The Freethought Society News

Logo and website banner contest details inside newsletter.
Submissions sought.

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A New Year, Name, Structure and Website

by Margaret Downey

Happy New Year, everyone! 2010 marks the beginning of an entirely new approach to meeting the needs of the freethought community. This new approach is highlighted throughout this newsletter, and more details can be found at the newly designed website. See: www.FtSociety.org.

I was the founder of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) and served as president for fourteen years prior to becoming president of the Atheist Alliance International (AAI). During my two year term at AAI, **Sally Cramer** served as the FSGP president. Cramer resigned on October 31, 2009. I became the president of FSGP on November 1, 2009.

My first duty was to ensure FSGP's participation in the 2009 winter display at the free speech zone located at the Chester County Courthouse in West Chester, Pennsylvania. A full report about that endeavor can be found elsewhere in this newsletter (*Tree of Knowledge #3 Generates Controversy*).

FSGP's membership has significantly declined mostly due to the worsening economy (from a high of 450 to a low of 100 members). Also contributing to the low participation is the fact that the Ludington Library is no longer available to FSGP as a place to hold a monthly meeting. The renovation project at the Library is expected to take one full year. On March 4, 2010, a new meeting location will be tested in Norristown. PA. For meeting details, please see the article *The Freethought Society's 2010 Three-Month Activities Calendar* located elsewhere in this newsletter.

In order to provide more services to the nontheist community, FSGP's structure is in need of re-evaluation. During the month of November 2009, the FSGP board of directors discussed and approved a motion to change the name of the organization to the "Freethought Society" (FS).

The new name allows the group to represent many more people than just those who live in the "Greater Philadelphia" area. The outreach expansion also enables FS to enhance the visibility of nontheists in many new locations, including other states. FS will provide services not offered by other groups. The goal is to raise awareness and acceptance of the nontheist community. Please visit the new FS website (FtSociety.org) to volunteer, donate and/or become an official representative of FS. Projects include:

1. Acknowledgement of Secular Occasions
2. Anti-Discrimination Narrative Collection
3. Billboards/Bus Signs
4. Diversity Outreach
5. Establishment of Meet-Up Groups
6. Free Speech Zone Displays
7. Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center
8. Helping Hands/Community Service Programs
9. Media Training
10. Mentoring Connection
11. Meetings (Social and Educational)
12. Newsletter
13. Protests/Demonstrations
14. Speaker's Bureau
15. Street Fair Participation
16. Student Outreach
17. Teaching Acceptance
18. Thomas Paine Memorial Committee
19. Unity Events

Each of these projects will be highlighted in detail at the new FS website which is currently under construction. The unveiling of the new website is scheduled for April 1, 2010.

There are many talented people currently involved with FS, but the search is on for more volunteers, speakers, committee chair persons, board members and representatives who can serve as freethought advocates. When opportunities arise, FS should be in a position to react and participate. If you can't volunteer, please consider donating. Donations can be earmarked to support any or all of the above highlighted projects. FS will make sure that your money is used specifically for that project. Donations that are not earmarked will be used for FS operational needs (which are, on average, close to $500 a month). With your involvement, 2010 will be the year that nontheists become more vocal, organized and much more visible.

Please note that articles printed in this newsletter have been adjusted to reflect the new name even though events may have taken place prior to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of State recognizing the name change on January 15, 2010. ◘

Tree of Knowledge #3 Generates Controversy

by Margaret Downey

Some may wonder who could possibly be against the advocacy of reading, the dissemination of information and recognition of the long-held American Constitutional rights of freedom of expression and freedom of thought. Wonder no more. Some of the people who seek to silence freethinking citizens and prevent them from expressing the nontheist point of view are living and/or working in the Borough of West Chester, Pennsylvania!

This article documents the Freethought Society's (FS) 2009 *Tree of Knowledge* project from start to finish. Documentation of the events that transpired serve not only to inform readers of the *Freethought Society News*, but will also help substantiate possible future litigation.

The 2009 *Tree of Knowledge* saga began in the month of October 2009 when I logged on to the Chester County Commissioners Office website (http://dsf.chesco.org/chesco/site/default.asp) to check the application process for participation at the 2009 Winter Display/Free Speech Zone located at the Chester County Courthouse on the corner of High and Market Streets, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

I was unable to complete the display application because it printed with large blue lettering stating that the document was a "DRAFT." I started checking the website daily, but from what I could read of the new regulations, it appeared that FS might not be able to qualify. The new regulations concerned me because the Commissioners would only allow three displays on a first come, first serve basis. I was also concerned about regulation number thirteen which stated:

> *Each applicant, as part of and by filing an application, shall agree to restore the ground and the premises to its original condition and shall provide to the County either a bond to cover and guarantee the cost of the clean up and repairs in the amount of Five Thousand Dollars ($5,000) or a signed agreement to pay and indemnify the County for any costs, damages and/or other expenses incurred in connection with or relating to the Display, such agreement to be accompanied by a written representation that the Applicant or its members or sponsors have sufficient financial resources to pay and indemnify the County for any costs and expenses incurred in restoring the grounds and premises should the Applicant fail to do so.*

The FS bank account did not have close to a $5,000 balance so I decided that another plan of action was needed to insure that FS would be able to exercise its right to freedom of expression.

On November 3, 2009, I submitted to the Borough of West Chester an application for a permit to display a street banner. The application requested either a location on Market Street (between Church and High Streets) or on High Street (between Market and Gay Streets). This is the banner design I submitted with the application:

Happy Holidays from The Freethought Society
Please visit the Virtual Tree of Knowledge at:
www.FtSociety.org

There are also regulations for installing street banners. Regulation number 5 states that the street banner may be hung 14 days prior to the date of the "event." Regulation number 6 states that the street banner must be removed within seven days following the concluding date of the event being advertised.

The FS application designated that the "event" date would be December 25. This tested whether or not the Borough of West Chester would recognize Christmas Day as an event.

Borough of West Chester Councilwoman **Sue Bayne** stated that the holidays could reasonably be defined as a community event, but by the end of the Council meeting the banner request was unanimously denied.

The official reason for the denial was that the Council had concluded that the banner was not advertising an actual event. When interviewed by *The Daily Local* newspaper for a November 23, 2009 article, I stated that in 2010, we will consider holding a particular event such as HumanLight and will apply once again for approval to install a street banner.

On November 17, 2009, I spoke at the Chester County Commissioners' Sunshine Meeting. The agenda included the approval of the new regulations. Until approval, the application could not be completed. The "Sunshine Meeting" provided an opportunity for me to express my concerns about the new regulations. Below are excerpts from what I said to the Commissioners:

> *I am concerned about the Chester County Courthouse property use regulations that will be voted upon on Wednesday, November 18, 2009.*
>
> *Item number five states that only "a maximum of three other displays" will be allowed on the grounds. This statement appears after the regulations claim in item number three that the purpose designating a 300 square foot area on Market Street is to "celebrate the diversity of the community."*
>
> *With only three display areas designated, were does that allow for a future Kwanza display, Hindu symbols, a Buddhist display and a Muslim symbol? The Tree of Knowledge only represents one Chester County minority. The Freethought Society is concerned that too many citizens are and will be left out altogether. Surely the Commissioners agree that three displays could not possibly represent all*

minorities and all religions. If all citizens are not given equal access to this publicly owned property, people will be denied their freedom of expression as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

The Ten Commandments plaque on the façade of the Courthouse endorses Christian ideology. If there is not enough room for representation of all citizens, I suggest that instead of passing regulations the Commissioners should consider adoption of a complete and totally neutral stance by closing the Free Speech Zone to all displays.

I went on to point out that if the display area remains, then consideration should be given to the location of the zone assignments. I asked that because of the 10' height of the *Tree of Knowledge*, the zone assigned to the Freethought Society should be free of low hanging branches. I could tell from the response that my requests had fallen on deaf ears.

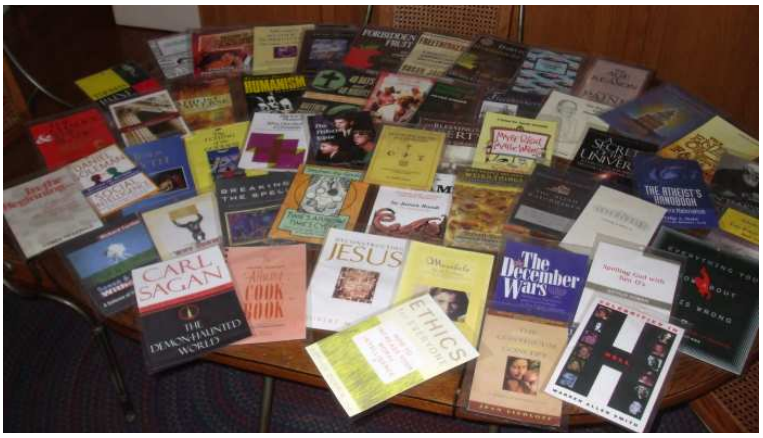
The next day the Commissioners approved the newly developed regulations and made none of the adjustments I suggested. In a November 20, 2009 article *The Daily Local News* reported that Commissioner **Kathi Cozzone** voted against the new regulations. She went on record as objecting to limiting the number of displays allowed, restricting their height to 10 feet and reserving a spot and grandfathering in the West Chester Chamber of Commerce's holiday tree. Cozzone was quoted as agreeing with my position saying, "I feel we could add one or two more displays, It would provide an opportunity for other people to participate in the displays."

Reading about the need for FS to prove to the Chester County Commissioner that $5,000 be guaranteed and available, two FS members stepped forward. **Glen Loev** lent FS $1,000 and **Chuck Villa** lent $4,000. The money was held for four weeks and was returned as soon as the tree was removed from the Chester County Courthouse lawn. Without Loev and Villa, FS would not have been able to turn in the display application and participate in the 2009 Free Speech Zone Winter Display. It is possible that the high bond amount would restrict the freedom of expression for some groups that do not have a large donor base. I hope that will never happen, but it would not surprise me to find a group in 2010 that desires to participate, but is unable to post the required $5,000 bond.

Along with the completed application FS was required to include proof of insurance, a letter from the bank (confirming that more than $5,000 was available), a design sample and a description of the display. I turned the application into the Commissioners' office in person on November 20, 2009. In order to address regulation number sixteen which states:

The advertising or selling of merchandise is not permitted from any display

The FS application stated that all the books highlighted on the tree are available through the public library system. A photo of the book covers spread across a table was included in the application and I stated that using book covers as ornaments conveyed the mission and purpose of FS.



The *Tree of Knowledge* allows FS, as an educational, non-profit organization, to express its values that include honoring education, appreciating history, human kindness, the appreciation of science and the promotion of rational/ critical thinking and acknowledgement of the many contributions nontheist have made to society.

It was important for the Commissioners to realize the main purpose of FS participating in the Winter Display area. I stated in the application that there exists in America a strong united minority of nontheists which include Freethinkers, Atheists, Secular Humanists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Rationalists, Ethical Culturalists and Humanists who celebrate family, the beauty of the natural world, the changing of the seasons, community and the power of knowledge. I also made sure that FS's application was the first to be received and I included another plea for the Commissioners to assign FS to a zone that would not be obstructed with low-hanging branches from nearby trees.

According to the new regulations, displays could not be placed on the Courthouse lawn until November 30, 2009. Fortunately, the application was approved. Plans were immediately developed for the installation of the display. There was only one caveat — the custom-made tree skirt design was rejected.

The tree skirt was to be white with the words "Tree of Knowledge" across the front and the words "See FtSociety.org for Book List" on the sides. The Commissioners considered the use of words on the tree skirt too much like a sign. FS would be able to participate only if no custom-made tree skirt was included with the *Tree of Knowledge* display. The November 25, 2009 Commissions' letter notifying me of this also disclosed that FS was assigned to zone 4 if we would agree with the restriction. I immediately notified the Commissioners' office that FS would comply and I requested a map of the zones.

Thanksgiving weekend apparently interfered with Commissioner's business and I was never given the zone information, but somehow zone information *was* given to the Pastor's Network because the crèche was installed on Sunday, November 29 — one day earlier than was stated on the new regulations as of November 25, 2009.

The creche was installed in the middle of the only area

that was free of low hanging branches. I also noticed that the crèche was installed without the sign required by the new regulation number eleven:

> *Each Display must be accompanied by a weather-proof disclaimer sign, 12 inches high and 12 inches wide, within the 100 foot square area and in proximity to the Display, no less than 24 inches nor more than 36 inches above the ground, stating in clear and visible letters: "This Display has been placed and is owned by (name of the individual or organization)," clearly displaying the name of the sponsor.*

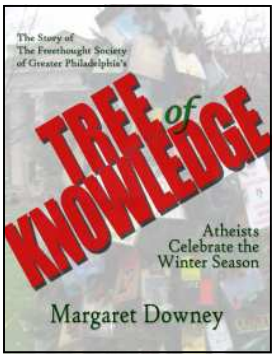
After seeing the crèche on the Courthouse lawn, I returned home to check the Commissioners' website for zone information. No zone information was available, but I noted that the installation date was changed to specify that displays could be installed "the last weekend of November." It appeared that the Pastor's Network had a direct line to "higher ups" in the Commissioners' office — a privilege not afforded to others.

The FS *Tree of Knowledge* installation crew met on Monday, November 30, 2009 at 9:00 AM. It was a rainy, cold day, but the volunteers were excited and energetic. Photos of the installation and volunteers can be found elsewhere in this newsletter. The only volunteer not pictured is **Sally Flynn**. She has worked on all three *Tree of Knowledge* projects, giving a huge amount of time before, during and after the displays were erected. Flynn stores *Tree of Knowledge* items in her barn and works diligently on preparing the ornaments for storage. Her work in preserving the ornaments has saved FS hundreds of dollars.

On Monday morning I met the group a little blurry-eyed. I had written a book over the weekend to guarantee that my book cover would be placed prominently on the tree. Because the tree skirt was "not allowed," FS needed a way to advise the public of the name of the display. Without the words "*Tree of Knowledge*" the display would appear as just another holiday tree.

Within two days I wrote an 84 page book entitled *The Tree of Knowledge*. I arranged to self-publish it as a cocktail table size book and also offered it free online for those interested in putting a *Tree of Knowledge* in other Free Speech Zones. We placed one *Tree of Knowledge* book cover on the front of the tree and on the right and left sides of the tree. Pictured here with me holding the *Tree of Knowledge* book covers is FS volunteer **John Reitter**.

On, Wednesday, December 2, 2009, I received a fax from the office of the Commissioners. They notified me that the display did not "conform to the Regulations and the application" submitted. The *Tree of Knowledge* online book cover looked too much like a sign and because it showed a website, the book cover would be considered an advertisement.



Fortunately, I had already begun to work with a volunteer who offered to design a professional looking book cover. **Carol Everhart Roper** produced a beautiful new book cover. The Commissioners threatened to order the facilities department to remove the *Tree of Knowledge* book covers if they were not replaced within 24 hours. Pictured right is the cover designed by Roper.

The Commissioners were not completely satisfied, however. Even though the new *Tree of Knowledge* cover is the same size as an actual cocktail table book, it was too large according to the Commissioners. On Friday, December 4, 2009 at 1:07 PM, the office of the Commissioners notified me that ALL book covers over the size of 9.5 x 6.25 would be removed by the facilities department at 4:00 PM if I did not remove them myself. The Commissioners claimed that a sample book cover that I included with the application represented the size of all book covers; therefore, any book cover on the tree over that size did not comply with the application. This was a desperate attempt to force FS to remove a great deal of book covers. It became obvious that the name of the display and some book covers had been deemed offensive. The mere fact that I had written a book to insure that the name of the display was known caused the power games to begin.

I immediately assembled an online volunteer legal team to assist me with a response to the unreasonable demands of the Commissioners' office. The first person to respond directly to the Commissioners demand was **Bob Ritter.** Ritter is the attorney and Legal Coordinator for the Appignani Humanist Legal Center (an arm of the American Humanist Association). Ritter's letter stated in part:

> *There is nothing in the Regulations that specify the minimum and maximum size of an individual decoration (except the one required sign which FS has complied with). FS's application provided a sample. The actual ornaments vary in size in minor amounts. The alleged offending ornaments are not significantly different than the sample. It would appear that someone is making up regulations — which a court would likely find to be arbitrary and capricious...Is this what you and the Commissioners want Chester County to waste taxpayer dollars fighting over?*

Rebecca Kratz, Staff Attorney for the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) faxed a letter to the Commissioners' office that stated:

FS's application, which is attached for your review, included a picture showing several book covers, which were to be placed on the tree. It is readily apparent from this picture that these book covers vary in sizes. The application makes no reference to the minimum or maximum size of the book covers to be displayed. The sample laminated book cover was provided to you merely as a representation of the type of book covers to be hung from the tree. On November 25, 2009, you approved the application for a permit for the Tree of Knowledge provided that the tree skirt conform to Section 11 of the regulations. FS amended their application and proposed display accordingly. There was no reference in that approval letter to the maximum size limit of the book covers.

FS is in clear compliance with the application it submitted to the County for its Winter Display and with the accompanying regulations governing these displays. Therefore, FFRF requests that the County refrain from removing any book covers from the Tree. Any removal without proper justification as to how these items violate the County's policy, or do not conform to the approved application, constitutes impermissible and illegal viewpoint discrimination. The County cannot engage in censorship.

ACLU attorney, **Mary Catherine Roper** was in a day long meeting the day the Commissioners' threats were sent, but the moment she was free Roper contacted **Lou Kupperman**, the County Solicitor via email. Her message was simple:

Lou, this is ridiculous. The display regulations don't say that ornaments have to be of uniform size and the components of the crèche certainly aren't. There is no possible conclusion here but that the County is making up new rules so that it can edit FS's display. Do you really want to test this in court?

I worked over the weekend preparing for the possibility of going to court with Roper on Monday. We had every intention of stopping the Commissioners' office from manipulating the *Tree of Knowledge* to suit their personal whims. The matter was put to rest the following week when Kupperman conveyed via email that the ornament question would not "be further explored, as a decision has been made that the "ornaments" can stay as they are."

Over the weekend, however another troubling incident occurred. On Saturday, December 5, 2009 a group of volunteers from the *American Sheepdogs* (see: http://americansheepdogs.com/) assisted **Colin Hanna** in moving the crèche from the designated zone on Market Street to the front of the Chester County Courthouse entrance on High Street. I later discovered that Hanna had obtained permission from the Commissioners to relocate the crèche. In an email to Roper, Kupperman explained:

...with respect to the crèche, be aware that the County received numerous complaints about the proximity of the Tree of Knowledge to the crèche. The number and nature of the complaints, some of which may have been ignited by your client's web site commentary that appeared to gloat over the fact that the tree was over the crèche, created an atmosphere of great hostility directed against the Tree of Knowledge and increased the risk that it would be damaged or destroyed. For these reasons, when the sponsors of the crèche asked to move their display away from the Tree of Knowledge, they were given permission to do so. This one-time consent was given in the interest of preserving the public health, safety and welfare and to reduce the risk of property damage and physical confrontations. The rancor and bitterness that has developed over the County's display policy is not what the Commissioners expected or wanted when the policy was adopted. Distancing the crèche from the Tree of Knowledge seems to have defused the situation.

I could not find a Facebook posting in which anyone "appeared to gloat over the fact that the tree was over the crèche," but I had recently posted a humorous photo on my Facebook page. Apparently, the Pastor's Network, Colin Hanna and/or members of the American Sheepdogs saw a Facebook page photo of the crèche on December 3, 2009 and took offense. After a fierce winter storm, I checked on the condition of the *Tree of Knowledge*. I was pleased to see that there was no damage to the tree, but noticed that the crèche was heavily damaged. I took a photo and posted it on Facebook. That photo is on the *2009 Tree of Knowledge Photos* page located elsewhere in this newsletter.

A very large area of lawn next to the *Tree of Knowledge* was cleared due to the moving of the crèche. Low hanging branches and the close proximity of an indigenous tree made the zone assigned to FS unsightly. A request to move the *Tree of Knowledge* to a more open area was submitted through Roper. The request was flatly denied. The Commissioners concluded that the branches were not directly effecting the tree and they would not consider the aesthetics of the location.

In the end, all winter displays EXCEPT the *Tree of Knowledge* occupied designated zones in FRONT of the Chester County Courthouse (on High Street between Market and Gay Streets). A citizen would need to turn a corner and walk a short distance to view the *Tree of Knowledge*. The good news is that there is obviously room for more winter displays on Market Street. In 2010 the *Tree of Knowledge* may not need to stand alone. It is possible that other minority expressions will occupy the space abandoned by the crèche. This year, we might see ten foot-high Kwanza candles, the Islamic crescent moon recognizing Ashura and/or a ten foot-wide statue of Buddha in celebration of Bodhi Day! ◻

2009 Tree of Knowledge Photos

Pictured above are *Tree of Knowledge* decorators (left to right) **Andrew Barrett**, **Brian Sapient**, **Margaret Downey**, **Ian Stark** and **Nicholas Stark.**

Pictured above are Barrett, Sapient and Downey decorating the *Tree of Knowledge*.

The photo below was posted on Downey's Facebook page. The caption under the photo read: "A major wind and rain storm passing through Chester County on Wednesday, December 2, 2009 damaged the crèche. The *Tree of Knowledge* did not suffer any damage. Hummmmm. If there is a God, *she* certainly works in mysterious ways."

The posting apparently upset some critics of the *Tree of Knowledge* who insisted on moving the crèche to avoid any further embarrassing phenomena — nature related, of course.

Pictured above is **Carol Everhart Roper**. She is a new member of the Freethought Society (FS) and is fast becoming a valuable volunteer. She is a resident of West Chester and monitored the tree throughout the season. Roper designed the *Tree of Knowledge* book cover, the new website for FS and is interested in becoming a board member.

2009 Tree of Knowledge Photos

Pictured left is the front of the *Tree of Knowledge*. The book cover ornaments can be easily seen from the Market Street sidewalk and the street. Among the many books featured on the tree are:

Imagine No Superstition
Stephen Uhl
Forbidden Fruit
Paul Kurtz
The Age of Reason
Thomas Paine

The Evolution of God
Robert Wright
The End of Faith
Sam Harris
Devil's Chaplain
Richard Dawkins

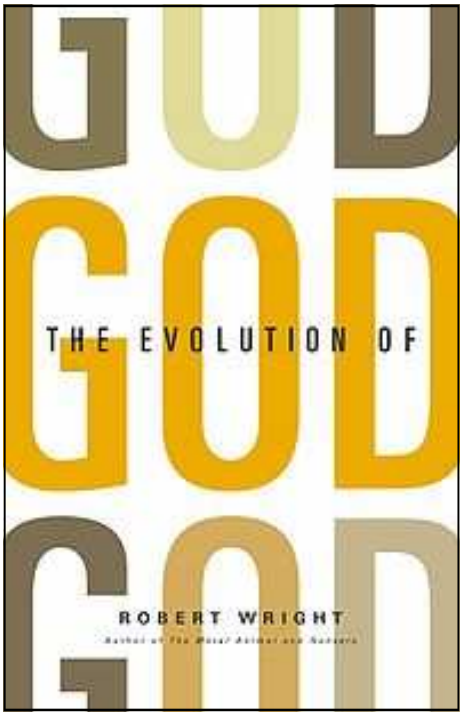
Pictured right is the back side of the *Tree of Knowledge*. Although a person would need to venture on to the lawn area of the Courthouse to see the back side of the tree, it is viewed every workday by people who occupy offices with windows facing Market Street. Book cover ornaments on this side of the tree include:

Misquoting Jesus
Bart D. Ehrman
Losing Faith With Faith
Dan Barker
Ethics Without God
Kai Nielsen
Judaism Beyond God
Sherwin Wine
The Origin of Species
Charles Darwin
Atheist Universe
David Mills
Sense & Goodness Without God
Richard Carrier

One Woman's Fight
Vashti McCollum
Contact
Carl Sagan
Looking for a Miracle
Joe Nickle
The Faith Healers
James Randi
Evolution Vs. Creation
Eugenie Scott
The Quotable Atheist
Jack Hubeman
In God We Trust But Which One
Judith Hayes

Critique of Robert Wright's *The Evolution of God*

By Michael Judge



Robert Wright could use some help from **Julia Sweeney**. Her brilliantly funny yet poignant 'Letting go of God' discourse illuminating her path to atheism from a religiously corrupted mindset could be the torch that he needs to release his tethered mind from his flickering visions of universal divine purpose. Wright is the author of the recent best seller *The Evolution of God* which 'Newsweek' religion editor **Lisa Miller** claims 'redefines the faith debate.' That may be debatable but Wright's curious claims of the existence of a divine purpose in the universe smells malodorously similar to intelligent design.

'Evolution' methodically traces religious beliefs from ancient hunter-gatherer groups through the development of the three Abrahamic religions. The creation of the god concept, while diverse, is consistent among virtually all cultures. The diversity and the morphing and molding of these god constructs according to the needs and circumstances of the defining society demonstrate the illusory nature of the god image. Wright unequivocally acknowledges that all the gods of the world's religions exist only in the minds of the faithful and, intentionally or not, 'Evolution' is an almost atheistic treatise on the fabrication of the god construct.

In spite of this, Wright stubbornly clings to a belief in a divine purpose. In a recent interview with **Bill Moyers** about his new book, he admits that, 'I do argue that there is evidence of some sort of larger purpose unfolding through the workings of nature.' His primary argument is that he sees patterns that show evidence of a 'moral direction' in history and that the direction is toward 'moral enlightenment.' However, Wright offers scant empirical evidence and is ambiguous about defining these terms. He claims that as societies have evolved into more complex structures, they have become more tolerant and cooperative and less hostile and cruel but his own discourse argues for a more natural explanation. His discussion of non-zero sum dynamics in a cultural context adequately explains the meanderings of morality based paradigms. He relates in detail how societies will change and even adjust their god beliefs as political circumstances dictate. As societies grow, everything within them evolves including moral and ethical codes. Cooperation is not just a desirable circumstance but an inevitable one and is a prime example of 'non-zero sum' dynamics. Societies naturally adjust their behaviors to achieve maximum beneficial return. Normal human dynamics, rather than divine purpose, is the 'Occam's razor' explanation of moral directionality.

Wright unabashedly accepts natural evolution but he still can't give up on the 'design' concept. In the book, he states that '… maybe natural selection is an algorithm that is in some sense *designed* to get life to a point where it can *do something*-fulfill its goal, its purpose.' (Italics in the original) He also accepts the methodology of British theologian **William Paley** of designed pocket watch fame. He says, 'It is indeed legitimate to do what Paley did: inspect a physical system for evidence that it was imbued with goals, with purpose, by some higher-order creative process.' He unequivocally professes to see the resultant patterns of that 'higher-order creative process.' Although he understands natural selection, he fails to see the contradiction that a 'higher purpose' has with the way natural selection really works. If higher purpose and moral direction are true, then human beings were predetermined. However, natural selection is directive only in that organisms tend toward increasing complexity and better adaptability based on environmental changes. The species that actually result are derived from this along with random mutations. Nothing indicates that Homo sapiens were inevitable. If not for a dinosaur killing asteroid, primates probably never would have evolved. Wright has the intellectual background and capacity to understand this but still prefers a supernatural influence. Why?

Wright was raised in a Southern Baptist creationist family. When he was nine he fell under the influence of an evangelist named **Homer Martinez** whose mind numbing indoctrination culminated with Wright publicly accepting Jesus as his savior and getting baptized. Only later, and to the dismay of his family, did he, through education, eventually come to accept scientific views of cultural and biological evolution. Still, he claims the one thing he has never lost is 'the sense that I'm being judged by a being.' He rightfully admits that 'it's a powerfully ingrained thing.'

Childhood religious indoctrination is indeed difficult to extinguish. Science wrestled from Wright most of his religious beliefs but in an attempt to retain some grain of a divine existence, he tries to bring science, and its exalted stature, to the rescue. After demolishing any hope of God existing in any of mankind's perceived forms, he then tries to resuscitate the existence of some kind of divine reality.

Since all of our concepts of God are wrong, then obviously humans must be incapable of conceptualizing realities beyond our perceptional space-time dimensions; including the divine. To do this he uses our concept of the electron as an analogy. While we can study the patterns of an electron, the true quantum mechanical physicalization of these wave-particles is beyond our ability to conceptualize. In spite of this, he observes that analyzing an electron's patterns justifies our belief in its existence. He intimates that the patterns we observe 'in the moral world' can also be evidence of God's existence. However, besides the fact that an inability to conceptualize something is irrelevant to its probability of existence, the analogy is invalid. We can generate as many wave-particles as we want that have the exact characteristics of a thing we call an electron. We can study and probe its properties as much as we like and we may never have a true and full picture of its reality but we can never produce or study anything that goes by the name of God.

To summarize, Wright claims that ill-defined concepts of moral direction are evidence of a divine reality that he admits can never be — not only proved or understood — but even peripherally conceptualized. The fallacy in his reasoning is not that there may be an ultimate source for the existence of the universe with all its physical properties, it's that he extrapolates the causes of human social interaction on this planet to the entire universe. He fails to accept that while the universe may very well have had an ultimate source, it doesn't mean that it wasn't a natural one. Everything we have learned indicates that we are simply irrelevant. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist **Steven Weinberg** wrote, 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.' Wright disagrees.

That someone of Wright's caliber is unable to sever his supernatural beliefs, gives evidence as to why in this age of universal education and mass information most people still claim to believe in God. All religions are relentless in indoctrinating children at the youngest age possible. Once ingrained, these childhood, and somewhat childish, beliefs don't die easily, especially if it's socially easier to maintain them.

The Evolution of God is a brilliant and scholarly work with far more good points than bad. It remains to be seen whether Wright will eventually accept that all concepts of a 'higher purpose' belong in the waste bin of human created gods. Sweeney, while trying to hold on to a belief in a divine purpose, describes how **Deepak Chopra** claimed to prove the existence of 'Universal Consciousness' using quantum mechanics.

"I was so intrigued by this quantum mechanics that Deepak refers to over and over again in his books that I decided to take a class in it. What I found was that Deepak Chopra is full of shit." □

See Wright on *The Colbert Report* at:

http://www.evolutionofgod.net/videos/

The Trickle-Down Theory of Happiness

by Philip Appleman

Out of heaven, to bless the high places,
it falls on the penthouses, drizzling
at first, then a pelting allegro,
and Dick and Jane skip to the terrace
and go boogieing through the azaleas,
while mommy and daddy come running
with pots and pans, glasses, and basins
and try to hold all of it up there,
but no use, it's too much, it keeps coming,
and pours off the edges, down limestone
to the pitchers and pails on the ground, where
delirious residents catch it,
and bucket brigades get it moving
inside, until bathtubs are brimful,
but still it keeps coming, that shower
of silver in alleys and gutters,
all pouring downhill to the sleazy
red brick, and the barefoot people
who romp in it, laughing, but never
take thought for tomorrow, all spinning
in a pleasure they catch for a moment;
so when Providence turns off the spigot
and the sky goes as dry as a prairie,
then daddy looks down from the penthouse,
down to the streets, to the gutters,
and his heart goes out to his neighbors,
to the little folk thirsty for laughter,
and he prays in his boundless compassion:
on behalf of the world and its people
he demands of his God, *give me more*.

Philip Appleman, "The Trickle-Down Theory of Happiness" from New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996.

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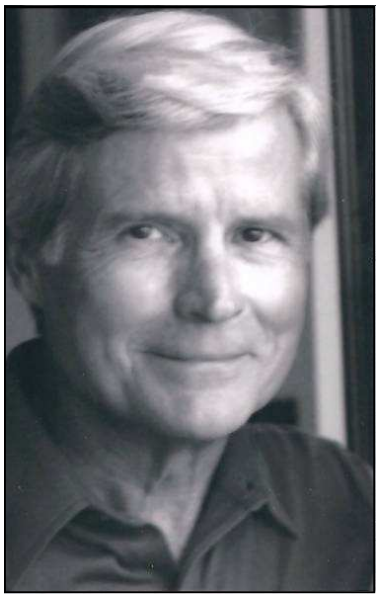


Pictured left is **Philip Appleman**. His books have been featured on the *Tree of Knowledge* for three consecutive years. His poetry will be a regular column in the *Freethought Society News*, but readers are encouraged to purchase Appleman books for their own library collection. Please purchase books through the FS website at FTSociety.org.

Presenting "The Life of Thomas Paine" Assembly in Urbana, Illinois

by Margaret Downey

Presenting a "Life of Thomas Paine" assembly at the Thomas Paine Elementary School located in Urbana, Illinois marked a milestone for the Thomas Paine Memorial Committee (a committee of the Freethought Society). There are only three elementary schools in the United States named after Thomas Paine. I have delivered the assembly to all three schools now and the October 28, 2009 assembly was the best one yet.

The entire school attended the assembly. Children from grades K-6 sat on the gymnasium floor. The chairs at the back of the room were occupied by parents, school officials, some members of the school Superintendent's office, school board members and all the teachers.

The event was made even more special with the attendance of Mayor **Laurel Lunt Prussing**. She read an eleven point city proclamation that I submitted for approval several months earlier. The proclamation highlighted Thomas Paine related accomplishments that took place in the month of October. Included were the publication of *The Crisis Number 12* and the publication of the second part of *The Age of Reason*.

The children were attentive and had studied Thomas Paine's life prior to my presentation. I was amazed to learn that many students already knew a lot of Thomas Paine trivia. Fortunately, I was able to surprise them with information they had not previously heard.

The children enjoyed the PowerPoint slide show, but they were most amused when I called forward a teacher to portray Thomas Paine. I always try to find a balding teacher so that I'm guaranteed a big laugh when I place a Colonial style wig on his head. I give the teacher an oversized Colonial shirt, wooden musket, canteen and gunpowder horn to complete the Revolutionary War outfit. The teacher then reads a few excerpts from *The Crisis* papers. Pictured right is special education and much loved teacher Frank Modica.

I also always bring a youngster (around the age of eight-years-old) into the presentation to read the first poem Thomas Paine wrote. It's always difficult to select just one child to participate. Unfortunately, there is no photo available of the youngster that was selected, but he is circled in the audience photo on the left. He left the assembly with a parchment copy of the poem and a Tricome hat as "thank you" gifts.

Many participation gifts are given throughout the assembly. I ask certain questions and those who answer them correctly receive prizes. The child who correctly identifies President George Washington receives a Revolutionary coin. The child who correctly identifies the "Declaration of Independence" as the important document that resulted from the Revolutionary War is given an authentic looking Declaration of Independence replica.

Every child is given a Revolutionary War paper currency as they leave the assembly. The teachers are provided information about the currency to continue educating the students about money. Few people know that the profits obtained from *Common Sense* were donated by Thomas Paine to start the First Bank of America. He was a generous, principled and dedicated freethinker.

This assembly was made possible by another generous, principled and dedicated man — **Drew Devitt**. Devitt has agreed to fund at least one "Life of Thomas Paine" assembly each year. He provides a $200 grant to offset the costs involved. I deliver the assemblies in areas that I normally visit, thus saving any travel expenses. The next assembly will take place in Aliso Viejo, California.

More assemblies can be made available if additional people become assembly sponsors. Any donation amount would be helpful. Please consider donating to this worthwhile endeavor. Your money will serve to reach many young minds as they contemplate their place in the world. The legacy of Thomas Paine serves as a wonderful example to question authority, think for yourself and begin the world over again.□

Photos of "The Life of Thomas Paine" Assembly in Urbana, Illinois

Pictured right are (left to right) Ashia, Tyleia, Jennyfer and **Margaret Downey**.

The three grade 6 students helped Downey unpack 1700s paraphernalia that had been mailed to Illinois ahead of time.

The young ladies also helped set-up two long display tables which are pictured below. After the assembly, the children walked past the tables to see Colonial games, tableware, learning tools and Thomas Paine memorabilia.

Pictured right are Downey and **Phil Ferguson**. Ferguson lives near the Thomas Paine Elementary School and is acquainted with Downey through the Atheist Alliance International (AAI). Ferguson served as a board member during Downey's term as AAI president. Ferguson and Downey remain good friends and associates as evidenced by Ferguson's willingness to wear a Colonial hat as he volunteered his time to be Downey's technical assistant for the assembly. The children enjoyed his energetic and good-natured personality.

Pictured left is Downey holding the Thomas Paine Day City Proclamation which was read aloud by Mayor **Laurel Lunt Prussing**. A total of three proclamations were printed by the Mayor's office. One proclamation is on display at the Thomas Paine Elementary School. Another proclamation was sent to the Thomas Paine Museum in New Rochelle, New York. The third proclamation was given to **Drew Devitt** as a "thank you for your generosity" gift. Devitt paid for all related assembly costs.

Call for Nominations to the Freethought Society Board of Directors

In accordance with the Freethought Society (FS) bylaws, the election of board members must take place in March 2011. This is the official call for members of FS to nominate candidates to serve on the FS Board of Directors. All seats are open (see bylaw below). Nominees must have been involved with FS for one (1) or more years immediately prior to nomination. The deadline for submitting candidates is September 28, 2010. Persons who are nominated may be asked to fill board positions that open due to resignations and/or vacancies.

In March 2011, everyone will have the option to vote online for the board! Voters will still receive paper ballots via the newsletter, but instead of sending back a ballot card, members who choose to do so can go online, enter their name and vote.

Please consider nominating yourself or another individual for consideration. The following criteria appear in the FS bylaws:

ARTICLE V: THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Section 1: Responsibilities
The Board of Directors shall be responsible for the organization's affairs and policies. The Board shall be subject to these Bylaws, and to any Bylaws of the Board of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF).

Section 2: Composition
The Board shall consist of not less than five (5) but not more than fifteen (15) members. The Officers are ex-officio Members of the Board of Directors. Elected and ex-officio Board Members shall have the same rights and responsibilities. Members may nominate candidates for the Board, or volunteer to be nominated as candidates. Directors are elected to a three (3) year term. Directors may be re-elected.

All Members of the Board must be dues paying individuals or Life Members of FS and FFRF. Should membership to FS and/or FFRF lapse during the term of any officer/board member, a resignation form will be offered. If a resignation form is ignored, the delinquent dues paying officer/board member's term will be ended within four months of membership due date.

Section 3: Indemnification
All current and former members of the Board of FS will be reimbursed by FS for any legal fees and costs incurred in a civil law suit having to do with the member acting in the normal scope of a member of the Board of Directors. Anyone who acts unlawfully or with gross negligence will not be eligible for reimbursement.

Freethought Society Board of Directors Nomination Form

Board members will oversee the functions of the officers and will be consulted on a regular basis for decisions concerning the wise use of funds, events, and newsletter content. Cooperative, committed, and congenial people are needed for these positions. Please get nomination permission from the person you desire to nominate. Nominees must agree to comply with the Freethought Society Bylaws. Please clip and send in this nomination form as soon as possible or fax it to: **(610) 793-2569**. Nominations are also accepted through email. Please email nomination information directly to: **downey1@downey1.cnc.net**.

Nomination Name:

_____

Nominated by:

_____

Nominations will be accepted until September 28, 2010.
Please mail this form as soon as possible to:

Freethought Society
2010 Board Nominations
P. O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19382

Freethought Society Logo Contest

Now that the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia has adopted the new name of the Freethought Society (FS), the organization is in need of a new logo and website banner. The use of the Liberty Bell was fine when the name reflected the geographical location of Philadelphia, but the outreach area is now much larger. A new logo can be very general in nature because no geographical location needs to be indicated. Below are some creations that were developed by **Margaret Downey** and **Carol Everhart Roper**. They are printed here to inspire and motivate submissions. The prize is a lifetime membership to the Freethought Society (valued at $1,000).

Freethought Society Logo Submission

Name: _____

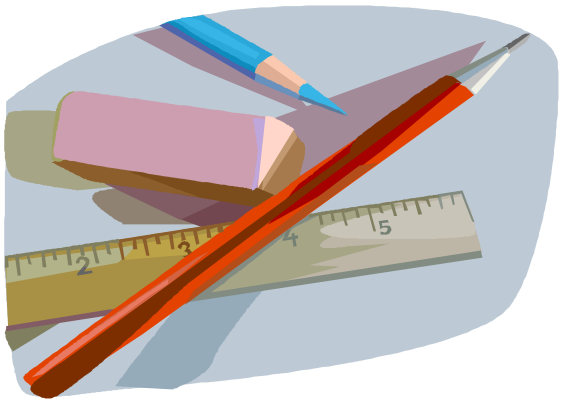
Email Address: _____ Phone: _____

Send this form, logo submission and any design information to:

Freethought Society
Logo Contest
P. O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366

A scan can be sent via email to: downey1@downey1.cnc.net

Fax designs to: (610) 793-2569



The Freethought Society's 2010 Three-Month Activities Calendar

February

Note: *The following event was canceled due to a winter storm warning. Please watch this newsletter for future rescheduling details.*

Please support and join us in protesting the Boy Scouts of America's (BSA) bigoted membership policy by attending the candlelight vigil scheduled for **Saturday**, **February 6, 2010**. Eagle Scouts are encouraged to turn in their badges in protest. People harmed by the discriminatory policies are welcome to speak.

This event is scheduled to coincide with vigils being held across the country. This event is endorsed by Scouting For All. Please see the Scouting For All website to find out why protesting at the Philadelphia BSA office is important:

http://www.scoutingforall.org/data/archives/articles/2007111301.html

Nineteen years ago, the Freethought Society's (FS) president, **Margaret Downey's** complaint against BSA was brought to the attention of the local media which enabled her to start FS. While nontheists are still banned from BSA, we can object to the prejudice. We can object to BSA having free use of the building on Winter and 22nd Streets as they boldly violate Philadelphia anti-discrimination statutes.

We can acknowledge that while discrimination against nontheists is a vile and unethical policy, the consequences of prejudices against the gay community is a situation of highest concern. There are many recorded suicides in the gay community that are a direct result of being discriminated against. The horrendous results of BSA prejudices goes even further. Few people know that **Matthew Shepard** was killed by an Eagle Scout. See: http://www.scoutingforall.org.

To learn about the murder of an atheist at the hands of an Eagle Scout, please see:

http://atheism.about.com/b/2007/01/19/murdered-for-being-an-atheist.htm

Some people involved in the nontheist community have not heard about BSA's discriminatory membership policy. It appears that this issue must continue to be exposed and written about lest we forget that BSA is not an organization of honor. BSA is now a private organization determined to separate themselves from atheists and gays — all the while getting public assistance, gratuities, free use of buildings, access to public schools and city officials turning a blind eye to violations of anti-discrimination laws.

You can learn more by attending the February event at **5:30 PM**. We will meet at the **Cradle of Liberty Council BSA Headquarters, 2130 Winter Street**, **Philadelphia**.

March

The FS board of directors will meet on **Wednesday, March 17, 2010** at **6:00 PM** at the **Norristown Public Library** (1001 Powell Street, Norristown, PA 19401-3817). The business meeting is open-to-the-public, however the board room will only seat 25 people. Seating is available on a first come basis.

The Norristown Public Library is being considered as the location for future FS monthly meetings. The board will study the drive time, observe the parking availability, examine the disability accessibility (ADA compliance), measure each meeting room size and determine potential use of audio/visual equipment.

Readers of *The Freethought News* are invited to send suggested board meeting agenda items. To date, agenda items include:

Work Distribution
(volunteer opportunities)
Meeting Plans
(Speakers, Location and Costs)
2010 Event Plans
(Picnic, Protest Efforts, Street Fair and Winter Holiday)
Bylaw Approval
(Name Change and Additional Specifics)
Committee Overview
(Chair Assignments)

April

FS is pleased to host **M. Kelly Tillery** as the April speaker. Please attend the **Monday, April 26, 2010**, meeting at the **Norristown Public Library** (1001 Powell Street, Norris-town, PA 19401-3817). All FS meetings are free and open-to-the-public. The meeting will begin promptly at **7:00 PM** in the large meeting room.

Tillery's speech "You *Can* Fight City Hall" will highlight the lawsuit *Gilfillan v City of Philadelphia*, 480 F.Supp. 1161 (E.D.PA. 1979) affirmed 637 F.2d 924 (3rd Cir. 1980). The legality of using taxpayer money to design, build and maintain a large platform from which Pope John Paul II performed Mass on October 3, 1979 was called to question in the lawsuit.

Tillery was a young soon-to-be lawyer at the time. He was the first to complain of this unconstitutional activity to the ACLU beginning the process which ultimately lead to the U. S. Supreme Court. Attend this presentation to learn legal details of fighting City Hall.

Tillery is a partner in the Intellectual Property Group at Pepper Hamilton, LLP in Philadelphia. Pennsylvania.

Supporters Added and Renewed

Edward J. Baker	Primos-Secane, PA
Andrew Barrett	West Chester, PA
Thomas J. Carroll	Lansdale, PA
Ann Fawley	Lansdale, PA
John Fawley	Lansdale, PA
Julie M. Gannaway	Royersford, PA
Dave Green	Bainbridge Island, WA
Aleck Kelley	West Chester, PA
Alita Kelley	West Chester, PA
Robert Millar	Fleetwood, PA
Lee Scheinert	Bainbridge Island, WA
Arthur Silverberg	Chesterbrook, PA
Edward and Maria Susterich	Milwaukee, WI

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee Donations

Drew Devitt	$200

General Donation Acknowledgements

Margaret B. Brown	$200
Daniel Hoffman	$40
Edward and Maria Susterich	$15

2010Winter Display Donations

Philip Appleman	$50
Bob Hoffman	$250
Michael Jacobson	$250
Michael Judge	$50
Robert Kay and Susan O'Connell	$35
Marshall Martin	$112.46
Teller	$100
Stephen Uhl	$50

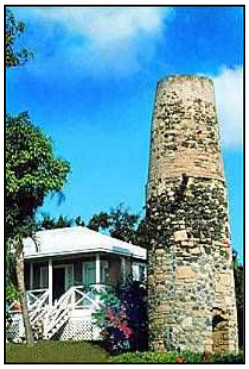
Property Donation

On November 10, 2009, Dr. **Robert J. Weiss** of Wilmington, Delaware donated a time-share in St. Croix to the Freethought Society (FS). The time-share is always available the eleventh week of the year (second week in March). The St. Croix beach cottage is available from Saturday to Saturday.

After the paperwork was complete, an announcement was made on the FS website, Facebook, MeetUp site and discussion list that the fantastic week-long use of the cottage was up for bids.

Interested bidders were directed to view a 360-degree slideshow of the Chenay Bay Beach Club. The slide show includes views of the beach, the clubhouse and the cottage interior. If you are interested in seeing the slide show please go to the following link:

http://www.travelcontentsolutions.com/affiliates/af1005.asp?hotelId=95&pageType=hotel&cid=53&order=1



The cottage has a bedroom and sofa sleeper. It is 100 feet to the beach and just as close to the pool. Nearby guests can snorkel, scuba and golf.

Bidding began January 14, 2010. The winning bid amount and the name of the bidder will be announced in the next newsletter.

The winner is responsible for all transportation to and from the resort, and any taxes or applicable fees. The time-share constitutes access to the condo and the resort amenities which are a standard part of the condo's benefits. Food and other vacation items are the responsibility of the winner.

FS will offer the use of the St. Croix cottage in 2011 differently. Instead of a bidding war, FS will be selling raffle tickets at $1 each or six for $5. Please watch the FS newsletter and the website for more details on how you can help sell tickets. In the meantime, below are photos of the St. Croix property that is now owned (thanks to the generosity of Weiss) by FS:

The Freethought Society (FS) is a chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and is a member of the Atheist Alliance International. FS members are committed to the advancement of Freethought and issues of state/church separation. FS activities and services are supported by donations. A list of activities and services can be found at the FS website (www.FTSociety.org). Please help finance FS's endeavors to promote freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of choice and freedom from religious intrusions.

Yes, I want to:

( ) become a supporter of FS (includes newsletter): **$30** basic, **$35** family supporter, **$20** student or email newsletter recipient. Please make checks payable to the **Freethought Society**. Donations to support special projects can be earmarked.
( ) join FFRF: **$45** individual membership or **$50** family membership. Please make checks payable to the **Freedom From Religion Foundation**.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

( ) Check here if you want your sponsorship to be anonymous.
( ) Check here if you want to receive the newsletter as a **PDF** email (make sure to provide your email address below).

Please provide your email address to enable FS to keep in touch:

_____

Our policy is to give interested readers a free newsletter to decide whether or not FS is for them. Please provide mailing address information to us regarding people who might be interested.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Clip and mail to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366-0242

Freethought Society

P. O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366-0242

Check your mailing label
for subscription information.
Please renew if "Until **1-09**" or
"Until **2-09**" appears on your label.

Special Quote

"It's always great to learn about someone figuring out that there is no supernatural. While we celebrate, isn't it most important whether they are also caring and considerate people?"

Peter Wernick, born February 25, 1946. He is a bluegrass musician/teacher known as "Dr. Banjo" hosting music camps around the country. He performs mostly in Boulder County, Colorado, where he resides with his wife – a devout Catholic. Pete has a doctorate in sociology and was once the president of "Family of Humanists." Pete co-authored *Humanism for Kids*.

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