Report on the First Online International Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular

More and more Hispanics are abandoning their religious upbringing but still want to celebrate the beauty of their culture. This is why a Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular was created. Many nontheist Hispanics desire to continue traditions and cultural rituals but in a secular way. In 2014, Freethought Society (FS) board member Victoria de la Torre and FS founder and president Margaret Downey created a secular version of the traditional Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos. Since that time, the event has taken place three times in San Diego, California; once in Los Angeles, California; Norwalk, Connecticut; Tysons Corner, Virginia; and Madison, Wisconsin.

Contrary to the name, the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event is actually a celebration of life. The nontheist Hispanic community views the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular as a perfect way to remember the legacy of deceased loved ones — in a way that does not require prayer, church, or any religious dogma.

The 2020 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event honored many Hispanic traditions and rituals that celebrated our one and only life and the joy of being human. Due to the current COVID-19 health crisis, de la Torre and Downey decided to modify the event in order to present it online. They developed a bilingual program that highlighted ways to keep all the secular aspects and have interaction with those who log on. When the program was developed, Downey pitched the concept to leaders of national nontheist groups and offered co-sponsorship opportunities. American Atheists (AA); Center for Inquiry (CFI); Hispanic American Freethinkers (HAFree); and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) immediately agreed to share costs and preparation responsibilities.

Thanks to the efforts of an energetic organizational team that included co-sponsor representatives Kristina Daliden (FFRF), Samantha McQuire (AA), Melissa Myers (CFI), David Tamayo (HAFree), Downey (FS) and de la Torre (FS), the event took on a decidedly international dimension. The very first online International Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event took place on Sunday, November 1, 2020. Registrants included people from all over the United States, Columbia, Canada, Denmark, El Salvador, England, Hawaii, India, Luxembourg, Mexico, and Spain. A total of 401 Zoom registrations were received.

Helping to advertise the event were the many people who shared the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Facebook event page. Many groups set up Meetup pages for their members as well. Podcaster Ryan Bell featured Downey and de la Torre on October 28, 2020 on his podcast “Life After God” (number: 094 Secular Day of the Dead). FFRF featured Downey and de la Torre as guests on their weekly live Facebook broadcast Ask an Atheist. The show can be seen at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLJQbGuLI8k

Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead honors the life of dead loved ones. Traditions connected with the holiday include building private altars called “ofrendas.” Ofrendas are tables that honor the deceased using sugar skulls and flowers as well as the favorite foods and beverages of a dead loved one. Some families and friends make a point on this day to visit graves with these items as gifts. Secularists, however, are encouraged to meet with other like-minded individuals to enjoy Hispanic food, beverages, music, presentations, and socializing – even though the event had to be done online this year.
The event began with a 15-minute concert that included recorded performances from Juan Carlos, who played an original guitar song entitled *This is Life*; Gary Stockdale, who sang *Imagine* in Spanish; and Christina Magallanes-Jones, who sang *La Llorona (The Weeping Woman)* and played the piano. All three performances were subtitled.

The formal event opened with a fantastic subtitled welcome from actor Jon Huertas who spoke about the importance of the separation of religion and government and his philosophy in life as a proud nontheist. Huertas also said:

“This today is a reminder that we don’t need a reason of why we exist. We just need a reason to live. Reasons like, I don’t know; free will, equality, love, solidarity, and respect of human dignity. Those are all amazing reasons for living, but they are also the essential values of secularism, nontheism and humanism. So be kind and be good not for some kind of afterlife, just because it feels pretty damn good to treat people like that in this life...”

After de la Torre and Downey welcomed everyone in both Spanish and English, de la Torre honored the life and work of Frida Kahlo and Downey honored the life and work of Thomas Paine. The leaders of co-sponsoring groups also participated in the welcome. Each provided a description of the group they were representing and honored a secular hero.

Tamayo (HAFree) honored Gabriel Jose de la Concordia Marquez, a Colombian author, scriptwriter, editor, and journalist, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982; Annie Laurie Gaylor (FFRF) honored her mother Anne Nicol Gaylor, who co-founded FFRF in 1978; Nick Fish (AA) honored the legacy of Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who founded American Atheists in 1963; and Robyn Blummer (CFI) honored the many accomplishments of CFI founder Paul Kurtz. All presentations were subtitled.

Zoom participants were then offered a choice of moving into either a Spanish speaking room or an English speaking room. To give time for this breakout choice, interlude music was provided by Stockdale, who sang Guajira Guantanamera and Abraham Steve Mackey, who sang Rancho Grande.

Dan Barker (co-president of FFRF) filmed his keynote speech in both Spanish and English to insure a mirrored program in both Zoom rooms. Barker’s talk was about his journey from being an evangelical preacher in Mexico to becoming a proud and productive atheist leader.

An Honoring Ceremony began after Barker’s presentation. Previous to the event, special guests sent the organizational team films of themselves honoring a dead loved one. All films were subtitled in either Spanish or English in order to make this event truly bilingual.

Author Fernando Alcántar honored his grandmother. Hollywood actor and Broadway star John Davidson honored his dear brother Lee. Sculptor Zenos Frudakis honored his brother and mentor EvAngelos Frudakis. Huertas honored his grandparents and his mother. Author Sasha Sagan honored her father Carl Sagan and his legacy. Downey honored the life and work of skeptic, debunker, and magician James “The Amazing” Randi. She also read sentiments about Randi submitted by Penn Jillette and Teller.

The session was then turned over to folks who had made a reservation to honor the legacies of the people they loved followed by an open mic session. People in attendance were invited to share stories about their dead loved ones. Following is a list of the speakers and the names of the people they honored:

**In the Spanish-Speaker’s Room:**
- Memo Benumea: Father, Dr. Guillermo Benumea Jimenez
- Consuelo Cortes de Fleming: Uncle, Enrique Cortes
- Tanya Galaviz: Father, Pedro Galaviz Padron
- Gerardo Romero: Father, Joaquin Romero
- Bertha Vazquez: Grandfather, Daniel McDonald

**In the English-Speaker’s Room:**
- Debbie Allen: United States Supreme Court Justice
- Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- Darrell Barker: Wife, Suzan Palmer-Barker
- Jennifer Beahan: Friend and atheist blogger, Ed Brayton
- Michael Steven Martin: Author Christopher Hitchens
- Lynne Schultz: Son, Scout Schultz
- Shelley Segal: Grandmother, Rebecca “Beppie” Isaacs
- Katie Reyes: Brother, Eric Weave
- Jenny Robbins: Son, Kade Riefenberg
- Hugh Taft-Morales: Father-in-law, Dr. George Morales

Six prizes were awarded to the best Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Zoom setting, face painting (half and entire), overall costume, hair adornment, and face mask. Congratulations to Ana Zamudio, Jennifer Vines, Allen, Benumea, Schultz, and Cortez de Fleming.

The Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular team thanks all the musicians, speakers and technicians who made the 2020 online international event possible. Aside from all those mentioned in this article, thanks also go to Buck Bowen for inserting video subtitles and FFRF’s Multimedia Manager Bruce A. Johnson for rendering the submitted videos.

To close the event, an 8-minute mini-concert was performed by Davidson in Spanish. Mackey sang the closing song *Imagine* in English.

If you missed participating in the 2020 event you can still view both the English and Spanish Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular sessions at the following links:

**English Speaker’s Room:** https://youtu.be/N46al_yEDdU
**Spanish Speaker’s Room:** https://youtu.be/ILM1Ozp4-8Q

After the event, many complimentary emails were received. Louise Danielson wrote, “Thank you for organizing a great event yesterday. It was interesting to experience such a beautiful tradition. I enjoyed the remembrance so much that I would like to book a slot at next year’s event to honor my parents. They passed away in 2013 and 2012. My father was a devout atheist and my mother a devout Baptist. I would love to tell a short story about them.”

Phillips Stevens, Jr., Ph.D. wrote, “Very interesting, very well organized. I read the comments as many people introduced themselves and brought greetings from their corners of the world. A truly international gathering! Nice music, heartfelt comments and tributes. I was impressed.”

The success of the event has inspired the organizational team to consider a future event with the possibility of adding more co-sponsors, speakers, entertainers, activities, and even more international connections. Ideas are welcomed and appreciated. Please send suggestions and comments to Downey and de la Torre at the following email address: SecularDayoftheDead@FtSociety.org.
Pictured left is Secular Day of the Dead co-creator **Margaret Downey**. She is standing next to the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Honoring Table she prepared for her Zoom setting.

Pictured right is Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular co-creator **Victoria de la Torre**. She is pictured in front of her secular Honoring Table.

Pictured left is **Consuelo Cortes de Fleming**. She won sugar skull earrings for having the best Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos headdress.

Pictured right is **Memo Benumea**. He won a sugar skull squeaky dog toy and a gold-and-black sugar skull thermal drink container for having the best overall Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular costume and Zoom set design.

Pictured below left is **Jennifer Vines**. She won a Day of the Dead spice jar for the best Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular face painting.

Pictured above right are Secular Saint candle labels for sale through the Freethought Society. The labels can be affixed to 7” round, 8” high candles found at most Dollar Stores. The available labels honor **Ann Nicol Gaylor**, **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**, **Christopher Hitchens**, **Robert Green Ingersoll**, **Paul Kurtz**, and **Thomas Paine**. The price for a single label is $6 or $5 per label for orders of two labels or more (postage included). Send your orders to: SecularDayoftheDead@FtSociety.org or mail orders to The Freethought Society, P. O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366.
Religious hate is protected speech. Everyone has the right to hate anyone, but not the right to commit crimes based on that hatred.

Perhaps that’s why Bob Jones III, former president of Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist Christian institution in my home state of South Carolina, apologized in 2015 for his 1980 remark that we should follow the biblical injunction of stoning gays to death.

So what about hate crime laws? I’m somewhat conflicted over this issue. I support laws that prohibit acts of discrimination, including threats and intimidation. But I tend to think it’s problematic to give longer criminal sentences for crimes motivated by religious hatred. I don’t want to hold the accused guilty of the free speech right to have an opinion, however hateful it may be. I also doubt that some bigot would be dissuaded from taking an action because a few additional hate crime years might be tacked on to a justifiably long sentence.

A more serious problem in criminal cases, I think, is that the race, color, religion, or sexual orientation of the defendant may unfairly sway the jury. For example, an atheist who refuses to swear an oath with his hand on the Bible, asserting a legal right to simply affirm, would likely prejudice some on the jury.

We also have the free speech right to not be “politically correct,” however politically correct is defined. It could mean opposition to language and behavior that upsets or offends certain groups. To be fair and balanced, I’ve criticized both politically correct liberals and conservatives. Some liberals give a pass to human right violations in Muslim countries because it’s part of Muslim culture. I also disagree with liberals who block conservatives from speaking on college campuses. Similarly, I disagree with conservatives who stop liberals from speaking in certain forums or claim discrimination against Christians when they don’t receive special rights not granted to those of other faiths or no faith at all.

Some people proudly proclaim themselves as politically incorrect in order to justify bad behavior, which may include refusing to vote for an African American or a Muslim, or not believing in scientific theories like evolution and climate change. Since when did rejecting the overwhelming consensus of scientists around the globe become a proud, politically incorrect position? I suppose I’m politically correct because I like to make evidence-based and reality-based decisions.

The ultimate in (literal) political correctness are politicians who won’t acknowledge they are atheists because they assume such an admission would hurt them politically. Fortunately, we now have a Congressional Freethought Caucus which, as of this writing, has 13 active members.

In 1990 I did the most politically incorrect thing possible — I ran for governor of South Carolina to challenge our state Constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. Of course I lost the election but after eight years of litigation, the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in my favor, thus nullifying the religious test clause in our state constitution.

Religious leaders may preach that I will suffer an eternity in hell because I’m an atheist, but I still believe the little ditty I learned in kindergarten: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Religions can prohibit women from sitting next to men in their houses of worship and can shun or excommunicate members for not appropriately following certain rules. Members who disagree with doctrines are free to leave the religion, as millions have done and continue to do.

The United States government can’t legally favor one religion over another or religion over non-religion. Religious freedom should include the right to be free from people imposing their religious views on the public through discrimination in employment, housing, education, and public accommodations. We are a secular country with secular laws that apply to all citizens.

Equal treatment under the law is not a radical idea. Same-sex couples should have the same rights, benefits, and protections as opposite-sex couples. Some people assert a biblical justification that marriage should only be between a man and a woman, just as a few generations ago they gave a biblical justification that marriage should only be between members of the same race. I could just as easily give a biblical justification for marriage of a man and 700 women (I Kings 11:3). Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, which shows that his brain was not his most active organ. Those who want to make civil laws compatible with a particular interpretation of a so-called holy book might think about moving to a theocratic country.

Unfortunately, the United States government favors religious institutions in many ways. Religious entities don’t pay property tax or state income tax, substantially increasing the tax burden on the rest of us. Our politicians and courts have also approved laws that give preferential treatment to religious institutions over secular nonprofit organizations. Such special accommodations include taxpayer-funded school vouchers for religious institutions that need not comply with the same standards as secular schools, faith-based initiatives that allow hiring discrimination, and denial of certain types of healthcare because of the religious beliefs of a provider.

With government benefits given to religion, numerous controversies have raged over what constitutes a religion. Religion scholars can’t seem to agree, but religious privileging has forced the Internal Revenue Service to make such determinations. I find all attempts to define religion problematic. Is religion a sincerely held irrational supernatural belief? If so, why should the government privilege irrational beliefs over rational beliefs?

Of course there are both theistic and nontheistic religions, the latter placing more emphasis on rational beliefs. Some rational religions include the Society for Humanistic Judaism (with atheist rabbis), the American Ethical Union (with Ethical Culture Societies), Unitarian Universalist Humanists, and the Cultural and Secular Jewish Organization. All four are nontheistic and are active members of the Secular Coalition for America. Some secular groups have used satire in forming religious, primarily to draw attention to unfair advantages afforded religion and how foolish religions can be. Examples include the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Satanic Temple.

The First Amendment prohibits the government from privileging one religion over another. I also don’t think...
religion should be privileged over conscience. If the government agrees to an exemption from a law because of religious belief, that same exemption should be available for conscientious belief, as in the 1965 case where the Supreme Court ruled in favor of an atheist conscientious objector to war (Welch v. United States 578 U.S.).

Special treatment for religion defeats society’s promotion of the general welfare. Neither religious nor non-religious people can invoke conscience to avoid paying taxes. A pharmacist should be required to dispense prescriptions regardless of religious beliefs, just as a supermarket cashier must check out meat products even though eating animal flesh might go against her vegan beliefs.

Our secular Constitution makes no mention of any gods. The only references to religion are in Article VI (no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office), and in the First Amendment (barring Congress from making any law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof). Our founders supported freedom of religion because they understood that religious diversity would help our new country avoid the kinds of religious wars that had plagued Europe for centuries. Freedom of religion must include freedom from religion, which means our First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion and conscience.

We might even honor the godless Constitution established by our founders, who had no “under God” pledge of allegiance and no “In God We Trust” motto. The Great Seal of the United States of America contains the motto E Pluribus Unum (out of many, one), and we the people are free to trust in gods or reason, without government promotion of religion.

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to The Freethought Society News. He is the author of two books, Candidate Without a Prayer and An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land. Both books are available through Amazon.com.

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Facts About the Amish

by Margaret Downey

When people learn that I live near Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, America’s oldest Amish settlement, I’m asked a lot of questions about the thousands of people that still live a centuries-old “Plain” lifestyle. Other Amish communities exist in Ohio and Indiana. In Pennsylvania, beautiful Amish hand-stitched quilts can be easily found for sale.

The Amish lifestyle still reflects roots in rural 17th century Switzerland. Amish adherents live apart from society, dress modestly, practice humility, avoid modern technology, “shun” members who stray, and follow Ordnung. The Ordnung is an oral tradition regulating all facets of life. It is a set of rules for Amish, Old Order Mennonite and Conservative Mennonites. This article, however will only highlight the Old Order Amish.

The Amish avoid temptation and sin by living apart from the outside world. Adherents never want to become arrogant or prideful and they consult the Ordnung for all their decisions. There is no need for the Amish to agonize over decisions; everything is covered in Ordnung!

Next to the Ordnung and the Bible, the Amish consider the book Martyrs Mirror (aka The Bloody Theater) as the most significant. The Bloody Theater, was first published in Holland in 1660 in Dutch by Thieleman J. van Braght. It documents the stories and testimonies of Christian martyrs, especially Anabaptists. The book includes accounts of the martyrdom of the apostles and the stories of martyrs from previous centuries with beliefs similar to the Anabaptists.

The Amish religion includes a belief in Heaven and Hell. The Amish community follows basic concepts of Christianity that provide a foundation for their beliefs. They believe in God (“Father,” “Son” and “Holy Spirit”). The Amish way of life is geared toward achieving salvation on a daily basis. Sinning is not tolerated and any perceived sin is punished by Meidung (shunning).

If a follower leaves the faith or is shunned that person will not be admitted to heaven. The Amish practice Rumspringa, which is when adolescents (age 16) “run around,” party, and see the outside world before committing to the adult Amish lifestyle. Young adults (18-21) get baptized a second time after committing to the Amish way of life as an adult. The formal education of Amish children ends at 8th grade. They must speak Pennsylvania Dutch (also referred to, more correctly, as Pennsylvania German) or English.

The Amish have strict gender rules and often separate women from men. Both men and woman must not use finery or ornamentation and this is why they are referred to as “Plain People.” Restricted ornamentation applies to zippers, and jewelry. Women must wear long sleeve dresses, black bonnets or white caps. Men’s pants must not have creases, cuffs, or zippers. Amish coats do not have pockets. The men grow long beards without mustaches after marriage. Divorce and birth control use are prohibited.

Amish households must not use electricity. Electricity is viewed as having a connection with the world. Well, at least they are safe from power outages and any post-storm fallen power wires! And for those who enjoy a quiet life an Amish home guarantees no radio, television, or other electronic noise. All farming equipment must be controlled manually.

Modes of transportation are either a horse-drawn buggy, bicycles, roller skates or scooters. The Amish must abide by local road rules, but there is no fear of ever getting a speeding ticket since horses stay well within safe road speeds.

Amish folk enjoy visiting each other. They conduct lengthy wedding ceremonies, large feasts and help each other with things such as “barn raising” and other needs. While these events are exciting times for the community, there must be no visual recording of these events. Cameras and photography are prohibited within the community.

Violence is not allowed in the Amish community and during wartime they are conscientious objectors. The plain and simple Amish are peaceful people and are respected for their farming, cooking, building, gardening, and quilting talents. Their business locations are open Thursday through Saturday only. They are aways closed on Sundays as that day is considered a special time for the family and community. Typically the Amish have worship services every second Sunday in private homes.

Despite the “no use of modern technology” rule, many Amish contractors and business owners enjoy lighting, heating, and telephone service when it’s provided by people who are not Amish — a survival loophole.
Margaret Downey:
James “The Amazing” Randi died on October 20, 2020 at age 92. Throughout his long and productive life, he inspired many. He encouraged us to seek truth, to always apply critical thinking skills, to break the chains of belief systems and to examine all claims of the paranormal.

Like magic, James found the words to convince us that people can be fooled if they fail to think, observe, and learn. He wrote many books to give us the tools to debunk nonsense, escape from scam artists, avoid astrology, never get flim-flamed, fall for faith healers, or get conjured. Randi taught us how to appreciate science in a way that only a talented educator could — entertainingly and eloquently.

I have two awards in my office presented to me by Randi. One was given to me in 2005 at The Amazing Meeting (TAM) 3 and the other is from TAM 5 in 2007. He was always supportive of my media training class and endorsed the unique idea of opening an Anti-Superstition Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center every Friday the 13th. He was a special guest at a Philadelphia Friday the 13th party in 2008. To show his support of our work, he gave us a special room at TAM 9 to open a Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center. That year TAM happened to fall on a Friday the 13th.

Randi’s encouragement of my skeptic activities did not stop there, however. Upon my invitation, he enthusiastically participated in the DragonCon Skeptrack parade entry — twice, each time greeting other Skeptrack parade participants and proudly riding in our “Star Car.” He loved going down that parade route lined by 90,000 onlookers, some yelling his name, some applauding, and some shouting “We love you James Randi!”

I loved him too. Not just for all the things I’ve described above, but for being a sincere and caring person. He took an interest in my life and kept in touch. When he met my grandson, Cameron, Randi took the time to show him card tricks.

When a family illness struck, Randi was the first to send a letter offering his love and best wishes. We will never forget that kindness and will always be grateful. Below is a photo of my grandson showing Randi a card trick after he attended TAM 11. Cameron was successful with the trick and Randi said, “Hey, that’s pretty good, kid!” Just what a youngster wants to hear from the best magician ever!

Brian Engler:
As a photographer at many skeptic and freethought events, most of my memories of being with James “The Amazing” Randi center around photos I took. I had known of, seen on TV, and read the many writings penned by Randi for years, but had not actually met him until I finally was able to attend The Amazing Meeting in 2008.

During that meeting I met and photographed a lot of people whose names I knew, but the person I was most excited to meet was Randi. To say I was not disappointed is an understatement. He seemingly was everywhere — at that TAM and at the many other TAMs, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry conferences, and other events. I subsequently was privileged to get to know him reasonably well.

It truly was amazing how large a presence he was on stage and off, and yet how approachable, friendly, and genuine he was to everyone. It turned out that during TAM 6 and as a surprise for his 80th birthday, the staff of the James Randi Educational Foundation asked every attendee to write on a slip of paper one thing for which they could credit and thank Randi for having had a positive influence on their life. At one of the final plenary sessions, a vase was given to him, stuffed to overflowing with these affirmations. When told what they were, he was, at first, uncharacteristically speechless and overcome with emotion. It was at that moment when I captured this photo. Not as “picture-perfect” as many subsequent photographs I took of Randi, but still one of my all-time favorite memories of an unforgettable “Amazing” man.

Mark Edward:
There will never be another person who had so much magic within him, yet the common sense to keep it all real and rational.

Every time I got together with Randi we would ascend to levels of magic talk that left us frequently laughing at the folly of how we spent our youth, but still digging up principles and effects long forgotten by the greater magic fraternity. Other people around us during these sessions would seem to vanish like phantoms and I often found myself feeling slightly guilty
for seeming to sequester him away from the dozens of people who just wanted to shake his hand. I apologize if you are one of the people so left out.

Even if we had not spoken in person for several months, Randi could take up where we left off as if it were yesterday. Just so much humor and information! We were on the same wavelength and I will miss that more than anything.

Randi totally got what I was doing and why I was doing it, because he had already been there. If there are indeed generous souls, Randi had one.

**Jason Frye:**

When a celebrated person or beloved friend has left us, it hurts, it gives us pause. The way to honor that person is to embrace and live with the same kindness, generosity, moral conviction and other virtues embedded by our dearly departed.

As Humanists, the great majority of us do not agree with the idea of an afterlife. We do believe, however, that we live on in the fond memories of those who we have touched. I had the pleasure a decade ago of meeting someone whose death gave us all a moment of bittersweet sentiment, glad for his being here, and sad that the world is somewhat diminished with his passing. I met James Randi in Las Vegas at a conference that bore his moniker, “The Amazing Meeting.”

Looking back, two topics of conversation come to mind. The first topic we chatted about concerned homosexuality. My being gay is something that I share with Randi. We chatted about his coming out of the closet in his early 80s. I asked him what the experience was like coming out as an octogenarian. With a great deal of charm and dramatic eyebrow attention, Randi said, “I didn’t come out as an octogenarian, I came out as gay!”

The conversation led into more social and civil rights topics. Randi told me the story of how as a young magician he would travel with an equality rider in his contract. On one occasion, Randi traveled from New York City to do a show in Florida. Before going on stage, Randi looked out from the wings and saw lily-white faces on the floor and darker faces in the balcony. He packed his bag, walked to the bus terminal and returned to New York City. There, his friends had gathered to greet him at a nearby drug store. When he walked in, they all gave him a loud round of applause.

Four years prior to the _Obergefell v. Hodges_ decision, Randi and I discussed the state of LGBT rights. The last thing Randi said to me was, “Things are changing, and they are changing raaaaaapidly.” For the man whose life was dedicated to debunking entrepreneurial prognosticators, perhaps the “honest liar” gave us the most accurate predication of all.

**Susan Gerbic:**

I have hundreds of photos of my friend James Randi. Sorting through photos trying to select just one that expresses my feelings for Randi and the great loss I feel over his death is like trying to choose a favorite moment from an excellent vacation. You can’t.

The photo I decided to share is not one of Randi and me (there are lots of those), but as a photographer I saw Randi often through the lens — how others perceive him. I took this photo in 2017 in Prague. I was on a tour visiting small skeptic groups all over Europe, with the end goal of speaking at the “European Skeptic Conference” in Wroclaw, Poland where Randi would also be speaking.

A group of conference attendees were in Prague a few days before the conference awaiting the arrival of Randi so we could take a chartered bus to the Conference in Poland. This photo captures the moment that Randi and Massimo Polidoro walked into the pub. Joy is on Randi’s face as he sees the room of friendly faces. Moments before his arrival we were all engaged in conversations and laughter — everything stopped when Randi walked in. We were all so thrilled to have him join us that evening.

A consummate performer, Randi adored people and people adored him. His distinctive voice and colorful stories would light up a room and keep people entertained for hours. When you were with him you felt his energy and positivity making you feel like you were the most important person in the room.

One word I would use to sum up Randi would be “caring.” He felt great anger towards people who take advantage of others but sympathy for those who had been duped. It will be a long time before we find another like James “The Amazing” Randi.

**George Hrab:**

When I first met James “The Amazing” Randi at The Amazing Meeting (TAM) 8, I got to sit next to him during a panel presentation. I was so excited when someone eventually sent me a photo of the two of us that I had it made into a giant poster. Here it is on my wall:

I displayed this poster in a spare room for a number of years. Anyone that saw the wall was always curious and I enjoyed talking about TAM and Randi. I liked how if a passerby stood in the right spot and my curtains were in the up position, the poster could quite clearly be seen from outside on the street. That made me oddly happy.

I converted the room a number of years later and ended up taking the poster down, but it always brought a smile to my face and anyone else who saw it during the time it was on display.

**Penn Jillette:**

There was one thing James Randi was never skeptical about and that was love. He loved so much and he knew that he was loved. Let’s keep the love going.
Angela Mattke:

Articles I’ve seen about the life of someone like James Randi are all full of the same clichés. Little man, big personality; disproportionate impact on the world; left a legacy; blah blah blah. None of the stories can do justice to the outsized impact this tiny man has left on me.

My mother would let me stay up late sometimes to watch The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson when I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. We enjoyed watching all the actors, singers, and other guests. James “The Amazing” Randi was one of our favorites, mostly because he was always so entertaining and clever, but also because who doesn’t love someone with a middle name in quotes?

I remember Uri Geller making appearances on the talk show rounds, and I was mystified by his apparent magical touch beneath which metal dissolved away. Then came Randi, showing how anyone could perform the same miracle. He did this while keeping up cheerful and funny patter. I was still mystified, but I understood that it was a trick, and I had been fooled by this man who was truly amazing.

Maybe Randi appealed to my ornery, questioning nature. So it was amazing to me when, 35 years later, this same man was in the back seat of my convertible to be a part of the 2012 DragonCon parade. There we were in downtown Atlanta moving slowly in the middle of the DragonCon parade, and Randi was ever still the showman. His fans were yelling his name from the sidelines and I noticed that they hailed from every generation.

Later during the DragonCon events Randi was kind and patient with all his fans, who continually approached him. He tirelessly posed for pictures and made gentle banter. By that time, I was already hooked into the Skeptic movement and was helping with the Skeptics Track at DragonCon with the parade participation.

Margaret Downey, one of my heroes, had persuaded me to don a costume and drive my car in the parade. I was in when she said that Randi would be the “star in the car.” As usual, she was absolutely right. I liked dressing in costume and I cherished every moment I got to spend with the man who was an integral part of the Skeptics movement.

Then, in 2015, I got to be the “star car” driver for a second time — with Randi as the passenger again. For this parade I borrowed my mother’s car for the purpose of using her automatic transmission instead of my stick shift. In 2012, we learned that stick-shift cars are not conducive to driving in a 2-mile parade route.

In 2015 Randi was more frail, but he was still engaging, funny, kind, and generous with his fans. Whether he was bending a spoon, busting con men, reenacting so-called “psychic surgery,” this diminutive man was larger than life and he worked his own brand of magic on me.

Chuck Miller:

I was fortunate enough to meet James “The Amazing” Randi a handful of times at DragonCon, TAM, and at an American Atheists convention. I remember that he really enjoyed interacting with fans. He spent a lot of time in conversation with each person he met and that is unusually personal for a celebrity.

The first time I was able to spend a few minutes with Randi was at TAM in Las Vegas. I was helping staff the American Atheists free literature table when I noticed Randi holding court in a corner of the long hallway that led to meeting rooms. I just had to meet him. On my way over, I noticed a poster of Randi for sale at a table hosted by a very good artist. I immediately purchased the poster. I introduced myself to Randi, holding my newly purchased poster and after a brief conversation I asked him to autograph it. He not only signed the poster, he personalized it! It hangs on the wall of my party room at my Alabama home.

At DragonCon Randi and I had a conversation regarding an old James Randi Educational Foundation forum post about, of all things, fixing faulty audio speaker wiring. The man could debunk any kind of flim-flam, not just the spooky paranormal stuff he was best known for.

I have one other item of Randi memorabilia — an autographed clock made from a cigar box that was given to me by fellow Randi fans. The clock occupies a space on the mantel above the wood stove in the den. I enjoy looking at it and thinking of Randi.

I’ll always remember Randi as kind, brilliant, a humble teacher, and skeptic guide.

Benjamin Radford:

It is not much of a stretch to say that James Randi was one of the two main inspirations for my career choice as a skeptical researcher and investigator (the other being Carl Sagan). It was 1992, and a beer shortage led me on a path that would culminate in me spending about half my life walking on fire, hunting ghosts, making crop circles, chasing monsters, and exploring the paranormal.

While at the University of New Mexico that year I won an essay contest and as a prize I was flown to a small college town in Utah to present my paper. While there my colleagues and I decided to venture out for a few beers. Because we were unknowingly in a dry county, this turned out to be an arduous and ill-fated venture.

In the process of going door-to-door and store-to-store, we came across a tiny used bookstore. Amid the spilling shelves of books on fruit-canning and apocalyptic survival guides (Mormon bookstore staples), I found a few old copies of Skeptical Inquirer magazine. One in particular, with a purple cover article on Nostradamus, caught my eye, and that was the first time I’d seen anyone criticize the famed prognosticator.

The author of the article was James “The Amazing” Randi. He offered skeptical, logical, and reasonable explanations for the prophecies’ apparent accuracy. Other paranormal and New Age topics were also featured in the magazine, giving another side to the story. Not all the explanations and arguments
I dedicated my book *Scientific Paranormal Investigation* to Randi. We come from a proud tradition of skeptics and investigators, from Benjamin Franklin to Harry Houdini. I am proud to count Randi as not only a mentor but a friend. He was always quick with a quip or a trick, and Randi inspired millions. I don’t know anyone else who has toured with Alice Cooper, been encased in a block of ice for an hour, and exposed fraudulent faith healers like Peter Popoff.

As varied and fascinating as his real accomplishments are, you have to watch out: Randi once told me he met Abraham Lincoln, and damn it, for a split second I believed him until that mischievous twinkle in his eyes reminded me to be more skeptical.

It’s not that no one else could, theoretically, have done many of Randi’s accomplishments; it’s that no one else did — and did them for the greater good with moral conviction, thoroughness, and a magician’s flair. There have always been skeptics, and there always will be — but there is only one James “The Amazing” Randi.

**David Richards:**

I think I’ve always been a skeptic at heart, although I didn’t know what to call it until well into adulthood. I acquired a copy of James Randi’s book *Flim-Flam* sometime in the 1990s. This became my “bible” for skepticism and techniques of investigating paranormal claims. Randi became my hero and guru. Through the book I was aware of Randi’s offer of a $1 million prize for proof of paranormal or supernatural abilities. However, the book was several years old already when I got my copy, and I wasn’t aware Mr. Randi was still conducting any investigations.

In 2000 I became active with a group founded by James Underdown in Los Angeles that brought together average people to participate in investigations into the supernatural. I was excited to participate and help carry on the mission begun by Randi, Paul Kurtz, Martin Gardner, Carl Sagan, Ray Hyman, and others in the 1970s (originally under the CSICOP banner). Through this group I learned about the existence of the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), and the still-ongoing offer of $1 million for proof of paranormal abilities.

In 2004 I found out JREF conducted annual conferences called “The Amazing Meeting,” and that I had already missed two of them. I quickly made plans to attend TAM 3 in Las Vegas in January 2005. Of course I was looking forward to hearing people speak, but most of the speakers listed I hadn’t heard of at that time; the main attraction for me was to meet Randi in person. At that event I was able to meet him for the first time, shake his hand, and ask him to sign a couple of books for me. He was very approachable; the problem was hundreds of other people also wanted to greet him and get
his sense of humor was like. But supposing I had been humor? I didn’t know the man well enough yet to know what paid! Was Randi messing around with me? Was this his idea of about the lunch bill the year before? I was told the bill was
And then he turned away to greet other people.

Randi appeared. A chair was pulled up for him at the end of our booth, and the five of us proceeded to have a very pleasant meal together, which is what I had hoped for, but despairs of actually getting a chance to do.

We had a great time, but as all things it eventually came to an end. I wanted to do something to show my appreciation to Randi, and to help support JREF, so as everyone was finishing I left the booth and found our server and said I’d like to pay the check for our table. He said I was too late, that the check had already been taken care of. Well that’s a perfect situation, right? You offer to pick up a check for someone you admire but then it turns out it’s already done! Not only that, but with the check paid I got a free meal out of it too. What could be better! I made the effort, but it wasn’t needed. So I headed out of the café with memories of a great weekend and a pleasant lunch with my guru. I had a smile on my face and was in a great mood all the way home.

Skip ahead one year to TAM 4. This time I wanted to be even more involved in the proceedings, so I submitted a paper to be presented in the Sunday papers session. Happily my paper was accepted. The topic of my paper was “Supernatural Influences in the Movies.” So this time, as a guest of the conference I was invited to attend an opening night private dinner with all the other speakers and presenters for the conference. When I arrived for the dinner, Randi was out front greeting everyone. He said it was nice to meet me and as I shook his hand I reminded him that I had actually met him the previous year and that in fact we had had lunch together on the last day. And, at that, the light dawned for him, he nodded and headed home. Having nothing else to do until my flight home later that afternoon, I approached the main organizer of the conference, Linda Shallenberger, and offered my help in packing up. They still had a lot of work to do and my offer was accepted. I spent the next hour or so packing things away in boxes in preparation for it being shipped back to the JREF offices in Florida.

Once we were done with the packing, David Shallenberger (Linda’s husband) suggested he and I grab some lunch in the café. Linda was still busy with other things. I was happy to have the company, so I sat in a booth with David and we ordered lunch. Within a few minutes a few more JREF workers drifted in and squeezed into the booth along with us. We ate, and chatted. We were all having a nice time socializing. Then, much to my surprise and delight, Randi appeared.

Randi was hugely influential in debunking fake psychics and other charlatans, as we all know. He began this work with his colleagues Kurtz, Gardner, and the others associated with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which was founded by the Center for Inquiry (CFI). But there was a falling-out between Randi and CFI, and there was ongoing resentment for many years. The reason isn’t widely known, although all you had to do was ask Randi to find out what it was. Both Randi and Kurtz are gone now, so I don’t think there’s any reason to explain the cause of the situation. It isn’t some deep, devious thing involving a wrongdoing by someone, or anything that sinister. And it isn’t going to be an embarrassment to anyone’s memory.

The conflict was simple; it stemmed from a lawsuit filed by a man who considered himself a psychic whose name I won’t use (I see no reason to give the man free publicity — there’s also a small chance the man still has some lawsuit lust, you never know). I’ll simply call this person “G.” Randi wrote articles and books in which he denounced G for his effects, and using magic tricks. CSICIOP published some of these articles. One of the books written by Randi featuring similar comments was published by Prometheus Books, a company also run by Kurtz. In 1991 and 1992, G filed lawsuits for slander against Randi, CSICOP, and Prometheus books. Now, at this time, Randi made a modest income from performing, speaking, occasional television appearances, and the few books he had written. But he wasn’t a wealthy man.

As Randi explained it to me, when he was named in the lawsuit he approached Kurtz and suggested that they team up to jointly defend against these lawsuits. Strength in numbers...
James Randi has left the stage, but not our lives. Yes, there are many wonderful memories of times spent with one of the world’s leaders in his field. I cannot imagine how anyone will follow that act. We can raise a glass and talk about our late friend. Indeed, I am planning, with some others in the skeptical community, to organize a night in Randi’s honor when next we are able to have a traditional convention. Maybe we can call it “The Amazing Meeting of Randi’s friends”… or something like that.

Randi is still very much with us in some important ways. Apart from 10 books written by Randi, and more where he was a contributor, we have a wealth of videos covering many of his adventures, interviews, documentaries and TV appearances. I have many videos of the man, collected over the past 20 years, in my own archive. These include some of his appearances on Australian television including being told to “Piss off!” by an angry Don Lane in 1980.

Putting my own collection aside, it is the collection of videos on YouTube and other sites that is simply… amazing. The catalog is growing almost daily since Randi’s final bow in October as people are uploading clips and other videos. Allow me to offer my top ten list of must-see Randi videos. What these videos represent is something priceless and, if we pay attention, Randi can still be our mentor and guide.


“Randi in Australia” (1980), a classic of all water divining tests as Randi travels to Sydney: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gN-0FeqAkQM

“Exploring Psychic Powers Live” (1989), Randi and Bill Bixby test a variety of psychic claims: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldr2JTuHBy0

60 Minutes Australia featuring “The Great Carlos Hoax: The ‘Spirit Channeller’ that Fooled the World” (1998), showing the shortcomings of the media: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN54PDwNa6s

Part 1 of a 4-part video where Randi exposes Geller (1998), an excerpt from “James Randi’s Solved Mysteries Workshop,” a talk given by Randi during the Skeptics Society Convention: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsDHPoXWfV1

“James Randi Speaks: Conjuring with Barbara Walters” (2009), Randi explains how he, under pressure, managed to still outdo Geller: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jpt-7j3ahP0

“James Randi: Psychic Investigator” (1991), a series of shows with a parade of mystics and others who are after Randi’s cash prize. Includes noted skeptics Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix_DEIo6nH4

“An Evening with James Randi | Think Inc.” (2014), a tour of Australia, highlights Randi as he chats to me: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Th1VjbjWpAU

Randi is gone, the stage is empty, but his encore will last forever.
James Randi was a presence in my life virtually for as long as I can remember, from seeing him perform on television in my boyhood to earnestly working as a collaborator and Senior Fellow to the James Randi Educational Foundation.

At the Foundation, among other roles, I collaborated as part of “The Million Dollar Challenge” committee, designing protocols and conducting tests at many of The Amazing Meeting conferences. Randi made the skeptical movement visible and viable force for reason, critical thinking, and science. The world at large, as well as my own world, remains a little less amazing in his absence.

Randi inspired, informed, and influenced me, and my life would not have been the same — indeed, I would not be the same person — without him.

Grant “Chip” Taylor:
My connection with James Randi goes back a long way. Back to around 1958-59, when I was a teenager, I became hooked on an all-night radio show on WOR from New York City. It was called The Party Line but most people knew it as simply the “Long John Nebel Show.” It ran from midnight to 5:30 AM. An impossible time slot for me as I was in high school at the time. But I was raised by an open-minded mother and being an only child helped, so I was allowed to stay up late on Friday and Saturday nights to listen to Long John and his fascinating guests, including those who claimed to have taken rides on flying saucers, were attacked by Bigfoot, or had X-ray vision and could identify objects or even drive a car while blindfolded.

The format was Long John interviewing his guest, and while he was often skeptical a favorite comment from him was, “I don't buy that.” He was polite and willing to let his guests make all kinds of outrageous claims. Long John, however, also had panelists in the studio with him who were either supportive of the guest or skeptical. An occasional panelist was a magician from New Jersey known as the “Amazing Randi.”

I generally would be asleep an hour or two at most into the program and often would wake up when the closing music came on just before 5:30 AM. My mother also listened and, being something of a night owl, would hear more of the program than me. She got to listen when in the mood on weekdays when I could not stay up because school was the next day.

Both the guests and panelists were almost always interesting, but the panelist who caught the attention of both me and my mother was James Randi. Always billed as “The Amazing Randi” even back then, he was more than just the “Resident Skeptic.”

Randi was very much a polymath, being able to speak on a wide variety of subjects beyond conjuring. And while never revealing every trick a magician uses, he would explain how so-called “spirits” who could sound a horn, write on a slate or move a table in a séance were just an ordinary mortal doing very simple magic tricks. Like most young kids I had a bit of an interest in magic, so I found what Randi had to say always fascinating.

This was reinforced when Randi had a show on a TV station in the New York City area so long ago that I can’t recall the details. It may have been a short weekly show from either WPIX in New York City or WNTA in Newark, New Jersey — far enough away from where I lived in Pennsylvania that it was difficult to receive. I would watch a usually grainy picture on a small black-and-white TV.

Thanks to that little television I now could actually see Randi demonstrate some tricks of psychics — examples like how a psychic tied to a chair can get lose once the room is darkened and move about writing spirit messages on a blackboard and blowing on a horn and then not only return to the chair but actually be tied to it when the lights came back on.

Or the trick where the psychic has people for whom he will do a reading put a piece of paper under his feet and draw a chalk outline around each foot. The room is darkened, “spirits” write on a blackboard, touch the people at the table, and move things in the room, but when the lights come back on, amazingly, the psychic’s feet are still within the chalk outlines, proving that he did not get up and move around the room.

I was always a skeptic when it came to psychic claims, even as a kid, but until Randi I really didn’t know how those self-proclaimed psychics did the things that happened. The few episodes of that long ago show were not only fascinating, I gained even more of an appreciation for Randi.

Over time, I went off to college and then military service and into the world of work, during which I would occasionally catch Randi on a TV show or on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson. I, of course, knew who he was and enjoyed his demonstrations of conjuring tricks, performing psychic readings and “psychic surgery,” and exposing spoon benders and faith healers. Below is a photo of me with Randi as he explains how easy it is to bend a spoon.

Thanks to the Internet I eventually found the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), The Amazing Meeting (TAM), and some of the JREF cruises. Seeing Randi in person was always a delight, particularly on the cruises, where we would all have a chance to chat with him. He was very approachable for someone who was by then something of a celebrity.

I recall, on my first JREF cruise through the Bermuda Triangle, talking with Randi at breakfast and somehow we got on the subject of astronomy. I mentioned that when I was growing up in New Hope, Pennsylvania I had as an astronomy...
mentor Larry Braymer. At the time Braymer was actually in the process of developing the Questar telescope. Randi responded that he had one of the first Questar telescopes, knew Braymer, and proceeded to tell me in detail, about some issues with the small screws that held some parts of the telescope together. He also told me how he and Braymer discussed ways to make improvements. It was never easy to top Randi! I can’t recall any subject that he was unable to discuss. Talking with this truly “Amazing” person was always a delight and always a learning experience.

So some of my memories go back a very long time, and doubtless I have forgotten many. Hopefully these will do for now. I cherish those times talking with someone I initially knew as a kid by listening to a radio show that was on in the middle of the night — a program that I could only listen to on rare occasions. I am grateful for having been able to attend so many TAM events and JREF cruises where I could talk to Randi and fellow critical thinkers.

**Teller:**
Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, “The stage of romance must precede the stage of precision. Learning is launched by emotion.”

The skeptical community into which James Randi came was full of precise and serious scholars — excellent scientists but usually not natural showmen. Randi showed us that skepticism is a real blast.

Randi wrote and performed with stinging joyful, and defiant wit. He gave skepticism all the fun and thrills of a daredevil magic show.

Randi also showed us how advocating science can be wicked fun, rebellious, full of high adventure, spy-movie derring-do, and laughs. In short, Randi gave us romance.

**Leonard Tramiel:**
I fondly recall when James Randi came to San Francisco, California in 2012 to give a talk about Houdini at the Jewish Contemporary Museum. Like all of the talks I would see him deliver, this one was engaging, informative, and performed without apparent effort. The question-and-answer portion afterwards was a masterpiece of audience engagement. Again, no surprise for someone that was truly deserving of the adjective “genius.” Randi was a master performer and a brilliant observer of humanity.

The thing that comes first to mind when I think of Randi, however, was his kindness. He always made you feel like you mattered, that he was truly interested in you, and that he would, apparently at least, move mountains to help you. In conversation with him and watching his conversations with others that always struck me. Here was a person of worldwide fame, a world-class talent in several fields, a truly exceptional intellect, yet he was always eager and appreciative to learn from others. He was delighted to learn of the ways the person talking to him had added to the world we shared.

Randi also had a delightful sense of humor. After that San Francisco talk a group went to a nearby bar to socialize. After some lighthearted comments about who would pay the bill, I joked with the waitstaff by pointing at my beard and making the self-deprecating comment, “Never trust a man with a beard.” Randi looked at me with the barest hint of a smile, raised one of his magnificent eyebrows, and said, “You call that a beard?”

**James Underdown:**
If you’re reading this, you probably already know who James Randi was. To call him one of the fathers of modern skepticism is no exaggeration. Randi’s life was largely a public one, and information about it can be found from many sources. I thought the New York Times obit by Margalit Fox was done well.

I knew Randi a bit, spoke at some of his “Amazing Meeting” (TAM) conferences, and over the years made note of how he went about disabusing the world of various wacky beliefs and exposing those who deceive us. But Randi looms large in my life because of three moments that very few people know about.

The first was in 2000 when I founded the Independent Investigations Group, now the Center for Inquiry Investigations Group (CFIIG). Here we were on our own, a small group of skeptics in Los Angeles, California, who sought to investigate and test paranormal and extraordinary claims. Yes, we had smart, experienced volunteers, many of whom had an extensive knowledge of skepticism’s dealings with wild stories, but the world is full of deception. The fact that Randi and CFI investigator Joe Nickell were a phone call away made our new endeavor seem safer somehow.

We began looking into the paranormal from a scientific point of view and within months, Randi and his James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) sent us someone who was trying to win their $1 Million Dollar Challenge, a prize JREF offered to anyone who could prove paranormal ability under proper test conditions. So we tested Sparky “The Wonder Dog” for psychic ability, and although the dog failed, IIG was off to the races and soon began offering our own $50,000 prize in the vein of the Million Dollar Challenge.

The second moment was in 2007 when Randi called and left a message after he’d heard that IIG had lost its (then) $50,000 Challenge to a psychic named Nigel Britman. We had publicly tested Britman the day before on the stage of CFI West’s Steve Allen Theater, and Britman had blown the doors off our test of his psychic ability to predict Zener cards. His phenomenal score well-exceeded 1,000,000 to 1 odds, putting many in our skeptical audience into a near frenzy, and sent one person out the door to his computer to post to the world what
had happened. That post eventually made it to Randi. That poster should have stayed for the reveal.

We/IIG had faked the whole thing! Britman was actually magician Howard Posner, who we convinced to cheat using multiple methods we provided. We then demonstrated the cheats to the very relieved attendees. Unaware of the full story, Randi left the following message on my voicemail the next day:

Hello Jim, this is James Randi. It’s ten minutes of 12:00 here which is three hours different from where you are. I’m just calling about something that Shermer forwarded to me about this $50,000 payout to this psychic… I find that hard to believe, but I’d like to get the poop on it if you would be so kind. I’m at 954-XXX-XXXX. Thank you Jim. Bye.

When we spoke, Randi found the whole affair amusing and was glad to hear we had not been conned out of our money. I always admired that he stayed unflappable — and ever skeptical — throughout what may have been a disaster for skepticism.

The third big Randi moment and probably the most significant in that it mattered most to Randi himself. It has a bit of backstory…

In 1991, alleged psychic spoonbender Uri Geller sued Randi and CSICOP (the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, now CSI) over comments Randi had made about Uri. Understand that Randi was an original member of CSICOP, which had been publishing Skeptical Inquirer (SI) magazine since the 1970s. The case was eventually resolved in Randi’s and CSICOP’s favor, but the handling of it led to a rift between Randi and Paul Kurtz, who oversaw CSICOP. Randi left the organization and eventually went on to form JREF.

Cut to TAM 6 in Las Vegas in June of 2008. IIG was planning its 2nd Annual IIG Awards the week after TAM in Los Angeles at CFI West. The ceremony would feature Julia Sweeney and Paul Provenza, and the presenting of the IIG Lifetime Achievement Award to Randi. (The 1st IIG Awards were posthumously to Harry Houdini and Carl Sagan.)

At TAM I was given a couple of minutes on stage to announce to the large audience that Randi had won this award. To my surprise, Randi stopped me before I could leave the stage. With me next to him, he spoke very poignantly about how it was time to bury the hatchet between him and CSICOP. The schism between the two had been regrettable and both parties wished to be friendly again. This reconciliation ultimately led to Randi returning as a CSI Fellow and appearing at numerous CFI events and conferences both before and after TAMs had ceased.

I am grateful that the CFIIG and I had a hand in healing an old wound between colleagues in the war against mis-information. And I am grateful for having known James “The Amazing” Randi.

Celestia Ward:
The old saying goes, “Never meet your heroes because you’ll surely be disappointed.” I can honestly say that I know many people who viewed the Amazing Randi as their hero, and I cannot think of a single one who felt disappointed after meeting him.

I first met Randi at one of the many TAMs held in Las Vegas, and then the last few times I saw him was at CSICon, long after he’d given up steering the ship and was content to sit back (often in his wheelchair, those last few years) and hold court, shaking hands and posing for photos, patiently smiling as people gushed at how his work had changed their lives. He said that it was so rewarding to hear the gratitude and see skeptics come together and fight the good fight as a community. Much of Randi’s early work had been as a lone wolf of skepticism, but it turned out he was a pretty amazing pack leader too.

At a DragonCon dinner several years ago, Margaret Downey kindly steered me toward a seat next to the man himself, and he looked over at me with a mischievous grin and held out a fork, asking “Would you like to see a magic trick, young lady?” Yes, yes, I certainly did.

Randi was instrumental in bringing skeptics together, and for me he also did so in a very roundabout, unexpected way. I had created a little caricature sculpture of him for a 2014 convention of the International Society of Caricature Artists. The sculpture attracted the attention of Ben Radford, who was attending the event as a spectator.

When Radford walked up to my display to get a close look at the Randi sculpture I said, “Hi, do you know who James Randi is?”

To my surprise Radford answered, “Why, yes. He’s a friend of mine!”

Many conversations later, Radford and I now helm a skeptics podcast, Squaring the Strange. I count him among my circle of best friends.

Later that year, I donated the finished item to a fundraiser for Skeptic’s Guide to the Universe (a weekly 80-minute podcast hosted by Dr. Steven Novella, along with a very impressive panel of skeptics). Australian skeptic Richard Saunders auctioned it for around $700. Randi had autographed it, which likely upped its value by at least $698.

In later years I was fortunate enough to have a few Skype calls with Randi, as I offered some editorial help in organizing a project. During that first call he proudly held up a scrapbook in which he had clipped and saved countless little drawings and cartoons of him sent by fans over the years. And yes, I recognized the work of a couple of artists I knew. He pointed out what he liked about various ones, and it was clearly not vanity that made him collect and preserve these things. Vain people rarely enjoy, let alone collect, caricatures. No, he appreciated the artistic flair that went into them and was humbled to have inspired so many. I shall be forever grateful that I was able to meet my hero.
Freethought Society Four-Month Zoom Calendar

To participate in the online Zoom events listed below, you must be a member of the Freethought Society Meetup group. Join the Freethought Society (FS) Meetup group at: www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/

Each event will have a Zoom URL link listed in the description of the event.

By joining the meeting, you consent to be recorded and agree to abide by the FS Anti-Harassment and Code of Conduct Policy.

January 23
The Freethought Society (FS) is pleased to host author Katherine Stewart on Saturday, January 23, 2021 via Zoom. The event starts with a pre-event chat session at 11:45 AM PST/2:45 PM EST. The formal presentation begins at Noon PST/3:00 PM EST.

Stewart’s presentation is entitled “The Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism.”

For too long the religious right has masqueraded as a social movement preoccupied with cultural issues such as abortion and anti-LGBT equality. Stewart reveals a disturbing truth: this is a political movement that seeks to gain power and impose its vision on all of society. America’s religious nationalists aren’t just fighting a culture war, they are waging a political war on the norms and institutions of American democracy. By pulling back the curtain on the movement’s inner workings and leading personalities, Stewart explains how Religious Nationalism works — and how to fight back.

After a break, plan to stay for a post-event happy hour/social.

Stewart is an American journalist and author who often writes about issues related to the separation of church and state. Her books include The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children and The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to obtain the Zoom link to participate in this event.

February 27
FS is pleased to host filmmaker Jeremiah Camara on Saturday, February 27, 2021.

The Zoom event starts with a pre-event chat session at 11:45 AM PST/2:45 PM EST. The formal presentation begins at Noon PST/3:00 PM EST.

Camara’s speech title is “What Does He Do?” His presentation will be discussing the uselessness of religious belief in modern times and how gods perform in times of crisis.

Camara is the director and producer of the documentary film Contradiction: A Question of Faith, which examines the saturation of churches in African American communities coexisting with poverty and powerlessness. After a break, plan to stay for a post-event happy hour/social.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to obtain the Zoom link to participate in this event.

March 13
FS is pleased to host standup comedian and author Leighann Lord on Saturday, March 13, 2021. The Zoom event starts with a pre-event chat session at 11:45 AM PST/2:45 PM EST. The formal presentation begins at Noon PST/3:00 PM EST.

The title of Lord’s presentation is “I’m not funny. What I am is Brave!” In an interview style format, she will be talking about her career as a professional standup comedian who happens to be a secularist and a skeptic. After the interview session, Lord will be taking questions. After a break, plan to stay for a post-event happy hour/social.

Lord was the New York City face of the African Americans for Humanism outreach campaign sponsored by the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and its “Millions Living Happily Without Religion” campaign. Lord is a former co-host of the Emmy-nominated StarTalk with Neil de Grasse Tyson and has been the emcee for several Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CFI’s skeptic arm) conferences. She is the author of Dict Jokes and Real Women Do It Standing Up.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to obtain the Zoom link to participate in this event.

April 24
FS is pleased to host Bob Nygaard as a Zoom speaker on Saturday, April 24, 2021. The event starts with a pre-event chat session at 11:45 AM PST/2:45 PM EST. The formal presentation begins at Noon PST/3:00 PM EST. His speech is entitled “Combating Fortunetelling Fraud.” He will tell us how he builds criminal cases against so-called “psychics” who commit fortunetelling fraud. All of Nygaard’s efforts protect society and he has successfully made victims whole again.

Nygaard is a retired New York police officer turned private investigator. Nygaard has recovered millions of dollars for fraud victims around the world. His many television appearances include ABCs 20/20, the syndicated Crime Watch Daily, and Nancy Grace — just to name a few. After a break, plan to stay for a post-event happy hour/social.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to obtain the Zoom link to participate in this event.
The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. We assist nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas.

FS publishes The Freethought Society News every other month. The publication 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 locations across the United States via Zoom or in-person if possible. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from 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 would like to:

( ) become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):

$30 Individual Supporter $40 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 $50 $55 $_____other (per month)

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


Name: _________________________________________________________________________________________________

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

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

Name: ___________________________Email: ___________________________

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366 or scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of FS often want to do more than just make a financial contribution. Listed below are committees designed to fulfill the mission, goals, and vision of FS. Volunteers are needed in all committees listed. Please contact FS to volunteer at volunteers@FtSociety.org.

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee
(nontheism explained in classroom settings)

Anti-Discrimination Support Network
(assist Secular Coalition for America gathering reports)

Community Outreach
(locater 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 in emergency situations)

Jump into the Jean Pool
(collection of jeans for the homeless)

Meetup Committee
(social events and improving online communications)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators
(schedule and manage speakers and venues)

Secular Celebrations
(develop, organize, and implement new nontheist celebrations)

Speakers Bureau
(provide FS a resume, photo and speech subjects/titles)

Special Events
(coordinate unique events of interest to nontheists)

Sole Searching
(collection of athletic shoes for donation to the homeless)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee
(assist with assemblies, city proclamations, and work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee
(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the Winter symbol concept nationwide)