2021 Tree of Knowledge Zoom Event

Each year since 2010, the Freethought Society (FS) and the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) co-host an event dedicated to decorating a Tree of Knowledge for public display. The Tree of Knowledge is proudly displayed in the foyer of the PES building located in Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The public is invited to see the Tree of Knowledge beginning the first week of December through the beginning of January. Many people visit the lobby during this time and compliments are frequent. For the last two years, however, the in-person decorating event has been canceled due to the Covid pandemic.

On Sunday, December 5, 2021, the traditional decorating of The Tree of Knowledge was conducted on Zoom. Margaret Downey represented FS and placed the ornaments on the Tree of Knowledge at her home office location. Hugh Taft-Morales represented PES.

Author Phil Zuckerman was the special guest. Zuckerman is the author of several books, including What It Means to be Moral, The Nonreligious, Living the Secular Life, Faith No More, and Society Without God. He is an Associate Dean and Professor of Sociology at Pitzer College. He is also the founding chair of the nation’s first Secular Studies Program. Zuckerman is also the Executive Director of Humanist Global Charity.

Zuckerman’s presentation was fascinating. He talked about the advantages of a secular community and so much more. Zuckerman also answered questions and provided hard evidence and data showing that religion does more harm to society than good. Zuckerman said,

“ I knew that the societies on planet Earth that have the lowest rates of belief in God, the lowest rates of church attendance, the lowest rates in belief in Heaven or Hell, the lowest rates in belief in Jesus’ super magic and all that — among democracies, because you have to set aside dictatorships for a whole host of obvious reasons — I knew that those societies that had the lowest rates of religiosity actually were the most humane, safe, prosperous, and peaceful.”

The Zoom event started with a fifteen-minute musical performance by two-time Emmy-nominated composer, songwriter, and singer Gary Stockdale. He sang Tom Lehrer’s hilarious song Hanukkah in Santa Monica, I Heart (an original Stockdale and Spencer Green creation), Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer, and Celebrate Me Home. Stockdale also provided us with the song Christmastime is Here during the break, and the closing song, John Lennon’s Imagine.

In advance of the event, a request was made for a scan of the front cover of the favorite books of registered attendees. As a result, Downey created a total of 20 new ornaments and added books written by John Loftus, Roy Speckhardt, Staks Rosch, Lyle L. Simpson and Zuckerman to the FS Recommended Reading List. As each new and old book cover ornament was added to The Tree of Knowledge, attendees told stories about why the book was recommended and what they learned from it. The FS Recommended Reading List can be viewed at: https://bit.ly/FtSocietyRecommendedBooks

We were pleased to have Loftus in the audience. He provided insights into how and why he was moved to write twelve books on the subject of God belief, organized religion and biblical analysis.

Sculptor Zenos Frudakis shared details about his “Knowledge is Power ”sculpture. He talked about the importance of reading and how he incorporates freethought and humanism into his work. See his work at: www.zenosfrudakis.com

The 2021 Tree of Knowledge event was recorded and can be viewed at: https://youtu.be/Zb01in-Yswc
Photos from the 2021 Tree of Knowledge Event

Hugh Taft-Morales is pictured above in the lower middle Zoom box. Morales was a co-host, representing the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) during the event. PES was a cosponsor of the 2022 Tree of Knowledge event. Morales is the Leader of PES.

Pictured below is Margaret Downey, president of FS. She created The Tree of Knowledge. FS sells ornaments through the website: https://bit.ly/ToKOrnaments

The Freethought Society (FS) highly recommends Zuckerman’s books, which can be found listed on the FS Tree of Knowledge Ornaments List:


Zuckerman’s speech was a big hit with viewers and FS was pleased to host him.

Pictured above is Zoom Technician and co-host Michael Steven Martin. Martin resides in Southern California and is a supporter of FS.

During the Zoom sessions, Martin runs PowerPoint presentations for speakers, coordinates the Q & A, and monitors the attendance. His Zoom technical skills are appreciated, as is his charming personality.
The 2021 Celebration of HumanLight

The 2021 HumanLight event took place on December 18th and marked its 20th anniversary. HumanLight 2021 was cosponsored by the following groups:

American Ethical Union  
American Humanist Association  
Baltimore Coalition of Reason  
Black Nonbelievers  
Foundation Beyond Belief  

Freedom From Religion Foundation  
Freethought Society  
New Jersey Humanist Network  
Secular Coalition for America  
Washington Area Secular Humanists

Hank Pellissier, director for Humanist Global Charity (HGC), was the first speaker for the program. He talked about what the organization does and how others could help fulfill HGC’s mission.

Patrick Colucci spoke about the history of HumanLight. The presentation included a video and acknowledgment of HumanLight original supporters, including Paul Kurtz, Roy Speckhardt, Fred Edwords, and Rabbi Sherwin Wine.

Digital artist Emily Wilson showed creative DIY decorations based on the HumanLight theme.

To see a recording of the 2021 event, visit: https://youtu.be/LZwbuqzzXVE For additional information about HumanLight see: https://www.facebook.com/groups/211184232752 Below are photos of other participants.

Danile Rogiérs, pictured left, was the Master of Ceremonies. He is an artist, activist, and director of Black Nonbelievers Washington, DC. Rogiérs was also the featured performer of the jazz-style rendition of John Lennon’s Imagine.

Pictured right is Victoria Noquez who performed close up magic using everyday objects such as cards, cups, and ropes. She is a professor of mathematics. She has been featured in The Close Up Gallery at The World Famous Magic Castle, and has been a magician member of The Academy of Magical Arts for over a decade.

Young authors Bailey Harris (seated right) and Elle Harris are pictured conducting the HumanLight candle lighting ceremony.

Books written by the Harris ladies are:

Wonderful Earth  
Elle The Humanist  

My Name is Stardust  
Stardust Explores Earth’s Wonders

All of the above mentioned books are available through Amazon. When designating “The Freethought Society” as your chosen beneficiary of the AmazonSmiles benefits program, it automatically increases the organization’s funds, at no cost to you.

Pictured left is Margaret Downey. She recited prose written by Daily Messenger entitled On the Meaning of HumanLight. She added two Humanist book cover ornaments to the 2021 Tree of Knowledge:

Fully Human Fully Alive by Lyle L. Simpson  
Justice Centered Humanism by Roy Speckhardt

As with the Harris books mentioned above, these books are available through the AmazonSmiles program. Please designate the Freethought Society as your chosen benefits program beneficiary.
Purpose of Human Existence

by Herb Silverman

The Hindu Temple in Charleston, South Carolina tries to put on an annual Interfaith event, where they invite people from different faiths (in my case different values) to participate and speak on specific topics. The topic at the January 16, 2022 event was to be “The Purpose of Human Existence.”

Unfortunately, the event was canceled because of new Covid restrictions. Since I had prepared my talk, I thought subscribers of The Freethought Society News might like to read it. Also, I am interested in hearing about your life purpose(s), too. Should you want to share, my email address is: SilbermanH@cofc.edu

Imagine me standing in the Hindu Temple delivering the following:

I’ve been asked to tell you my ideas, as an atheist and secular humanist, about the purpose of human existence. Let’s start by defining what we mean by “purpose.” The primary purpose of every living thing, from bacteria, viruses, and plants to humans like us, is to replicate so the species will survive. Unfortunately, we’ve seen this replication with the Covid virus. You can read evidence for this purpose in books on evolution, including The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins.

There is no other universal purpose of human existence. And the more we learn about our natural world, the less significant humans seem to be in it. Charles Darwin showed that we are all animals in a long evolutionary line. But purpose for humans is about more than mere replication and survival. It’s about what we believe we should do in the brief time we’re alive. And most people have more than one purpose. I believe we all need to find individual purposes in our lives. Purpose involves having goals and activities that give us direction and meaning, and help us engage in productive ways.

For example, my wife Sharon Fratepiertro has a T-shirt that states: “Be Good, Do Good.” She says that’s her purpose, but how does she or any of us know what “good” is?

I don’t believe in a supernatural being who supposedly created humans and inspired some of them to write rules about being good in so-called holy books like the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, or the Quran. I do think part of our purpose in life should include making good moral decisions. For some conservative religions, morality is more about belief than behavior, and they view this life as a preparation for an imagined afterlife. If loving and worshipping a god inspires a person to treat others with loving kindness, that’s great. Unfortunately, love of a god all too often makes some people less loving of those who don’t believe and worship as they do. And if this life is just a religious test to get into heaven and avoid hell, what kind of morality is that?

Some religious morality is certainly worth keeping, like love your neighbor, don’t murder, steal, or lie. But that’s necessary for the survival of any culture, with or without religion. Regrettably, some religions have justified slavery, second-class status for women, anti-Semitism, executing blasphemers and homosexuals, burning witches and heretics, and genocides, to list just a few things.

So how do atheists and secular humanists like me make moral decisions, and decide on our purposes? I believe we should be guided by the expected consequences of our actions affecting other people and our planet. We should look at what has withstood the test of time in creating a livable society. We need ongoing discussions about morality as we continue to revise and refine our views about how best to maximize happiness, minimize suffering, and promote human good.

Looking for happiness is probably a major purpose in almost everybody’s life. Robert Ingersoll, known as “The Great Agnostic,” said: “Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.” And I like the life purpose expressed by atheist mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell: “The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.”

I’ve had several purposes in life that have changed over the years. As a child, my purpose was to be educated and socialized as a moral member of society. As an adult, my purpose was to teach mathematics, do mathematics research, and pass on knowledge to future generations. Now, at age 79, my purpose is to write a blog on secular humanism, be a good husband and citizen, and do what I can to remain healthy for as long as possible.

I don’t believe we will have an afterlife. We have one life to live, and one chance to do something meaningful with it. We can all contribute something useful. Sometimes our choices and their repercussions live longer than we do, impacting on family, friends, people we don’t know, and even future generations. Immortality for atheists includes the good works and offspring that live long after we have disintegrated.

Here’s something we all need to consider. Life is a sexually transmitted disease with 100% mortality rate. Yes, we are all going to die someday. As for me, I’ve accepted a purpose for my death. When I die, I’m going to medical school, just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use my body parts to their fullest while I’m alive, but I assume others will make good use of them when I’m dead. I also encourage all of you to make some “future” plans.

Finally, I would like to thank the organizers at this Hindu Temple for being one of the few houses of worship that would tolerate a “sermon” from me. I must confess (which I’m told is best calling and became a professor, so I could profess — if the god thing got in the way. That's why I chose the next Temple for being one of the few houses of worship that would tolerate a “sermon” from me. I must confess (which I’m told is best calling and became a professor, so I could profess — if the god thing got in the way. That’s why I chose the next purpose for my death. When I die, I’m going to medical school, just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use my body parts to their fullest while I’m alive, but I assume others will make good use of them when I’m dead. I also encourage all of you to make some “future” plans.

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Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society’s ezine, The Freethought Society News.

Silverman is the author of two books, Candidate Without a Prayer and An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land. Both of these books are available through Amazon.
American naturalist and nature essayist John Burroughs said:

“If there is one thing certain in the history of mankind, it is that sects do outgrow their creeds and are compelled to pull down and build larger or else be terribly pinched for room.”

Burroughs makes this observation in a discussion of a “hint” from Benjamin Franklin (The Light of Day). Franklin had described a religious group known as Dunkers who refused to write down their confession of faith because, “From time to time [God] has been pleased to afford us further light.”

In the Dunkers’ understanding, the true and guiding principles of faith grow as they live their faith. Franklin thought this was remarkable, noting that this group was “perhaps a single instance in the history of [humankind]” as opposed to all other religious groups who are sure they and no others hold exclusive title to the fenced property they call eternal, immutable truth.

An open-air walk with Burroughs is not a well-ordered, programmed hike in order to be a strict scientist or a “spiritual seeker.” The naturalistic philosopher wants to lead us “home” because we’re already there, already here, and heaven too. “The Cosmos knows no God — it is super deum [above god]” (The Light of Day). In this bright and expansive vision we can let go of God and all god-language, all religion, without fear, because we belong to the universe, it is our home, our heaven.

Lest one should quickly judge this “light” for being little more than a romantic glow or New Age blissful/wishful thinking, consider the balanced reasoning Burroughs packs into the discussion. His Nature God was no warm and embracing deity to comfort and coddle. In accepting the universe as he saw it, Burroughs was also accepting the realities of what some call “evil.” This man lived through the Civil War and World War One! There is conflict, disease as well as disaster, suffering and death, yet this is not “evil”—not cruelty or judgment, or a bumbling impotent Potentate at work. The struggles of existence are, as Charles Darwin and other scientific minds have observed, what have made us and continue to make us the wonderfully complex creatures we are. We “accept” the vicissitudes of life but we still question, wrestle and seek wider, down-to-earth answers as well as wiser solutions to make the world a better place to live.

For many more years than I care to count, I repeated the Apostles’ Creed every Sunday in church. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. . .” and so on. This very old statement of faith and catalogue of beliefs is the classic style of religion’s power. Like The Lord’s Prayer, the words of the creeds began to stick in my throat. Even as a minister, I reached a point where I simply couldn’t repeat them one more time. The words were empty, had no meaning, no life.

Burroughs has offered us a new way to appreciate living creeds. He saw that “a love of nature has high religious value.” The following lines from Accepting the Universe offer the closest thing to a Nature Creed that I have read:

“It has made [those who love Nature] contented and at home wherever they are in nature – in the house not made with hands.

This house is their church, and the rocks and the hills are the altars, and the creed is written in the leaves of the trees and in the flowers of the field and in the sands of the shore.

A new creed every day and new preachers, and holy days all the week through.

Every walk to the woods is a religious rite, every bath in the stream is a saving ordinance. Communion service is at all hours, and the bread and wine are from the heart and marrow of Mother Earth.

There are no heretics in Nature’s church; all are believers, all are communicants.”

This portion of one of my favorite passages in all of Burroughs’ work, Accepting the Universe, brilliantly presents what he calls “the faith of a naturalist.” As I see it, this is the only faith or creed relevant for the modern world. It may be the only sense of “spirituality” practical for a grown-up humanity and critical for our survival — our health and Nature’s. And, in truth, our health is inextricably linked to all of Nature. Here again the wisdom of the naturalist reminds us:

“We do not realize that we are a part of Nature till we begin to think about it.

Our lives proceed as if we were two – [Humanity] and Nature. . . but the two are one; there is only Nature.”

As Burroughs observed in one of his own moments of scientific/spiritual understanding, “We are rooted to the air through our lungs and to the soil through our stomachs. We are walking trees and floating plants. The soil...is the grist out of which our bread of life is made” (Leaf and Tendril).

“I am the Bread of Life,” the ancient text says, but instead of consuming the bread to sustain our bodies, to become healthier human beings who bake our own bread, we spiritualize and super-naturalize until the actual Life dies — the opportunity is lost. Bread of Life, as Burroughs noted, is intricately and intrinsically woven with the soil, as is the air we breathe into our branching lungs.

In The Breath of Life Burroughs looks closely at the stuff of life, finding words to express an almost mystical devotion. Using poetic, imaginative language, he says the molecules and atoms of our own bodies “take hold of hands and perform their mystic dances in the inner
own stepping out into the light of day, to accept the parish of
innovative congregation. He deserves to be honored by our
Burroughs and his simple yet radical views might be
cathedrals.

This is our vitality, what makes all life a livelihood. This
literally bakes our bread and gives us breath. One is reminded
of Emerson’s image for cooking up reform as he wrote in Journals (July 1839):

“The past has baked my loaf,
and in the strength of its bread
I break up the old oven.”

Building a Secular House with Burroughs

A religion of Nature has many rest stops along its winding
trails. The vista points are not for “settled conclusions,”
however. No one builds a dwelling at a vista point or rest stop.
The same holds true for a new humanistic community. There
are always more viewpoints, always new truths to see or hear.
As Burroughs points out in The Light of Day, “Every person
builds or tries to build a house of truth of some sort. . . but how
foolish to expect us all to build alike or go to the same quarry
for our material. . .”

If we are already home, why build a house, let alone an
organization, a community, a tribe? I suspect the answer to
this question could have vast repercussions across the round
globe. How many dwellings are forced upon the earth without
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As Minnesota’s youngest DJ, he survived
an on-air assault. As the owner of multiple
talent agencies, he survived everything
the cutthroat music industry threw at him.
As a wildlife adventurer, he survived a
fierce hippo attack. But can he survive his
toughest test—an over-the-top,
evangelical father, who prayed aloud in
restaurants, faith-healed his old Toyota,
and believed demons possessed his
Masonic Lodge watch? Find out in the
hilarious new memoir from multi-award-
winning author Marty Essen!

Available worldwide in paperback, e-book, and audiobook
formats.

Chris Highland is a teacher and
writer. A former minister and
chaplain in the San Francisco Bay
Area, Highland is now a
freethinking Humanist celebrant.
He is the author of many books,
including From Faith to
Freethought, A Secular Gospel,
and Meditations of John
Burroughs. He writes the weekly
“Highland Views” column for the
Asheville Citizen-Times (a USA
Today affiliate). Highland and his
wife live in Asheville, North Carolina. His website
www.chighland.com, is entitled “Friendly Freethinker.” This
two-part essay is adapted from Life After Faith, 2010.

Freethought Society
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Complimentary advertisement space is available in The Freethought Society News ezine to supporters and friends of the Freethought Society, pending space availability and editors’ approval.

Submit high-resolution PDF files with embedded fonts.

Please make sure all files are RGB before submitting a PDF or JPEG files. Graphics must be 300 dpi or higher. Send to:

ezine@FtSociety.org

HITS, HEATHENS, AND HIPPOS

Stories from an Agent, Activist, and Adventurer

MARTY ESSEN

MartyEssen.com
The Freethought Society (FS) and the American Ethical Union are pleased to host Chetan Ahimsa via Zoom on Thursday, March 10, 2022 at 6:45 PM EST/3:45 PM PST. Ahimsa is an actor in Karnataka, India and a political/social activist.

Ahimsa is known for his efforts protesting against the Indian caste system. In June 2021, Ahimsa was arrested by Basavanagudi police who were following a complaint from the president of a little-known organization called “Yuva Vipra Vedike.” Read more at: https://bit.ly/3IlfJ1P

Ahimsa fights for equality, justice, rationality, and non-violence. He will tell us what motivates him to be a social activist.

Ahimsa credits his mother, Mangala Kumar, and his father, Amar Kumar (both doctors), for providing him with the willpower to continue his important activism work, but as a young adult Ahimsa studied the writings of Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy.

Revered as “Periyar,” Ramasamy was an Indian social activist and politician who started the Self-Respect Movement called Dravidar Kazhagam. He is known as the Father of the Dravidian, a social movement that advocates to eradicate the ills of the existing caste system including untouchability. Ahimsa will talk about Periyar’s importance in India’s rational thinking movement, the acceptance of atheism, and to himself personally. Register for this Zoom event at: https://bit.ly/chetan-ahimsa

The title of Andrews’ presentation is “I Sold My Soul on Twitter.” He will take a candid look at how tribalized, and often cruel, we can become — especially in the era of Covid and social media’s isolating algorithms. When is outrage appropriate, and when are we losing our way in a haze of unnecessary shouting, labeling, calling out, and condemning? Join Andrews for a journey toward re-humanizing ourselves and others in this often crazy world. The Zoom registration link is: https://bit.ly/SethAndrews

FS would like to host an in-person Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center on Friday, May 13, 2022. Covid may still be an issue, however. We are requesting input from readers of The Freethought Society News. We welcome answers to the following questions listed below:

If you attended the 2021 Zoom Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center evening, was it fun and educational? The event can be viewed at the below link, if you missed it and would like to weigh in now:

https://youtu.be/hqKc8lgkUyI

Would you attend a Zoom event if FS hosted a different speaker and conducted activities that were created specifically for the 2022 observance of Friday the 13th in May?

Would you be willing to volunteer to help with a Zoom event?

Do you have any ideas for a Zoom Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center program?

If an in-person event is planned would readers be interested in a dinner, dance party, or speaker meeting?

A Friday, May 13th event could take place in either Southern California or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Which location would you prefer?

Would you be willing to volunteer to help with an in-person event?

Do you have any musical or speaking skills that would fit into a live or Zoom Friday the 13th anti-superstitition theme?

Send your answer to: margaret@FtSociety.org

Graphic at right created by Ross Blocher
The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. We 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 all 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 when possible. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from supporters. Donations may be sent using this form or via the FS website ([https://www.paypal.com/us/fundraiser/charity/1554941](https://www.paypal.com/us/fundraiser/charity/1554941)). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). All donations, large and small, are helpful and appreciated.

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 your bank or through PayPal in the amount of (circle one): $5 $10 $15 $20 $25 $30 $35 $40 $45 $50 $_____other (per month)

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

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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.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee</th>
<th>Meetup Committee</th>
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<tr>
<td>(nontheism explained in classroom settings)</td>
<td>(planning events)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Anti-Discrimination Support Network</th>
<th>Monthly Meeting Coordinators</th>
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<tr>
<td>(assist Secular Coalition for America gathering reports)</td>
<td>(schedule, manage speakers and venues)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Community Outreach</th>
<th>Secular Celebrations</th>
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<tr>
<td>(locate tabling opportunities)</td>
<td>(develop, organize, and implement new nontheist celebrations)</td>
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<th>Diversity Outreach Committee</th>
<th>Speakers Bureau</th>
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<td>(brainstorming about and developing programs to appeal to minorities)</td>
<td>(provide FS a resume, photo, and speech subjects/titles)</td>
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<th>Free Speech Zone Committee</th>
<th>Special Events</th>
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<tr>
<td>(research and implement displays in public venues)</td>
<td>(coordinate unique events of interest to nontheists)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Helping Hands</th>
<th>Sole Searching</th>
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<tr>
<td>(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)</td>
<td>(collection of athletic shoes for donations)</td>
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<th>Jump into the Jean Pool</th>
<th>Thomas Paine Memorial Committee</th>
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<td>(collection of jeans for donations)</td>
<td>(work on themed events)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Literature Placement for Prisoners</th>
<th>Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee</th>
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<tr>
<td>(providing literature to prison libraries)</td>
<td>(promote and support the concept nationwide)</td>
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