



THE SECULAR CIRCULAR

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

March, 2006

Media Spin

By Nancy Wahl

Where is Walter Cronkite when we need him? Never before has it been so difficult to know



who and what to believe. Gone are the days when a fatherly anchorman made all of America believe "that's the way it is." Digital media have rendered obsolete the phrase "pictures don't lie," and new forms of communication

technology have made it easier than ever to bend the truth.

Join us on March 18th when Susan Rogers, editor and publisher of MediaLiteracy.com, UCSB graduate, and former Santa Barbara resident helps us explore the nature and extent of media spin in all its many forms. From "astroturf" organizations (corporate-backed non-profits masquerading as grassroots consumer groups) to video news releases and the blurring of the line between news and entertainment, Rogers will present an overview of the current media landscape and discuss the personal, cultural and political implications of our culture of "spin."

Rogers is a marketing communications consultant who discovered media literacy

education in 1995. Her MediaLiteracy.com web site serves as a gateway for teachers, parents, health professionals, and others who recognize the need to teach both children and

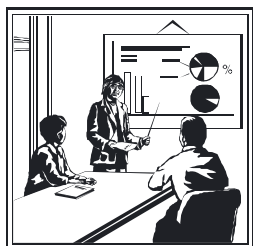
Saturday, March 18th at 3 pm
Vista del Monte Patio Room
Susan Rogers

**"Truth or Consequences:
The Search for Credibility
in an Age of Media Spin**

adults how to navigate today's world of powerful images, words, and sounds. Rogers earned her BA and MA from UCSB and lived in Santa Barbara for most of the period from 1969 to 1983. Known then by her maiden name as Sue Freas, in 1980 she published Santa Barbara's first women's business directory and founded the South Coast Business Network, a business and professional networking organization that operated locally for nearly 20 years. She taught public speaking at Brooks Institute and Santa Barbara City College, and served as marketing director of the Bank of Montecito.

Presently living in Grass Valley (in the Sierra foothills northeast of Sacramento) with her husband and teenage son, Rogers still has many friends in this area and is looking forward to returning for this talk.

Humanist Society of Santa Barbara



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Board meetings are scheduled on the Monday preceding the Saturday general monthly meeting of the Society and are usually held at the home of one of the board members. All HSSB members are welcome to attend these meetings. Contact any board member for more information.

Membership Notes

by Mary Wilk

Humanist Society meetings are usually held on the 3rd Saturday of each month at 3 pm in the Patio Room of Vista del Monte, 3775 Modoc Road, Santa Barbara, CA. More information is available at our web site:

www.SantaBarbaraHumanists.org

or by contacting any of the board members listed in the left-hand column of this page.

If you would like a copy of this newsletter mailed to a friend or someone who might be interested in our Society, please send their contact information to PO Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130 or call Mary Wilk. Alternatively, all of our newsletters are available at the web address shown above.

If you are not already a member, we encourage you to join our Society. Annual membership dues are \$36 for a single person, \$60 for a couple, and \$100 (or more) for a sponsor. Members receive the monthly newsletter and have the option of attending meetings, outings and special events sponsored by the society.

Those unable to attend our monthly meetings may subscribe to our newsletter for an annual fee of \$20 but are not entitled to other membership privileges. When attending our meetings, a donation of \$2 from members and \$5 from non-members is appreciated. If you are not a member and would like to learn more about our society, please contact any Board member to attend one of our meetings on a complimentary basis.

Social Justice by Marian Shapiro

Our Humanist Society meeting last October, excellently facilitated by Carol Palladini, revealed a few things about our Santa Barbara group. The members shared their feelings that many issues mattered to them and that they felt being a Humanist meant being involved with these social justice issues, and that being a Humanist meant more than a lack of belief in god.

Where the discussion groups differed was in how they prioritized the issues on which we might want to take action. For example, three out of the four groups ranked "separation of church and state" as the highest priority issue for humanists. Also highly ranked were the issues of the environment, health care, corporate power/corruption, population, ideology in the public sector (teaching Intelligent Design, keeping Terry Schiavo alive, marriage only for man and woman, no US Funds for UN Population Fund, etc.) right to privacy, and many others. A small number (2 reported) expressed the thought that we should only involve ourselves in church-state issues.

Groups were asked to add and delete issues from an inclusive list that Carol introduced for us to consider. Some groups deleted issues because their scope was too broad and all-encompassing, such as world conflicts, developing nations, etc.

Some of the issues that were added were: criminal justice issues, election reform, and animal rights. One person brought up the consideration that taking action on some issues may alienate the few members who may not share the views of the majority. The

board also gave this serious consideration and consequently supported the concept of a Social Justice Committee (SJC). It could take a position, not claiming to represent the whole group, but rather representing only the Social Justice committee. If, for example, the SJC learns of a situation that it feels most members would like to know about, they may send out a notice about it. No one is required to respond or participate. If the SJC thinks that some action is advisable, they can send a recommendation to the board of directors and let them make a decision about whether the Society as a whole will support it or not support it, will sign a petition with other organizations, or will donate money, write a letter to the Editor, etc. An important restriction, of course, is that as a 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization, we cannot be involved in supporting political candidates, just issues.

Social Scene by Anne Rojas

Please mark your calendars for the exciting Summer Solstice Party. Also note that the location has been changed to the lovely Hope Ranch home of Mary Wilk. Her party house credentials are outstanding! The party is on June 17th, Saturday at 3 pm. Easy to remember as it is the same date and time as the normal monthly meeting. Party is a potluck with your Social Committee and hostess providing drinks, tableware and a main entree. Cost for this + the fabulous entertainment (games and contests as the "Duck-Off") is only \$10.00 per member. If you have any activities you would like to see, please let me know. Details will be forthcoming as well as your culinary offering form.

(See *Social Scene*, page 5)

Chairman's Chat

by Dick Cousineau

The excerpts of the text of Judge Jones' ruling on the Dover, Pennsylvania, Intelligent Design (ID) case has been printed in the March/April edition of *Free Inquiry Magazine*. In it, he castigates the defendants for "flagrant and insulting falsehoods presented to the court and their efforts were purposely insincere and that the Dover Board consulted no scientific materials, contacted no scientists, and failed to consider the School District's own science teachers".

He ruled that the evidence demonstrated that ID is not science but rather religion masquerading as pseudo-science. The claims of ID have never been peer-reviewed, have never been supported by studies of biological concepts, and have never been subject to scientific research. Jones wrote, "The goal of the ID movement is not to encourage critical thinking but to ferment revolution that would supplant evolutionary theory with religious beliefs". The claims of ID have never been, nor can they ever be, tested or observed because the claims are bogus.

Can you imagine what a scientist would do if she were asked to verify that a wooden boat which had been found in the mountains of Iran that proved that a worldwide flood occurred some 8000 years ago and wiped out all life in the sea, just what she would do? Of course, first find the boat, second test the age of the wood on a Carbon 14 scale, then find no sea life older than 8000 years. If all could be verified, then there could be a theory proposed that a flood had occurred in the Middle East during that time. No more no less. But, of course, nothing of the kind can be verified.

What is left? Only the writings of some religious scribes about 2400 years ago and faith. Such simple faith just does not trump science no matter how much some folks wish it could.

The morality, honesty, and truthfulness of the Christian proponents of ID was reprimanded by Judge Jones because they lied to the court, to the School Board and to the public just to prove their unsupportable beliefs were infallible and need to be taught in public schools as fact. Why is the job of our public schools to teach religion? That is the function of the churches, temples, and mosques. As the famous bumper sticker says "Don't pray in my school, and I won't think in your church".

Book Club

by Marty Shapiro

The Book Club will hold its next meeting on Wednesday, March 15th, at 1:30 at the home of Aida Bullock, 3755 Lincolnwood, off Hope. Aida would like to know how many folks to expect so please give her a call (687-0784) if you're planning to come.

The book we've all been looking forward to discussing is Karen Armstrong's *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, a critically praised and content-rich study of why and how men create God(s).

Due to the depth and length of Armstrong's writing, we will only tackle the first half of the book (6 chapters, 206 pages) at this. The remaining chapters, dealing with "The Death of God" among other ideas will have to wait for the future.

Voting Integrity

by Marian Shapiro of Social Justice Committee

Humanists believe strongly in democracy and many of us have been troubled by the reports of Diebold voting machines altering election results. If citizens can't trust their votes to be counted honestly, our very system of Democracy is in jeopardy. Learn more about this issue at <http://www.blackboxvoting.org/>

You may remember that former Sec. of State Kevin Shelley decided against California using those voting machine because there was no retrievable paper trail. Now Secretary of State McPherson has recertified Diebold voting machines for use in California.

We expect that shortly we will be asked by Senator Debra Bowen, Chair of the Elections Committee, to send emails and calls to members of the Rules Committee in support of subpoenaing officials from several voting machine companies and requiring them to testify under oath about how the machines work. Stay tuned. We'll let you know when they want the emails and calls to go to the members of the Rules Committee.

If any member has an issue to suggest for the SJC to look into, please let one of the members of this committee know. We are: Marian Shapiro, Carol Palladini, Micki Stern, Helen Conley, Bob Perry, Hope Smith and Marcia Sherman.

News Bulletin: In London, 15,000 Atheists rioted after a blank sheet of paper was found on a cartoonist's desk.

(Social Scene, continued from page 3)

We had to cancel the theater evening in Ventura to the "Ben Franklin Unplugged" due to lack of interest. Actually, it was a traffic and dinner problem so perhaps we will rethink that venue and schedule an evening of theater here in SB. Your suggestions are welcome.

Our Dining Out at Ming Dynasty after the Dr. Shapiro talk was well attended by 30 persons. It continues to be a favorite for the price and food quality. The fabled duck was on the buffet as promised. We have not selected the Dining Out location for March. If you have suggestions, please let me know after you have done some preliminary research. Our members demand: good food, acceptable noise level, fair price, easy parking, separate checks, central location and good table set ups for easy conversation.

The last Sunday brunch was attended by only 5 persons, but we soldier on and you all are invited without any prior notification. We meet at Crocodile, State and Alamar in the Lemon Tree Motel at 10:00 AM on the last Sunday of the month.



Since the early days, [the church] has thrown itself violently against every effort to liberate the body and mind of man. It has been, at all times and everywhere, the habitual and incorrigible defender of bad governments, bad laws, bad social theories, bad institutions. It was, for centuries, an apologist for slavery, as it was an apologist for the divine right of kings.

– H. L. Mencken

Getting to Know You

Bret Hughes

By Diane Krohn

Free will, destiny, consciousness, the meaning of life...these are just some of the topics that may come up if you start a conversation with Bret Hughes. Oh, yes, he may also mention that he worked on some movies in New Zealand. You may have heard of them, The Lord of the Rings trilogy.



Bret is that rarity, a Santa Barbara native, who attended Adams School, San Marcos High School, and SBCC. He has always focused on the big picture of life, wanting to know what it all means. But he

did not pursue philosophy in college because he didn't feel that it was reasonable or appealing to have a career in philosophy. Instead, he obtained a degree in Aeronautical Engineering, with a minor in Computer Science, from Cal Poly. He got an offer from Lockheed Aeronautical when he graduated, but he wanted to go into computer graphics. So he got a job, after a bit of persistence, with Alias Wavefront, a computer graphics company in Santa Barbara. After a year and a half there, he ended up in New Zealand working on the "Lord of the Rings" movies. He lived in New Zealand for about 2 ½ years, and then returned to Santa Barbara.

Bret's parents were not religious and did not attend church or make any particular references to god. Bret did attend Sunday School for a while, though, with a

neighborhood friend. That didn't last too long when he figured out that the stories probably weren't true. Bret came to the conclusion that religion is something that humans made up and became agnostic at the age of 13. But his conclusions were difficult for him to deal with at that point in his life, so he set them aside for a while. However, as he got older, he realized that his analysis of life and reality and his life's philosophy had continued to develop, and continued to get broadened and refined. He felt that with all the historic and scientific information available, we have most of the answers for "life's big questions." With that in mind, he felt determined to pursue his number one life's goals: writing a book on life and reality.

While in New Zealand, he started work on his book titled "Wisdom in Perspective," a work that he finished in Santa Barbara. Bret feels that there is a need for his book due to his life experiences, the presence of religious intolerance, and lack of perspective on the bigger picture. As part of the research for his book, and in determining the audience for his book, Bret did research on agnosticism, atheism, and humanism. It is through the research that he found out about the HSSB, and has been a member for about 8 months. He enjoys the speakers and topics that are discussed in the HSSB meetings.

Bret has finished his book (it has been edited, printed, and bound), and he is currently in the process of getting testimonials for it, in preparation for getting it published. Ask him about it! Bret might be willing to loan you a copy, and you can read his answers to the "big questions."

The Origin of Life

by Robert Shapiro

Professor Bob Shapiro challenged myths of the origin of life arising not only from religion but also from science. The origin of life has challenged great minds for centuries and Dr. Shapiro is one used to challenges. At age 23 he earned a PhD in Chemistry from Harvard. And shortly before turning 70 he decided to start running and was soon running marathons. In between he has written 120 scientific publications, including four popular books.

In his talk he easily dismissed Creationism as transferring the origin of life question to the origin of the Creator question. Intelligent Design is not substantially different, though he credits Michael Behe as writing one of the few such books worthy of review. Life from space has the same problem of just transferring the problem elsewhere.

It has been years since Van Helmont and others had a "science" of spontaneous generation giving us mice from dirty underwear. But more recent scientific explanations fail Dr. Shapiro's scrutiny as well.

Most such explanations involve highly improbable events combined with lots of time. The Oparin-Haldane Hypothesis of lightning plus early earth materials giving life's building blocks was one early example. But it takes exponential increases of time to overcome linear increases in probability.

So life had to come from a sequence of stages, each of which is reasonably likely. Likely enough that these stages can be observed in experiments.

"RNA World" was one attempt to simplify the mechanism from DNA to the easier RNA biochemistry. But it is still orders of magnitude too complex.

He does not have a specific theory, but offers a concept of what one would be like. He calls it "Metabolism First", meaning that the key is energy. In particular, harnessing an energy source to a specific process that would be important for primitive life.

One such model he suggests is "bags of dirty water" which would be the precursors to cells. The key is to collect materials in compartments or through electrostatic cohesion. Then to tie these to an energy source like ultraviolet light or hot undersea vents.

In addition to laboratory experiments and simulations, he sees space exploration on Mars and Titan as valuable. This offers a chance of seeing whether the origin of life processes have occurred elsewhere. Starting with searches for carbon-based life as we know it makes a good practical start. He also thinks it is worthwhile to search here on earth for other forms of life that we may have overlooked.

The universe may be teeming with life, but in response to a question, he thinks intelligent life will be far more rare.

Dr Shapiro thinks that progress on the origin of life will occur when we stop wasting time on current theories that he sees as a dead end. That, and a great increase in funding for such basic research that has been lacking for too long. As Humanists, we should make such research on the origin of life a priority for both practical and philosophical reasons.

Web Site of the Month **Secular Coalition for America** **by Wayne Beckman**

This month's site is the website for the only full time lobbyist supporting the separation of church and state. Those of you who made it to the Sizzler on January 24th got to meet Lori Lipman Brown, the charming person representing our interests in Washington. With the huge influence of the religious right on the current administration, it is good to know there is someone looking out for us. Lori is living proof that there are lobbyists that are not at all like Jack Abramoff. Her low key and cooperative approach will help dispel the Madeline Murray O'Hare stereotype of the angry atheist. This website will keep you up to date on Lori's activities, and it will give you an opportunity to support her work. Because

this is a lobbying organization, however, your contributions are not tax deductible.

The mission statement of the coalition seems well aligned with the concerns of many Santa Barbara Humanists: *The mission of the Secular Coalition for America is to increase the visibility and respectability of nontheistic viewpoints within the larger culture and to protect and strengthen secular government as the best guarantee of freedom for all.*

So visit the Secular Coalition website directly or visit it from the link page of our website and see what is happening in Washington and in the media that might affect you.

[Ed. Note: Lori has joined our Society. I interpret this to be her effort to stay in touch with grassroots Humanist organizations and to mean that she is open to input from our membership.]