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The First Secular Day of the Dead Celebration

by Margaret Downey

When I attended the Humanist Institute in 1996, the book *Judaism Beyond God* by **Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine** was required reading. I found reading the book to be thoroughly enjoyable, but more important, I found Wine to be thoughtful and wise. I was impressed by the logical way he presented his premise — that being Jewish was both cultural and religious, and that it is possible to separate these two components. Wine explained that many Jewish rituals and celebrations are essentially secular, and that those that are religious can be changed to be consistent with a nontheist humanist worldview.

I began to look at all rituals and celebrations as potential projects, just waiting to be redesigned. Anticipating a fast-growing nontheist community, I knew there would be a great demand for many more God-free family ceremonies. In 2001, I unveiled my Secular Celebrations website to meet those demands. I have provided my services for weddings, Baby Naming Ceremonies, Coming of Age, and funerals. Along with those God-free ceremonies, I have created unique secular traditions and rituals.

Archeological studies have unearthed evidence that the human species has always created rituals. Ancient sites reveal a wide variety of ceremonial artifacts. In some cases, written descriptions of these ceremonies exist, and in many, entire villages participated. It seems natural that human beings would want to socialize and connect in meaningful ways.

It would be easy for nontheists to dismiss the importance of religious celebrations, but I look upon these as opportunities for a holiday design challenge. I also see where, given the proper twist, the secularizing of a cultural/religious holiday could be of great advantage with outreach efforts to the nontheist community.

Critical analysis of religious doctrine has caused many to reevaluate the need for belief, but the need for social connections is a basic human necessity. Yes, there are some who would argue this notion and say that social connections can be had easily without rituals and celebrations. My secular celebrations efforts would not be appealing to those who feel this way. I accept that, and I know that there are many other ways to reach them (meetings, social occasions, events, conferences, etc.). I look for balance and inclusion however, as I develop more and more outreach efforts.

In 2013, I met a young Latina by the name of **Victoria de la Torre**. We immediately realized that we had a lot in common and decided to establish a mentor-protégé connection. She is a resident of San Diego, California, and I now live half the year in Newport Beach, which is only a few hours from del la Torre's residence. During our first brainstorming weekend, de la Torre and I talked about outreach to the Hispanic community. I am from a Hispanic family and know first-hand how important certain celebrations are and the great advantages of secularizing them.

Secularizing the traditional Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) would surely be a huge success, if we were careful and sensitive to the Hispanic culture. Dia de los Muertos is actually a celebration of life. Nontheists value their one and only life and know that their legacy is the only real "afterlife." Honoring someone's life, therefore, is a way to accept death rationally and reflect on the value of a life lived. We decided to keep almost all of the rituals in our secularized celebration, but designed them to be free from superstitions and religion. In this article, I will recapture the events of the day. I hope that around the nation many more nontheist groups will adopt the secular holiday and host Secular Day of the Dead celebrations.

(continued on next page)

Preparations leading up to the Sunday, November 2, 2014 event included gathering together traditional Hispanic decorations (sans religious icons and symbols, of course), costumes, signage, securing a venue and food preparations. We divided the duties and each of us recruited additional helpers, including family, friends, and local community leaders.

The event could not have happened without the assistance of the San Diego Coalition of Reason's local director, **Debbie Allen**. She secured the venue and was of great help before, during and after the event. When I asked Allen a few questions about the venue, she wrote the following:

Pictured above are (left) **Margaret Downey** and **Victoria de la Torre** (right). They are standing next to the Secular Day of the Dead Legacy Tribute Table. The table skirt and flags represent "Papel picado," which is the Mexican folk-art of paper cutting.

*The Day of the Dead event was held at the business park of SeeScan, a research and development firm owned by **Mark Olsson**. Mark is the son-in-law of **Dr. Robert Tapp**, who is a Professor Emeritus of University of Minnesota, and the Dean Emeritus of The Humanist Institute.*

*I met Dr. Tapp and Olsson at a breakfast meeting during a conference that was organized by San Diego State University's Religious Studies Department. During that conference we hosted **Greg Epstein**, the author of* Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe. *Epstein is the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University.*

During his speech he encouraged humanists to build communities for humanists and other non-believers. During that breakfast meeting I talked about the difficulties so many local humanist groups have finding appropriate venues for gatherings.

Not long after that meeting, Olsson volunteered the use of his company community room at SeeScan to the Humanist Fellowship of San Diego for monthly meetings. As his business facility expanded Olsson made additional areas at the location available to local freethought groups for events that serve the secular community. We thought he might just unlock the door for our meetings, but Olsson enjoys preparing pots of coffee and sometimes staying for the entire program.

Olsson has never asked for compensation to cover the many hidden expenses of opening up his business for our events. We owe him a great deal of thanks for his generosity and for his support of the freethought community of San Diego.

Indeed, without the use of Olsson's venue, the event simply would not have taken place. Nestled in the foothills of San Diego, the SeeScan gardens offered spectacular views and a walking trail. The patio was the perfect size to accommodate guests and the temperate weather lasted all day.

I very much appreciated the availability of a Legacy Tribute Table (a secular replacement to the religious Dia de los Muertos alter). Attendees were encouraged to place photos of dead loved ones on the table in order to generate conversations about the person's life. The table quickly filled up with sweet family photos. They were great conversation starters and lovely family stories were exchanged. It was amusing to see the use of "Secular Saint Candles" that honored the life of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Plato, and Socrates. I placed a photo of my aunt on the table and very much enjoyed having an opportunity to talk about why she was so special. So that readers of this article fully com-prehend why I am promoting more Secular Dios de los Muertos events, I am reprinting the tribute to my Auntie Conchita.

Today, I displayed a photo of me with my sisters and my Auntie Conchita. In the photo, Conchita has her arms extended trying to embrace my sisters and me as our protector. That is what she was to us. She was our loving and beautiful protector.

My mother sent for Conchita —her younger sister — to act as our babysitter. My mother needed help, so she funded Conchita's trip from Puerto Rico to the United States of America.

Auntie Conchita was the first of five aunts and two uncles to immigrate to the United States. Our house soon became full of Spanish relatives — all needing jobs, trying to learn English, and looking for happiness far away from the rain forest of Puerto Rico. Of all the relatives who lived with us, Auntie Conchita was the most fun to be around.

Auntie Conchita loved singing and dancing. I developed my love of song and dance from her. There was always a record on in our house, and you could hear her voice singing along to film musicals such as South Pacific, The Pajama Game, and Oklahoma as she cooked and cleaned. But, she didn't just sing! No, she would act out an entire movie scene as if she was being filmed, and we all played along with the performance.

We made costumes and sets for our productions using old clothes, ribbons, and sheets. Because she mostly spoke only Spanish, Auntie Conchita could not pronounce the word "sheets" very well. We would laugh and laugh when she would say, "Bring me the shits, so I can make a curtain."

We would hang the sheets on the line and make a grand entrance to perform for family and friends. We never tired of finding ways to make her say the word "sheets." She knew her pronunciation would make us bend over in laughter.

You should have heard the way she pronounced the word "aspirin." She added an extra "s" in the word just to make us giggle.

Auntie Conchita was never defensive about her accent and her humorous outlook always amused us.

I was about eight years old at the time this photo was taken. At that age I was deeply concerned about what the future might hold. I was feeling scared and vulnerable. I knew about death, hunger, and sickness by then.

The world was frightening. I asked her to help me figure things out, because even then, I thought believing in an all-caring, all-knowing and loving God was just a fantasy — like believing that there was a Santa Claus. I had rejected all myths by that age, because we, as a poor family, had to deal with the realities of life's challenges every day.

On those days that she and I talked about deep questions, she would stroke my hair and in her best Doris Day voice she would sing, "Que Sera Sera. Whatever will be, will be. The future's not ours to see. Que Sera Sera."

The song lyrics did not provide any answers, but I knew that she loved me and sought to comfort my fears the best way she could. While it was true that, "whatever will be, will be," we could make things better with a positive outlook and hard work — those were also the life lessons I learned from Auntie Conchita.

She worked hard and soon found a full time job. She got her own apartment and car within four years of arriving in the United States. We were all sad to see her move away from us. Her beautiful personality made many people happy to know her.

Auntie Conchita married and had two children. Through the years she became more and more religious. The Puerto Rican side of the family was also very superstitious, and it did not surprise me to learn how devoted to Catholicism she had become as she aged.

She had, after all, also believed in ghosts and the power of séances. She loved using a Ouija board to communicate with the dead when she lived with us.

When Auntie was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, a few family members got together to visit her in Reno, Nevada. I was told that because I had become such an outspoken atheist, I should not participate in the visit. A close relative stated that she absolutely knew it would upset Auntie Conchita to see me. I asked, "Why?"

I was told that I should stay away because Auntie Conchita knew that I did not believe in a heaven, God or Jesus. In her dying days, Auntie Conchita would surely not want to be visited by an "atheist."

I considered going to see her on my own because I knew that the speculation was not correct. My Auntie Conchita and I had a bond that reached far beyond religion. We were connected through our love for life, hard work, laughter, music and dance.

She died before I could visit her, and today is the first time I have talked about her memory with anyone. This is why I appreciate the opportunity to share my Auntie's legacy with you today, my likeminded friends. I am confident that you understand why religious differences should not be a factor in keeping people away from each other.

Thanks for listening and thank you for being here.

Right after my presentation, **Mike Estes** (pictured with me at left) spoke about his "awesome father." Estes talked about his father's principles, words of wisdom, and the guidance he provided.

The Estes tribute was sprinkled with humor, sweet stories of affection, and profound insights. The crowd enjoyed every word, and when Estes concluded with the words, "...and that is why I say my dad was an awesome father," the audience clapped in agreement.

After hearing tributes from another four people that day, I knew that we had provided a wonderful event for the nontheist community. We created a nonreligious environment in which life legacies could be honored and loved ones remembered. Values were shared and life lessons memorialized.

This outreach to the Hispanic community ended up being very appealing to everyone who learned about it. I, therefore, encourage all nontheists groups to provide this opportunity to your local community. FS's expense portion to co-host the 2014 Secular Day of the Dead was $400, but the event total investment amount was $1,000. If you support this project and see the benefits of carrying on this new secular tradition, please earmark a donation to "Dios de los Muertos." We need funding to move forward and any size donation would be appreciated.

Pictured below is a chocolate Secular Day of the Dead cupcake. It is topped by a Sugar Skull ring.

Pictured above are **Margaret Downey** congratulating **Victoria de la Torre** for a job well done.

Pictured right is **Debbie Allen** standing next to the agenda poster.

The Lively Celebration of the First Secular Day of the Dead

by Victoria de la Torre

Brainstorming with like-minded people certainly has it's advantages! During a weekend get together with my mentor, **Margaret Downey**, I talked about ways in which we could appeal to a fast-growing nontheist Hispanic community. Personally, I have a great affection for the cultural holiday known as Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). It occurs on the two days following All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. We immediately knew that there was before us a celebration that could be secularized and re-created to appeal to nontheist Latinos and many others.

Pictured above left to right in the front row are **Christina Frost** and **Ana DelaCruz**. Left to right, in the back row are **Consuelo Fleming and Victoria de la Torre.**

Unlike traditional Dia de los Muertos rituals, Downey and I wanted to emphasize the importance of cherishing life before death. Dogma and superstitions would have no place in our Dia de los Muertos holiday. Instead, we would emphasize life legacies and the value of living a religion-free life. Here was our chance to reclaim the holiday. For seven months, we worked hard to make our vision of a Secular Dia de los Muertos/Day of the Dead a reality.

I was in charge of preparing, delivering and setting up half the needed food, securing local volunteers, decorations, and co-hosting. Downey took on the responsibilities of providing the dessert and appetizers. She also created sign-up sheets for the piñata smash and I ordered a lovely Sugar Skull piñata filled with candy.

I thoroughly enjoyed designing craft activities for the children and I was very proud of the table that was set-up at the site for this purpose. It was particularly rewarding to see many adults at the event participating in the coloring project and Sugar Skull Mask creations.

Adults and children also enjoyed getting their faces painted. The face painter was my sister, **Ana DelaCruz**, who was more than happy to volunteer for the event. She, like me, has always enjoyed celebrating Dia de los Muertos and wanted to contribute in an artistic and creative manner. So many people had their faces painted that she worked almost nonstop! Please see photos in this article highlighting the creative work of DelaCruz.

The authentic Mexican folk art paper cutting ("Papel picado") decorations were created by **Sandra Medina**. The paper flags added so much charm to the event.

The piñata activity brought everyone together in the late afternoon and many children took turns trying to break open the Sugar Skull piñata as their name was drawn from the jar. One adult attendee said, "It's been so long since I've seen a piñata. It's wonderful to see so many children having such a great time at a humanist event."

Many guests expressed how happy they were to finally have a significant secular event that was family-friendly. This was such an important aspect for me. The Secular Day of the Dead proved that children and adults can have a fantastic time at events that express not only the importance of humanism and secularism, but also incorporated family time — and of course, good food!

The Secular Day of the Dead meal consisted of homemade and authentic Latin-American rice, beans, and tamales (both sweet corn and beef). The food went quickly and we were happy that people had preregistered so that estimated servings would be sufficient. Downey added chips, salsa and guacamole to the buffet-style spread.

Downey also provided Secular Day of the Dead themed cupcakes that were decorated with souvenir Sugar Skull rings. Since many attendees had filled up on other food there were quite a few leftover cupcakes. They were taken to a nearby homeless shelter.

A focal point of the Secular Day of the Dead event was the importance of sharing the legacy of dead loved ones. I honored the life of my beloved grandmother, **Cecelia Cortes**. She led a beautiful life full of love for her entire family. When she died I continued the traditions and customs that she taught me. I am proud of her and her accomplishments. It was rewarding and special to share her life legacy with others. Unfortunately, some in my extended family who are still religious (cousins, aunts and uncles) told me that they were not happy with me for honoring my grandmother's life in a way that did not include any mention of God. Some members of my family told me that I should not do anything to honor her memory since it would not be in a biblical manner. They contend that, "The only way to honor her was through spreading the gospel."

I, however, know that as an atheist I value a person's life more than any god. I know that our afterlife is not in heaven, but in the hearts and minds of those who recall our legacies. I say this with all sincerity, that remembering the life someone who has lived is far better than making up a story about a fictional place left to interpretations of a believer. As a humanist I do not imagine people being tortured in a fictional hell. The notion of a heavenly afterlife is just silly wishful thinking.

It was painful to hear from family members that I should not have honored my grandmother during the Secular Day of the Dead event. I reminded them that religious dogma should not divide family members. No matter the difference in religious views, people can honor and remember a deceased loved one in a beautiful and secular manner. The testimonies we heard that day from six other people proved that point and I hope this new secular holiday tradition will be carried on in other parts of the country.

I am so grateful to the volunteers who helped with this event, especially from my immediate family.

My brother, **Johnny Jones**, took wonderful pictures throughout the festivities. My mother, **Consuelo Fleming**, helped with many chores that had to be done before, during, and after the event. She cooked most of the food, helped decorate, and staffed the ticket and raffle booth.

Years ago, when I first started exploring atheism and humanism, my family was hesitant to even discuss the issue with me. Now they are very supportive of my philosophical lifestance. They, in fact, often enthusiastically ask about and attend humanist events.

My fiancé, **Chong-Ren Chien**, helped with just about everything! I could not have put the event together without his support and assistance. We will be married in June 2015 and we look forward to Downey officiating at our secular wedding ceremony.

The event was also made possible with the help and insight of **Debbie Allen**. Allen leads the Humanist Fellowship of San Diego, which was a co-sponsor of the Secular Day of the Dead event. She helped guide me in regards to the finances and advertisement, and she was an amazing volunteer the day of the event — actually saving the day by quickly solving a food warming problem!

Would I do this again? Absolutely! I encourage anyone who is looking for a secular event idea to duplicate what we did in San Diego, California. Downey and I are putting together a Secular Day of the Dead manual that will be available online soon. See the "Secular Day of the Dead" section at: www.secular-celebrations.com for more information and a printable version of our "How To" manual.

Pictured above are hungry Secular Day of the Dead attendees getting ready to enjoy the buffet-style Latin-American food. At the front of the line is Freethought Society supporter **Sherry Sutton**.

Pictured above children await the breakage of the Sugar Skull piñata. Almost every child had a chance to attempt to break the piñata open. Eventually candy was had by all — including the adults!

Ana DelaCruz is pictured left painting the faces of a young lady and her mother.

Pictured right is **Michael Dorais** wearing a Sugar Skull mask he created at the arts and craft table.

Below, attendees are pictured participating in a sing-along.

Photos of the First Secular Day of the Dead

Pictured above, sitting at the Freethought Society free literature table with **Margaret Downey** (right) is folk singer **Josephine Johnston** (left). Johnson opened the Secular Day of the Dead festivities by singing "Beautiful Sunday." To open the tribute portion of the program, Johnson sang a song she wrote to honor the legacy of poet **Emily Dickinson**.

Pictured below is face-painter **Ana DelaCruz** creating another unique Sugar Skull design for a little girl who enjoyed all the Secular Day of the Dead activities.

Pictured above is **Claudia Kellersch**, the coordinator for a local Parenting Beyond Religion group.

Chong-Ren Chien is pictured below helping serve the tamales at the buffet table.

Pictured left are the "Saint Candles" that were displayed on the secular version of the Dia de los Muertos alter. The candles can be purchased through:

philosophersguild.com

Voting Beneath the "Head of Christ"

by Wayne Trotta

I was inspired to write this article after reading "Voting 'Beneath the Cross of Jesus'" by **Sally Flynn** in the November/December 2014 issue of *The Freethought Society News*.

In 2012, I was informed by the Cumberland County, Pennsylvania Bureau of Elections that my polling place was to be moved from the local vocational/technical school to Young's United Methodist Church. I didn't think much about it at the time, because I naively trusted the Bureau to insure that the polling station would be located in a non-consecrated area of the church. I imagined that voting would take place in a cafeteria, auditorium, gymnasium, or other area free of religious iconography.

It came as a shock when I entered the church to vote in May 2013 and found three depictions of Jesus prominently displayed. One portrayal (*Head of Christ* by **Warner Sallman***)* was situated atop a nearby piano. The other two Jesus portrayals were hung on the walls. All three works of art were plainly visible from just about any point in the polling room. I also could not help but notice the large message displayed on a bulletin board. It stated, "Celebrating 162 years of service to the Lord."

Outraged at the overtly religious venue I was forced to use to cast a vote, I registered a complaint with the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF). On May 28, 2013, FFRF's staff attorney **Rebecca Markert** sent a complaint letter to **Penny Brown**, the Director of Elections and Voter Registration for Cumberland County.

In that letter, Markert reminded the Bureau of Elections that its own elections code required the use of public buildings "…wherever possible and practical…," and that non-Christians as well as non-believers could be made to feel like second class members of the political community when subjected to Christian iconography while voting. Upon my request, Markert kept my identity anonymous when she wrote her letter to Brown.

Brown responded to Markert in a letter dated June 4, 2013. She stated that the Bureau has a "continuing sensitivity" to this issue, and that she would ask church representatives to remove or cover up the religious symbolism on Election Days. I considered this a minor victory.

Unfortunately, the November 2013 Election Day crushed my optimistic attitude. The portraits of Jesus on the walls and piano were still in plain view just as they had been in May!

On November 8, 2013, I wrote to Brown. In that letter I identified myself as the complainant referred to in Markert's letter.

Brown replied to me in a letter of December 11, 2013, saying that she had taken no action, because, sometime after writing her letter of June 4, 2013, she made her own survey of the polling station at Young's Methodist and found none of the items cited in the May 28, 2013 letter they had received from FFRF. This was inexplicable. The Jesus drawings are impossible to miss. It would be rather unusual for a church to place religious items on display only during Election Days. I regretted not having taken photos to prove my case.

My next opportunity to vote would be Primary Day, May 20, 2014. Not surprisingly, the religious iconography was just as it had been before! The drawing of Jesus was still on the piano and the other two drawings of him remained hung on the walls in the very spot they were when I originally complained.

Immediately after voting at Young's United Methodist Church that day, I stopped in at the polling place located in St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church just down the road. There I found the polling station to be perfectly neutral in regards to religious symbolism. On June 2, 2014, I emailed Brown asking her why one polling place was secularized and the other was not. I reiterated the seriousness with which I take this matter.

Brown was busy with post-primary activity, but by July 28, 2014 she was able to inform me by email that she had arranged a meeting with Young's Methodist church board members for August 4, 2014. I replied that I would be waiting anxiously to hear from her as to the outcome of this discussion.

When a church is used as a polling venue, citizens will most likely walk past a church marquee. In this case, Young's United Methodist Church was able to advertise their November 23rd event and promote their Sunday services (worship and Sunday school) to all voters. To a casual observer it would appear that the government has approved this type of religious advertising. To citizens who are aware of the importance of upholding constitutional tenets of separation of religion and government, requiring citizens to vote in a church venue is indeed a violation of that tenet. Supporting, endorsing and promoting religion is not appropriate at any time. Doing so on Election Days is an abuse of power and very disrespectful to the diversity of voters.

Brown never informed me directly of the church board's decision, but she recommended that I present my voting venue concerns at the County Commissioners meeting on August 28, 2014. Obviously, had her talks with the church board been successful there would be no need for me to address the Commissioners.

In preparing my commentary for the Board of Elections (similar to the Bureau of Elections, except that the Commissioners run the show), I consulted with FFRF's staff attorney **Patrick Elliott**. Elliott advised me to focus on the possible violations of the Pennsylvania Elections Code rather than on Establishment Clause issues. As much as I wanted to do battle on First Amendment grounds, I understood the practical nature of his counsel and tailored my commentary accordingly. In my brief speech before the Commissioners, I noted that the Bureau's own website revealed that, of the County's 118 polling places, 45 percent are located in Christian churches.

I expressed my doubt that the high percentage of churches was in accordance with the requirements of the Pennsylvania Elections Code. In those cases where a church building might be the only option, I suggested that the area designated for voting be made as religiously neutral as possible.

I also pointed out that by ensuring religious neutrality in all polling places, the Bureau would be better aligned with its own code. Secularizing a polling venue would remove any impression that county government is promoting religion over non-religion. In addition, neutrality would avoid making citizens feel like political outsiders. I urged the Commissioners to advocate for the un-compromised equality of all voters. I told them that they must underscore the importance of freedom from state-supported religion by removing any potential divisiveness associated with religious symbolism. Lastly, I stated that the secularizing of a voting venue would reduce the likelihood that any voter would be subjected to unwanted subliminal religious influences.

The Commissioners appeared to listen as I spoke. I even sensed that they agreed with my assertion that no voter should be exposed to anyone's ideology, whether religious, political, or otherwise. Doing so would constitute undue influence and possibly even "electioneering" at the polling place, which is specifically forbidden by the Pennsylvania Elections Code. The Commissioners requested that I email them a copy of my remarks. I did so the next day.

Fortunately, a reporter from *The Sentinel* newspaper was present during the time I addressed the Commissioners. The headline "Silver Spring Township resident criticizes use of churches as polling places" appeared on August 29, 2014. Journalist **Daniel Walmer** reported my appearance fairly and intelligently.

Like many newspapers these days, *The Sentinel* publishes both in print and online. Online subscribers have the opportunity to provide commentary — a new way of writing a "Letter to the Editor." The article instigated about 70 responses. Comments were a mixed bag of negativity.

In the commentaries I was told to "take a hike" and that I should "leave the country." One person said that if I didn't want citizens to vote in a church, I should volunteer the use of my own home as a polling place! This particular suggestion intrigued me. I imagined myself adorning my home-based polling station with posters containing some of my favorite sayings, such as "In God only some of us trust," or "I'm secular, just like the Constitution," or "Faith is pretending to know what you don't." How would the mostly-Christian, citizens of Silver Spring Township feel if they had to vote in such a venue?

Brown also testified at the August Commissioner's meeting. I learned that she had indeed met with representatives of Young's Methodist and requested that they remove or cover up religious icons on voting days. They refused, and Brown then offered to have Bureau of Elections staff take responsibility for making the polling place as religiously neutral as possible. Church officials remained adamant that their drawings of Jesus would not be covered — period.

I contend that, at that point, the church's eligibility as a polling station should have been rescinded. Had a new location been found I would not have found myself on November 4, 2014 voting with Jesus peering over my shoulder.

By the way, I asked Brown if I could either vote as an absentee or vote at an alternative polling place. She denied both of these options to me.

As I see it, then, county government is forcing me to be exposed to unwanted religious iconography while performing a civic duty. Actually, the problem is worse than that. The Religious Right and many other religionists have chosen to politicize themselves and they now constitute one of the most significant voting blocs in the country. Hence, while voting, I am being subjected to one of the major symbols of a nationwide political organization dedicated to imposing on me its own agenda on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, women's rights, birth control, separation of religion and government, and so forth.

Courts have not typically found that voting in churches amounts to a government advancement of religion. However, I think that we are far from having heard the last word on this issue. I don't know of any cases that have been argued based on the Pennsylvania or any other state's Elections Code, but it certainly seems worthwhile to ask why a code would strongly recommend the use of public buildings if there were not some concern that private and religious venues are problematic.

What is most needed is that those who are made to vote in churches, and who are uncomfortable with the practice, come forward and register their concerns in one way or another. Living in a county where nearly half of the polling stations are church-based, it is hard for me to believe that there aren't many more citizens who feel just as I do. That is why I was so happy to read Flynn's article in the last issue of *The Freethought News*. It gave me hope that I was not alone in my quest to secularize polling venues.

As many readers of this publication know, in politics numbers matter. The only way we will be heard is to add more voices of concern and activism.

Wayne L. Trotta is a psychologist and freelance writer who lives in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in *Free Inquiry*, *The Humanist*, *Pennsylvania Heritage*, and many other publications.
Trotta is a longtime supporter of the Freethought Society.

Advocating for the 2014 West Chester, PA Tree of Knowledge

by Margaret Downey

Earlier this year I was pleased to learn that several influential nontheist leaders would make a special effort to join me in a public appeal on behalf of a 2014 *Tree of Knowledge* in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The Freethought Society (FS) has appealed for inclusion of *The Tree of Knowledge* at the Sunshine Meeting of the Chester County Commissioners since 2010. The tree was banned from the Chester County Winter Holiday display as a result of the passage of Resolution 58-10 that year. Resolution 58-10, in essence, gives exclusive control of the property, normally known as the Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zone, to the Chester County Commissioners for the entire Winter Holiday season.

Unfortunately, the October Sunshine Meeting we had all arranged to attend was cancelled due to the November 2014 elections. I quickly contacted the scheduled speakers and made the necessary changes to the FS meeting schedule. **Jason Torpy** was scheduled to speak about nontheists in the military. **Hugh Taft Morales** intended to speak about Ethical Society members in Chester County. **Jennifer Taylor** was scheduled to speak about black nonbelievers. **Glen Loev** was looking forward to speaking on behalf of Secular Judaism, and I was prepared to represent FS supporters.

With the cancellation creating rescheduling difficulties, I decided that this year I would arrange to meet face-to-face with two of the three Commissioners. The third Commissioner was not contacted as he has never expressed even a mild interest in the issue. I was pleased, however, that the other two Commissioners accepted my request for a meeting.

I met with Commissioners **Terrance Farrell** and **Kathi Cozzone** on separate days and they were both very nice. They found a way to open their tight schedules in order to spend 30 minutes discussing *The Tree of Knowledge* with me and my spouse, **Tom Schottmiller**. I was impressed with their friendliness and willingness to listen to the evidence we presented, and to reconsider the reasons we were requesting the right to display *The Tree of Knowledge*.

I promised the Commissioners that I would not disclose details of the meeting — this, in order to create an atmosphere of sincerity and openness. The conversations were very enlightening and I learned how allowing the display of a *Tree of Knowledge* had been a political issue that polarized citizens and government officials. This is a real shame in that guaranteeing Constitutional rights of freedom of expression to a minority should not be a political question! Twisting the display issue into a "War on Christmas" would fuel the flames of hatred and divide the community.

I contend that FS is waging a "War on Intolerance" and I remained steadfast in my commitment to demand equality and respectful representation of the nontheist community during the Winter Holiday season. Both Commissioners were complimentary about my tenacity and determination. They each mentioned the large amount of emails they have received regarding *The Tree of Knowledge* issue and said that it was an impressive show of support.

Since I pledged not to disclose the details of our meetings, I will simply print the follow-up message that I sent to the Commissioners on November 29, 2014:

Dear Commissioners Cozzone and Farrell,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me recently regarding the 2014 Chester County Winter Holiday displays.

I am hereby writing to make another appeal to you for permission for The Freethought Society to place a Tree of Knowledge, *the widely-accepted symbol representing the rapidly-growing nontheist community, among the other Winter Holiday displays on the Chester County Courthouse grounds.*

The Tree of Knowledge — *a simple evergreen tree decorated with copies of the covers of a wide variety of educationally valuable books — is used in many homes, in public displays around the nation, and in many other countries around the world. Your decision to refuse the installation of* The Tree of Knowledge *is particularly disappointing because over the course of the three years that* The Tree of Knowledge *was on display we, in fact, witnessed significant social progress. The first year* The Tree of Knowledge *was installed on the courthouse grounds (2007), there were eight incidents of vandalism. The second year, four incidents, and the third year, no incidents of vandalism!*

On an even more positive note, the Freethought Society began receiving more and more compliments from local residents and business owners about The Tree of Knowledge. *There was a noticeable improvement in the social acceptance of the many nontheist residents of our community, a positive result due, in large part, to the holiday installation of* The Tree of Knowledge.

Unfortunately, in 2010, the office of the Chester County Commissioners found a way to keep nontheists from participating in the Winter Holiday community event and display. When Resolution 58-10 was passed, all progress in increasing tolerance, understanding and acceptance ground to an abrupt halt. In place of inclusion and celebration of diversity within our community came tacit approval from the Commissioners to treat nontheists with rejection and discrimination.

While Resolution 58-10 conforms to the guidelines written in the 1984 United States Supreme Court case Lynch v. Donnelly, following them in the most restrictive way possible, the nontheist community is represented in an exceptionally demeaning way. The childish symbols displayed to fulfill the minimal legal requirement for secular "balance" (wire choo-choo train, toy soldiers, candy canes, and Santa Claus) do not, in any way, represent the nontheist community.

During my meeting with you, I asked what would happen if a group requested a spot for a Kwanzaa display. Both of you said that such a request would be given due consideration at such time it was presented. There should be no difference between the request for a Kwanza display and our request for the use of our Winter Holiday symbol — The Tree of Knowledge. *Each display is representative of citizens in your community and should be given full and respectful consideration.*

Even though for the past four years our request for a spot

for The Tree of Knowledge *within the Winter Holiday display has been denied, I hope that my personal appeal might still make a difference.*

After my in-person visits and the review of the materials I left, I remain optimistic that you will reconsider this modest request and allow our symbol, The Tree of Knowledge, *to join the Christmas Tree, Crèche and Hanukah Menorah in the 2014 Winter Holiday display at the Chester County Courthouse.*

Should you not do so, however, I would very much appreciate (and hereby request) a response explaining the reasons why our symbol is being rejected.

Happy holidays to all and thanks again for meeting with me.

Sincerely,

Margaret Downey
Freethought Society, Founder and President

As of the printing of this newsletter, I have not received a reply from the Commissioners. As I waited for a response, I also met with the Mayor of West Chester Borough, **Carolyn Comitta**. Schottmiller also attended the meeting that took place on Thursday, December 4, 2014.

Mayor Comitta spent 30 minutes listening to our concerns about nontheist exclusion and experiences of discrimination. As with the Commissioners, we reviewed literature about the growing secular community and the Mayor was invited to keep the information for future reference. The Secular Coalition for America literature highlights the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and the 2012 "Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life" survey.

As the positions of Commissioner and Mayor depend upon voters, we thought it was important for Cozzone, Farrell and Comitta to know that the amount of religiously-unaffiliated citizens has risen from around 8 percent in 1990 to 21 percent in 2014. Of particular concern, the ARIS survey found that 41 percent of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated have experienced discrimination. Survey participants reported to have experienced slander, coercion, social ostracism, denial of work opportunities (goods, and services), and hate crimes.

Of the three public officials we visited, Comitta was the most interested and concerned. We were impressed with her questions, sympathy and commitment to help us find a Winter Holiday solution.

Newsletter readers will be kept informed of any progress as we continue to petition that the nontheist Winter Holiday symbol, *The Tree of Knowledge*, be included in the 2015 holiday display.

The Tree of Knowledge symbol received a major boost from the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR) when **Jason Heap**, the National Coordinator, wrote to the Commissioners. He informed them about the significance of *The Tree of Knowledge* and encouraged them to reconsider denying an important nontheist Winter Holiday symbol. In the letter he stated, "For the Chester County commissioners to deny the application of the *Tree of Knowledge* relegates the nontheist community yet again to second-class status."

Heap recommended that affiliates seek to have a *Tree of Knowledge* "planted" in a public place to symbolize the presence of a nontheist community. Heap also reported the Chester County Commissioners' denial for a West Chester *Tree of Knowledge* to UnitedCoR affiliates through his article entitled "Cutting Down *The Tree of Knowledge*." The article was published in UnitedCoR's online publication, *Hard CoR News*, as well as on the American Humanist Association's Facebook page. In one day, the article received well over 50,000 hits and many more people wrote to the Commissioners on behalf of *The Tree of Knowledge*.

It is very important that the Chester County officials continue to hear from people who appreciate the symbolism of *The Tree of Knowledge*. To advocate on behalf of this winter nontheist symbol, please take a moment to write to the following people — no matter what time of year you are motivated to help us:

Commissioner Terrance Farrell
tfarrell@chesco.org

Commissioner Kathi Cozzone
kcozzone@chesco.org

Mayor Carolyn Comitta
ccomitta@west-chester.com

Please stress that *The Tree of Knowledge* is a symbol that represents you during the holiday season. Nontheists advocate education, reading, and the accumulation of knowledge to improve society and the human condition.

As further proof that *The Tree of Knowledge* is an accepted and respected Winter Holiday nontheist symbol, please note the many other locations that proudly display the tree. The Rhode Island Coalition of Reason's (RICoR) *Tree of Knowledge* is pictured right. It is installed at the Rhode Island Statehouse.

The RICoR tree is accompanied by a sign featuring the **Robert G. Ingersoll** quote:

Banish me from Eden when you will, but first let me eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

FS recommends that this Ingersoll quotation be used often and that as many people and/or groups as possible adopt this holiday symbol.

Please shop for your 2015 *Tree of Knowledge* when 2014 post-holiday sales take place. Artificial evergreen trees can be found at 50-75 percent off, so it's a perfect time to make an investment that will last for many years.

Please send photos of your personal *Tree of Knowledge* for our collection. One supporter simply displayed a large photo of the FS *Tree of Knowledge* in his living room. What a great idea! Putting a photo up instead of an actual tree is brilliant! The photos alone created a lot of conversation and changed the hearts and minds of friends and family. *The Tree of Knowledge* proves that nontheists have something wonderful to celebrate during the winter season. We celebrate the advancements of literature, science, rationality, freedom of thought, critical thinking, and philosophy. We honor the natural world, our real-life heroes, our history, our freedom of expression, and our future. ◘

The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 2014 Tree of Knowledge

by Margaret Downey

It's become a tradition! 2014 marks the fourth year in a row that the Freethought Society (FS) supporters and members of the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia (EHSP) joined together to place a *Tree of Knowledge* in the lobby of the Ethical Society building (1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

The public is welcome to view the tree during EHSP business hours. Since the auditorium, the basement and the upstairs rooms are frequently rented, nearly one-thousand people are expected to see *The Tree of Knowledge* during this holiday season.

The Tree of Knowledge was decorated on Sunday, December 7, 2014 shortly after EHSP Leader **Hugh Taft-Morales** delivered his speech entitled, "Great Awakenings."

The Taft-Morales presentation was both entertaining and educational. He highlighted waves of "righteous" social changes that periodically washed over the United States affecting society. Dressed in an old-fashion preacher's cape, Taft-Morales delivered an 18th century sermon promoting the notion of an "angry God." Such sermons were considered "The First Great Awakening" that roused many Americans. At the beginning of 19th century, "The Second Great Awakening" sounded the alarm of public social reform. At the start of the 20th century, progressivism woke citizens to the government's responsibility for those in need. In the 21st century, Taft-Morales speculates that a "Third Great Awakening" is on the horizon, thanks to a wave of compassionate and humanistic activism.

Pictured above are
Margaret Downey
(Creator of *The Tree of Knowledge*)
and **Hugh Taft-Morales**
(Leader of the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia).

I opened the tree decorating ceremony by providing background information about *The Tree of Knowledge*. I thanked EHSP for their support and hospitality. Over the years, FS has developed a strong connection to EHSP, which is exemplified by the cooperative events that have taken place at EHSP. Many of the authors of the books displayed on *The Tree of Knowledge* have spoken at those co-operative events (**Lawrence Krauss**, **Jill McDevitt**, **Katherine Stewart**, **Herb Silverman**, **Jay Wexler**, and **Ronald A. Lindsay** — just to name a few).

While many people enjoyed picking out ornaments and hanging them on the tree, two volunteers worked with me for several hours. Pictured right is **David McDevitt** hanging some ornaments on the top branches of *The Tree of Knowledge*. Fortunately, McDevitt can reach over the EHSP staircase thanks to his tall stature. McDevitt is the founder and president of the Drexel Freethought Society and an engineering student at Drexel University.

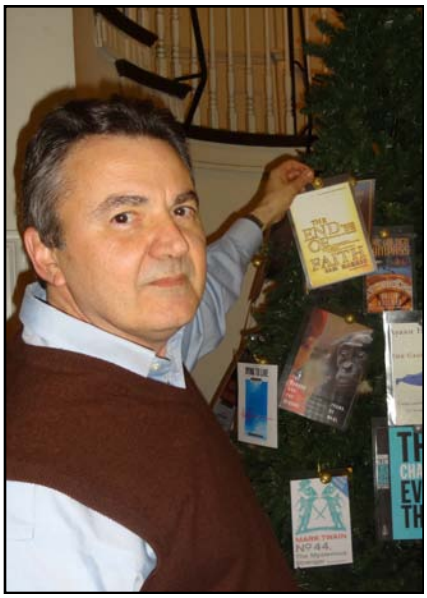
FS and EHSP also thank **Zenos Frudakis** for helping to place book cover ornaments on the tree. Frudakis is a local celebrity. His amazing sculptures have been featured on many "Top Sculptures of the World" lists published every year.

See his famous "Freedom" sculpture at the corner of 16th and Vine Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is a sight-seeing favorite. Sport fans can see his piece "Mike Schmidt" at the Citizens Bank Park also located in Philadelphia. But the Philadelphia pieces only scratch the surface of his many worldwide award-wining sculptures.

"Knowledge is Power" is his most recent creation. Frudakis sculpted a giant open book. On one side, **Albert Einstein** is emerging from the pages of the book. On the other side, **Charles Darwin** is holding a human skull in his right hand, offering it to a passerby who might want to learn more about evolutionary science. There are many more faces and writings of 31 icons from the fields of science, history, mathematics and the arts depicted in the sculpture. It stands 8 feet high and 12 feet long. The piece weighs more than 1,500 pounds. The sculpture was installed at Rowan University College of Education on November 29, 2014.

Pictured below is Frudakis hanging *The End of Faith* ornament. *The End of Faith* by **Sam Harris** is one of Frudakis' favorite books. While sculpting in his Glenside, Pennsylvania studio, Frudakis listens to books on tape. His audio collection numbers in the hundreds.

It was indeed a pleasure and an honor to have the help of Frudakis as we decorated the 2014 Philadelphia *Tree of Knowledge* in the EHSP lobby.



The Las Vegas, Nevada 2014 Tree of Knowledge

by Margaret Downey

Having never visited Las Vegas, Nevada during the winter, I knew nothing about an attraction known as "The Magical Forest." The winter-themed attraction sits on the grounds of Opportunity Village. At the site (Oakley Campus, 6300 West Oakey Boulevard, Las Vegas, Nevada 89146), between November 21, 2014-January 4, 2015, visitors can ride the Forest Express train and the Cheyenne's Enchanted Carousel. There is also a miniature golf course to enjoy. Youngsters can slide down Snowflake Mountain and families are invited to view a 3D film (*Boris the Elf*) and so much more.

I learned about the location when I accepted an invitation to honor the contributions **Penn Jillette** and **Emily Zolten Jillette** have made to help Opportunity Village. They provide a wide array of services to citizens with disabilities including job training, music programs, art lessons, and more.

When Penn appeared on NBC's "All-Star Celebrity Apprentice," he donated all his winnings to Opportunity Village. He also donated a portion of the sales for his Apprentice ice cream creation to Opportunity Village. "Magic Swurtle" ice cream is comprised of turtle candies and chocolate swirl in a vanilla ice cream base. This one-of-a-kind flavor is only available at Walgreens Pharmacy locations. The Jillette family also donates their time and energy to Opportunity Village, often hosting classes and special events.

Just before the event, I told Penn that, "It's about time an atheist is being recognized for good works."

As Penn accepted his award, he mentioned my comment on stage. I was so proud. The above photo of Penn and me was taken shortly after his acceptance speech.

The award event included a tour of the Magical Forest, after which I knew that a *Tree of Knowledge* would be a perfect addition to the all-inclusive and hospitable venue. I immediately began searching for donors to make that vision a reality. Soon, the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR) contacted me to say that a grant was available thanks to generous donors and the American Humanist Association (AHA).

Thanks to AHA Executive Assistant **Meghan Hamilton** supplying two (flat) color copies of recommended books, I was able to create 40 new and much-needed ornaments. I also thank **John Hannum** at Goshen Signs in West Chester for immediately creating a *Tree of Knowledge* topper and custom tree skirt. I shipped the needed items to my dear friend **Celestia Ward**, who volunteered to decorate the tree at Opportunity Village.

Ward is a Las Vegas artist and a regular cartoon contributor to *The Freethought Society News*. She is a world-renowned caricature artist and sculpts in her spare time. Ward received tree decorating help from another Las Vegas caricature artist, **Celeste Cordova**.

Since we were a little late getting the funding we needed, we were only able to secure a tree that nobody else wanted. It looks like a very tall and extremely scrawny **Charlie Brown**-style tree. We love it!

The branches of the tree are perfect for the ornaments. The book covers hang from the bare branches and twirl in the wind. The tree looks like a book cover whirlygig mobile.

Cordova and Ward did a wonderful job working with the bareness of the tree, and within a few hours the Las Vegas *Tree of Knowledge* was ready to be unveiled.

Upon learning of the tree, **Teller** wrote, "This boffo tree has the balls to have books."

Penn wrote, "I'm all for the study of history, science, skepticism, real-life heroes, culture, and philosophy but, don't get so wrapped up in all that that you forget hot chocolate, cookies, family and friends — in that order."

The placement of *The Tree of Knowledge* in the Magical Forest brought together many nontheists in Las Vegas — so much so that a donor offered to sponsor a billboard announcing the presence of the Las Vegas Coalition of Reason (LVCoR). The billboard was placed on Interstate 15, about 1,500 feet south of Flamingo Road. The north-facing billboard was unveiled on Sunday, December 21, 2014. Watch for an article about the LVCoR and billboard in a future Freethought Society newsletter.

Pictured above are **Celeste Cordova** (left) and **Celestia Ward** (right).

Cordova and Ward are sitting under the 2014 Las Vegas *Tree of Knowledge* at Opportunity Village's Magical Forest after spending hours decorating it on behalf of the Las Vegas Coalition of Reason.

The Backyard Skeptics, the Freethought Alliance and the Freethought Society invite you to a

Friday the 13th Anti-Superstition Bash

and the opening of the West Coast

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Celestia Ward, Caricature Artist
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LOTS OF ENTERTAINMENT!

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7 pm, Friday, February 13, 2015

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222 W. Houston Ave, Fullerton, CA 92832 (714) 992-1700

Discounted Rooms are $70, while they last. Mention "Friday the 13th party."

Visit Friggatriskaidekaphobia.com, FtSociety.org, FreethoughtAlliance.org

School District Under Fire for Hosting Scouts Assembly

by Tim Cwiek (First Published in the *Philadelphia Gay News* on December 11, 2014)

A Chester County public-school district that hosted a Boy Scouts of America (BSA) recruitment assembly in September 2014 has come under criticism.

The Freethought Society, a nontheist organization, wants the Octorara Area School District to stop hosting BSA recruitment assemblies. District officials say the BSA Chester County Council hasn't been shown to discriminate and will be allowed to continue holding assemblies on campus. The school district is based in Atglen, Chester County.

Margaret A. Downey, president of the Freethought Society, said BSA discriminates against nontheists, gays and other groups. She said BSA shouldn't be allowed to recruit in public schools during regular school hours.

Downey plans to attend an Octorara school board meeting to explain her position. "I will attend a school-board meeting to inform the public and more school officials that it's irresponsible to allow BSA to recruit during school hours, on school property," Downey said. "Allowing the assemblies conveys that BSA is endorsed by teachers and administrators."

Octorara Area School District superintendent **Thomas L. Newcome** issued this statement about the BSA assemblies:

> *"The school board feels this is a local matter and will address it as such if residents express a concern to either the administration or the school board. If any student has been harmed by the BSA presentations or if discrimination is brought forward in regards to local troops, the school board should be made aware and the district will address the situation. The district is welcoming to many organizations — and each has detractors. It has been our experience that the BSA troops in the Octorara community are open and welcoming to all children and have provided great opportunities for many to thrive."*

Newcome said he discussed Downey's concern with the board. "Since no person in the Octorara Area School District has registered a complaint to either myself or to the school board about our practice to allow the Boy Scouts of America to present a recruiting assembly with the children in the early elementary grades, the board members have directed me to let Downey know that the practice will continue into next September unless addressed as a local concern," he said. "As we discussed, Downey's fight is with the national organization, not our local organization — which has shown no discrimination in practice that anyone has brought forward."

Downey said the school district's position won't go unchallenged.

"Dr. Newcome is letting a blatantly discriminatory group on campus and that's totally unacceptable," Downey said.

She expressed concern that board members don't fully understand the impact of BSA's exclusionary membership policies.

"Just because there isn't an active BSA discrimination case in Chester County doesn't mean that the BSA doesn't discriminate," she said. "Literature, evidence and incidents around the nation and BSA's own membership application have made it very clear that gays and atheists aren't welcome."

Downey also said a public school isn't an appropriate venue for a BSA recruitment assembly.

"The fact that BSA is a private club should be enough evidence that a public school is the wrong venue for recruitment," she continued. "Let them recruit in private religious schools since that is where they will find their target audience."

She hopes enough pressure will be applied to prevent another BSA recruitment assembly at the Octorara Area School District.

"The next BSA assembly may take place in September 2015, so we have until June of 2015 to put a lot of pressure on the school district to stop this shameful activity on campus," Downey said. "The Freethought Society has members with children in that school district. We represent them, because they've requested anonymity as they are fearful of retaliation."

The photo at left was taken during a 2003 demonstration that took place during a National Boy Scouts of America (BSA) conference being held at the Downtown Marriott (12th and Market Streets) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Nontheists, gays, and anti-discrimination advocates gathered with hopes of enlightening 2,000 conference attendees, the media, and the public-at-large about bigoted BSA membership policies.

The signs being held were created in the 1990s. Sadly, the messages continue to relate to BSA problems in 2014. Nontheists are still not allowed to join. Furthermore, if a Scout "thinks he is gay" and is still gay at age 18, he will be ousted. Gay and nontheist parents are not allowed to volunteer.

BSA camp guidelines now indicate that as a "private organization" they do not need to abide by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Do you want to weigh in? Please send your comments and concerns to Dr. Newcome at:

tnewcome@octorara.org

The Movie Scene

by Dennis Middlebrooks

The sci-fi film *I Origins*, which has received favorable reviews overall (though not from *The New York Times*), is yet another example of cinematic woo.

Once again, an atheist male scientist "sees the light" (along with his atheist scientist wife) and discovers the existence of a supernatural realm. In this film, "the eyes have it," quite literally.

The viewer is supposed to accept the notion that people can easily recognize their own eyes when photos of their weepers are posted on a billboard or that the director of a mission in India can identify one former resident out of hundreds when presented with a photo of just the person's eyes. Oh, yes, and the viewer must accept the peculiar claim that people inherit the memories of deceased individuals who had eyes identical to theirs.

The "skeptical" scientist meets a girl wearing a mask at a party. She vanishes quickly, but not before she lets him photograph her beguiling eyes (after all, he is obsessed with eyes in his research). He roams New York, looking for a woman with those distinctive eyes, and one day finds his love riding the subway! He notices her eyes from half a car away and knows right off it's her! They soon become lovers, but sadly the day before their wedding she dies in a gruesome elevator accident.

The bereaved scientist soon finds new love in the person of his pretty blonde colleague, and they marry. Jumping ahead, they find, via a global eye data base (yes, that exists in this film) that their little boy apparently shares the memories of some deceased man who has the same eyes as the child. The same data base reveals that there is someone in India with the same eye patterns as the dead fiancée.

The scientist goes to India to find this person and discovers it is a young street urchin girl who is staring at a billboard the scientist paid for featuring his dead fiancée's eyes. The billboard seeks the answer to the question, "Are these your eyes?"

The girl recognizes that those are her eyes! The scientist conducts an inconclusive computer test with the child to determine whether she may share some memories associated with the late girlfriend.

As they are about to board an elevator, however, the little girl freaks out and refuses to go in. To stirring music, the scientist realizes that she must possess the late fiancée's memory of being crushed to death in an elevator. He carries the child down a flight of stairs, and as he passes a window on the landing a burst of light illuminates his face. Praise the Lord! No more skeptic or atheist, he!

Of course, if he were really a skeptical scientist, he would have first considered other explanations for the kid's behavior. After all, as a homeless street urchin, she probably had never seen an elevator before and refused to enter what she thought was a small closet. Or perhaps she had been on an elevator one time and it stalled or moved erratically. Or maybe the girl was just claustrophobic.

These reasons, of course, would have been rational explanations. That's a no-no in our mass culture of woo. Occam's Razor now has a blunted edge.

I whole-heartily recommend **Woody Allen**'s new film, *Magic In the Moonlight*, and urge you to pay no attention to the negative *New York Times* review or any other negative reviews. In addition to featuring lovely cinematography and grandiose architecture in the south of France, the film is a tonic to those who embrace rationalism and skepticism at a time when "woo" films like *I Origin* have become mainstream.

Without giving too much away, the film stars **Colin Firth** as a Houdini-type character in the 1920's, a magician who is also a debunker of spiritualists and assorted frauds. However, he is soon confronted with a young American woman whose "abilities" lead him to abandon his disbelief in a "world beyond ours."

Just when you are sure that Allen has gone over to the Dark Side...well, you will just have to see for yourselves. There are some major plot twists!

The cast of *Magic in the Moonlight* is marvelous, especially Firth as the often sarcastic and abrasive skeptic.

The much-acclaimed science-themed film *Interstellar* is two hours of far-fetched, but acceptable, science fiction involving astronauts traveling through a wormhole to find a suitable replacement planet for an ecologically-doomed Earth. The film has spectacular special effects and loud organ music, followed by 30 minutes of some of the most ridiculous New Age "woo" I have ever seen in a motion picture. If you thought a person being sucked into a black hole would mean instant pulverization, guess again!

Love, in this film of an inter-dimensional quantum entity, conquers all to save the human race! I personally found the entire plot confusing and in many parts maudlin to the extreme. The main character, played by award-winning **Matthew McConaughey**, often grunted or whispered dialog. It did not enhance my appreciation for the film.

On the plus side, the cinematography was very impressive, so if you see *Interstellar* make sure it is in a theater with a large wide screen and a good sound system. You may need ear plugs for the overwrought conclusion of the movie.

The Freethought Society's 2015 Four-Month Activities Calendar

January 31

The Freethought Society (FS) recommends attending an event celebrating the birth of **Thomas Paine**, hosted by The Thomas Paine Society. The event takes place at the **Castle Green**, located at **99 South Raymond Avenue, Pasadena, California 91105**.

"The Headstrong Evening Club" and birthday party takes place on **Saturday, January 31, 2015** at **7:00 PM**. Special guests are **Ian Ruskin** (portraying Paine), **Dale Reynolds** (portraying **Thomas Jefferson**), and actress **Ellen Snortland**. There will be light fare, cake, and a cash bar. Tickets are **$35** and are available for purchase at:

http://www.thomaspainesociety.org/#

February 13

FS, The Backyard Skeptics, and The Freethought Alliance are pleased to present an Anti-Superstition Bash and the opening of the first West Coast Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center on **Friday, February 13, 2015**. The party and Treatment Center activities takes place at the **Howard Johnson Hotel and Conference Center** (**222 West Houston Avenue, Fullerton, California 92832**). Break superstitions, dance, and enjoy a dessert table beginning at **7:00 PM**.

Discount hotel rooms are available through the hotel. Mention "Friday the Thirteenth" for a rate of **$70** per night. Call **(714) 992-1700** to make your room reservations.

Entertainers include a live band (*The Heathens*), singers **Christine Jones** and **Dave DeLuca,** as well as comedian **Ian Harris**. The Master of Ceremonies is **Buck Bowen**.

Participate in Ladder Limbo, Horoscope Trashing, Piñata Smashing, Leprechaun Bowling and much more. Bring an umbrella to dance under! One person will be selected to smash the ceremonial mirror.

World-renowned caricature artist **Celestia Ward** will capture your image for only **$13** per person. The website logo at right was designed by Ward!

Friggatriskaidekaphobia treatment nurses and doctors will be awarding a "Clean Bill of Mental Health" to those who complete an easy and fun obstacle course.

Register online before February 13, 2015 for **$13.13** per ticket. Tickets will be **$15** at the door.

March 16

FS is very pleased to host **Bruce Hanes, Esquire** on **Monday, March 16, 2015** at **7:00 PM**. Hanes is an adjunct professor teaching politics/electoral law at Philadelphia University. He is also a Montgomery County Register of Wills and Clerk of the Orphans' Court.

Hanes's presentation "Marriage Equality — What's The Problem?" will highlight how it came about that on July 24, 2013 the Montgomery County Orphans' Court Clerk issued the first same-gender marriage license in the history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The presentation will be about the reasons for and the consequences following that simple act. The move defied a state law that had been in existence since 1996.

FS will host Hanes at the **Ludington Library** (**5 South Bryn Mawr Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA**). A SEPTA stop is located across the street from the library.

April 9

FS is pleased to host **Sarah Levin** on **Thursday, April 9, 2015** at **7:00 PM**. She is the Outreach Coordinator for the Secular Coalition for America (SCA).

Levin's presentation "Did Hobby Lobby Make You Want to Knit a Brick?" will be about SCA's "Knit a Brick" campaign, and how SCA successfully appealed to grassroots supporters raising awareness about this important secular issue.

As a student, Levin was a leader of the Rationalist and Atheist student group at American University, where she graduated cum laude with a Bachelor's degree in International Studies. She also serves as the Secular Student Alliance's Volunteer Network Coordinator for secular student groups in the Washington, D.C. area. Levin was reared in a Secular Jewish home and is deeply passionate about separation of religion and government.

FS will host Levin at the **Ludington Library** (**5 South Bryn Mawr Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA**). A SEPTA stop is located across the street from the library.

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month.The newsletter is delivered as an ezine via email and is complimentary to supporters, donors, like-minded individuals and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in many locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. FS activities and services depend on the financial contributions of supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (www.FtSociety.org/donate/). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Please donate generously.

Yes! I want to:

( ) become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):
$30 Individual Supporter **$35** Family Supporter **$20** Student **$1,000** Supporter for a Lifetime

( ) become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through PayPal in the amount of (circle one): **$5 $10 $15 $20 $25 $30 $35 $40 $45** $_____(other per month)

( ) earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name): _____

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____Cell: _____

( ) Check here if you prefer your sponsorship to remain anonymous.

FS will email a complimentary newsletter to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS newsletter.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donate. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees were designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We seek to be of assistance to nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas. Please see the FS website or contact FS to volunteer at: volunteers@FtSociety.org.

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee
(nontheism explained in classroom settings)
Anti-Discrimination Support Network
(assist Openly Secular gathering reports)
Community Outreach
(locate tabling opportunities)
Diversity Outreach Committee
(brainstorming about and developing programs to appeal to minorities)
Free Speech Zone Committee
(research and implement displays in public venues)
Helping Hands
(provides helpers to seniors and in emergency situations)
Media Outreach Committee
(press coordination and writing press releases)
Membership Committee
(watching for and connecting with possible supporters)
Monthly Meeting Coordinators
(schedule and manage speakers and venues)
Secular Celebrations
(develop and implement new nontheist celebrations)
Speakers Bureau
(provide FS a CV, photo and list of subjects to participate)
Special Events
(coordinate interesting and unique nontheist events)
Thomas Paine Memorial Committee
(assist with assemblies and work on themed events)
***Tree of Knowledge*/Winter Display Committee**
(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the winter symbol concept nationwide)