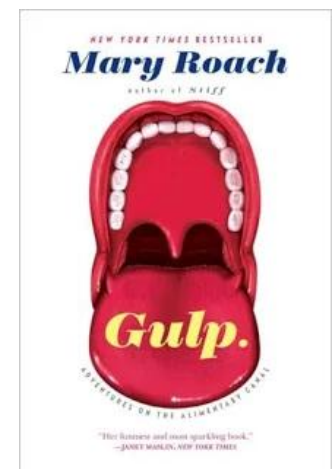
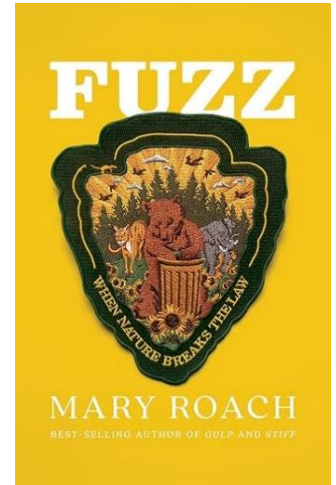
Mary Roach in Conversation with Richard Wiseman

This was one of the most entertaining conversations that I have ever heard! Author Mary Roach has written eight non-fiction books about a variety of topics, including; *Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law*; *Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal*; and *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*.

Her writing is factual, based on experts within the field of the book topic, and she has a wonderful sense of humor, so her books are funny and informative.

Richard Wiseman is a psychologist and a magician, and he also has a wonderful sense of humor. Put the two of them together, and you get a memorable presentation.

Roach does not have a traditional science background, but she is a good writer, and she presents science in a way that people who may not know that they like science find that they actually are captivated by science. She travels around the world and gets experts and scientists to share information with her, but she did say that it



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takes a lot of persistence, time and tenacity to get that information.

Roach said that she likes the opportunity to learn new things constantly and hopes that it inspires others to do the same thing. If you have not read any of her books yet, do yourself and favor and start reading!

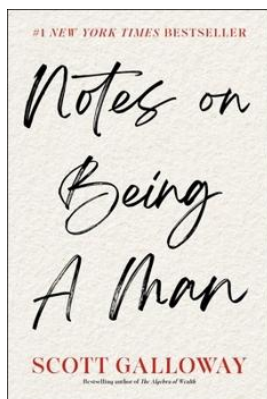
Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

Submitted by Diane Krohn

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](#)

October 15-17: Freedom From Religion Foundation 2026 National Convention, Milwaukee, WI. Speakers include Jared Huffman, Ron Reagan, and Jim Obergefell. [FFRF 2026 Convention](#)

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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

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HSSB Calendar

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: *Sending Smallpox into History*. 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>.

Tuesday Sept 15. 5:00 pm Pacific. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

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

Saturday September 19, 3:00 pm Pacific. Lee Boek: *Confessions of a Pulpiteer*. A one-man show by a former evangelical preacher: “a foot-stompin’ hallelujah show about life at the crossroads of politics, religion and liberation.” 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>.