The Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum Rededication Event

On Saturday, August 12, 2023 the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum was rededicated to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Museum’s reopening under the auspices of the Center For Inquiry (CFI). The year 2023 actually marks the Museum’s fourth reopening. The first opening of the Museum took place in the 1920s. The second opening took place in the 1950s. The third reopening took place in 1988. Each time the Museum closed, related collections were dispersed. Under CFI’s leadership, the Museum recovered items, repaired the house, and added many collectible items related to the time period and the life of Ingersoll.

The Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum is the only one in the United States dedicated to the Freethought movement. It is also the place to find the largest collection of speeches by and artifacts related to the life of Robert Green Ingersoll, who is best known as “The Great Agnostic.” Most of Ingersoll’s orations were published and they are also on display in the Museum. The address of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum is:

Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum
61 Main Street, Dresden, NY 14441

The Museum is located on the west shore of Seneca Lake in the heart of New York’s Finger Lakes area. The beautiful location and surrounding areas make it a perfect place to vacation. More information about the historic connection of the Freethought movement in Finger Lakes, New York can be found at the following website: https://freethought-trail.org/

The celebration began with a free Museum tour that featured new and expanded displays. A complimentary sit-down lunch was provided by CFI and a new gazebo was dedicated to longtime Museum director and former editor of CFI’s Free Inquiry magazine Tom Flynn.

Freethought Society founder and president Margaret Downey unveiled a surprise gift of a custom-made cornhole game to the Museum. The game was also dedicated to the memory of Flynn. The dedication speech is reprinted in the following pages.

Downey is proud to have donated various items to the Museum, including an antique dresser and an original studio photograph of The Great Agnostic. Ingersoll candles created by Downey are being sold in the Museum gift shop.

Downey also spoke about the connection of Thomas Paine and Ingersoll, pointing out their influence on freedom of thought. Her presentation can be read in the following pages.

Seth Andrews was the keynote speaker. He is an award-winning podcaster and author. Andrews frequently quotes Ingersoll, and his career as “The Thinking Atheist” has been as exemplary as Ingersoll’s legacy. His speech can be read beginning on page two.

Tim Madigan, philosopher, author and former editor of the CFI's Free Inquiry magazine, also spoke and his presentation can be read here as well.

Robyn Blumner, CFI's executive director and the executive director of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, talked about current issues and how Ingersoll’s words are still relevant today. Robyn said, “Ingersoll would be astounded by the progress made in the intervening century and a half.” She also said that “Ingersoll would undoubtedly be delighted to know that ideas he posited — such as universal secular education, equality for women and racial minorities, and strict church-state separation, that were so heterodox and radical in his day — were now considered an intrinsic part of American society.”

The estimated attendance was almost 100 people who were not deterred by the late afternoon rain shower. The next big celebratory event at the Museum will not take place for another five years. Please plan to visit before the 35-year anniversary event takes place.
Today we remember and honor one of the greatest minds of the last several centuries; thoughtful, wildly intelligent, insightful, impactful, and remarkable. So you can imagine my surprise when the organizers of the 30th Anniversary of the Reopening of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum called me to speak as keynote.

Robert Green Ingersoll was a brilliant man. I’m an ex-Christian who took thirty years to figure out that Bible donkeys couldn’t speak Hebrew. But maybe my invitation makes sense. I’m a storyteller telling the story of his journey as it impacted my own. One hundred and eight years after his death he still became an encourager in my own journey.

Ingersoll’s words gave me food for thought, courage, and hope at a crossroads in my life. I was thirty-seven years old and finally holding my faith to the fires. The exit from Christianity was often scary and stressful. My gut was in knots. I feared losing my family, my friends, my job, my identity.

Fortunately, along the way, my Google searches about un-religion (if that’s even a word) brought me to the writings of Ingersoll, and my eyes locked onto them. He was deep, but he didn’t write in the typical, snobby, avant PhD-speak that academics often use to make the commoners feel stupid.

Ingersoll wasn’t a shepherd barking at sheep. His words beckoned me as if I were a fellow traveler, allowing me to admire and learn but always speaking to me as an equal. That was his gift — along with being perhaps the most quotable writer of the last 300 years.

Ingersoll’s words were so influential that for over a decade I’ll sometimes include a favorite Ingersoll quote over my own signature when I sign books at conventions. In my activism, it has become a creed: from his famous 1885 lecture “Orthodoxy” Ingersoll said, “The more false we destroy, the more room there will be for the true.”

With so many celebrated untruths circulating in society today, I wonder how Ingersoll would comment in modern times. The conspiracies. The inequities. The cruelties. The waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

Finally, objectively reading the Bible gave me plenty of opportunities for doubt. Did I really believe that humankind came from a dirt man and rib woman in an enchanted garden bearing a magical tree offered up by a talking snake? Did I buy Old Testament claims of giants, thousand-year-old men, floating zoos, and supermen whose power was determined by the length of their hair? Did I hold to the claim that a resurrection Christ for daring to say “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe (John 20:25).” Thomas made the error of doubt, and of inquiry! Yet Ingersoll wrote that “Progress is born of doubt and inquiry.”
Ingersoll inspired me to embrace and celebrate my doubts. And he realized long ago that the doubters would be branded blasphemers by the privileged.

In Ingersoll’s “Heretics and Heresies” (1874), he wrote:

“Whoever has an opinion of his own, and honestly expresses it, will be guilty of heresy. Heresy is what the minority believe. It is the name given by the powerful to the doctrine of the weak.

“Heresy cannot be burned, or imprisoned, nor starved. It laughs at presbyters and synods. At ecumenical councils on the impotent thunders of Sinai. Heresy is the eternal day, the morning star; the glittering herald of the day. Heresy is the last and best thought. It is the perpetual of the New World, the unknown sea toward which the brave sail. It is the eternal horizon of progress.”

Ingersoll was fearless — fearless against the clerics — fearless against the dogmas. He said many heretical things during the religious resurgence just after the end of the Civil War, a time when more and more people were magnetized back into churches and Christian nationalist thinking. The era of Ingersoll saw “In God We Trust” first printed on American coins. He knew which god the evangelicals meant, and if he were alive today he would see the same maneuverings by theocrats and Christian dominionists weaponizing a specific deity behind the shield of “religious liberty.”

I am also convinced that Ingersoll would recognize and thank believers who are better than their religions. We have seen Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and other religious people in this country join us in interfaith coalitions promoting state-church separation and secular values. That’s a lesson I would like to see learned by many in my own activist circles. The religious do not fit into our boxes. Very often good and lovely people want what we want — love, equality, humanity. In Ingersoll’s words: “I do not say, and I do not believe, that Christians are as bad as their creeds. In spite of church and dogma, there have been millions and millions of men and women true to the loftiest and most generous promptings of our human hearts.”

As most of you know, I’m an atheist. My wife is “spiritual.” We disagree on spirits, but we share humanist values. I have had guests on my show who were practicing Baptists protecting state-church separation. We disagree on Christianity but share humanist values.

I am also a fan of Muslim human-rights activist Deeyah Khan. We disagree on Islam but share humanist values. Yet how many times have we burned the bridges that Ingersoll would have encouraged us to build? How often have we made enemies of our allies?

In the Twitter-verse (or X-verse?), where the world is simultaneously more connected yet more divided than ever, I am convinced Ingersoll would be pleading with people to see the “other” in three full dimensions. I’m also quite convinced he would wince at much of the insulting and branding and name-calling which passes for “debate” in this world.

What did Ingersoll convey to us? He said, “Arguments cannot be branded with insults. Kindness is strength. Anger blows out the lamp of the mind. In the examination of a great and important question, everyone should be serene, slow-pulsed, and calm.” Now, do I think he never raised his voice or got justifiably indignant? No. But I do think he understood that it wouldn’t change the world by screaming “Idiot!” at the opposition.

I suspect that Ingersoll was a lot like Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens didn’t scream at people for having horrible ideas, and even against fanatical antagonists he almost always kept his cool. Did keeping cool make him weak? Should Hitchens have surrendered his high ground? Of course not! Despite the occasional (and necessary) “Hitch slap,” he demonstrated how to be the adult in the room. He showed us the difference between reacting and knee-jerking. Hitchens proved that we won’t win the day with mere volume but with brave, informed, and empathetic engagement. Hitchens was a thinker, but he also felt compassion, and the attendees at his speeches and debates knew it.

I think this is the ticket to our success. In a recent podcast conversation with Melanie Trecek-King of the organization Thinking Is Power, she introduced me to a gem of a quote: “People won’t care what you believe unless they believe that you care.”

Ingersoll cared. We remember, invoke, and celebrate him because he cared. If a man who lived and died over a century ago can inspire an apostate like me, I’m convinced that others can stand on his shoulders to inspire many more. We should all be kind as we doubt. We need to chase facts, denounce fictions, challenge authority, and live each moment in the real world. In this way, per Ingersoll’s words, we can be true to the loftiest and most generous promptings of our human hearts.
Tom Flynn’s “Afterlife” in Dresden, New York

Written by Tim Madigan (pictured below) and delivered on August 12, 2023 at the 30th Anniversary of the Reopening of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum and the Commemoration of the Tom Flynn Gazebo. Madigan is the former editor of Free Inquiry magazine and was Tom’s friend for almost 40 years.

Our great friend Tom Flynn died on August 23, 2021, almost two years ago. The last article he was working on for Free Inquiry, the magazine he edited for so many years, was entitled “Robert G. Ingersoll’s ‘Afterlives’ in Washington, D.C.” and it appears in the current August/September 2023 issue. It is fitting therefore that we honor Tom’s memory here today at the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum by commemorating the gazebo named in his honor.

I came across two articles this week that I know would have brought a smile to Tom’s face. The first was headlined “USA Today Names the Finger Lakes as One of the 10 Must-Visit Wine Regions.” Tom and his wife Sue were great advocates of the Finger Lakes wineries long before it was cool, making it a point to visit as many as they could during their frequent excursions to the Dresden area to work on the Museum, and this is a vindication for them.

The second headline I recently happened across was entitled “Christmas Tree Shops to Close All Doors Permanently on August 12.” Tom was the author of the book The Trouble with Christmas and was known far and wide as “The Anti-Claus.” I’m sorry he didn’t live to see this news. As we know, he was famous for his battle cry of “Ho, Ho, Ho? No, No, No!” I’m sure he would have considered the closure of all Christmas Tree Shops across the nation a good start.

As I recall, the Council for Secular Humanism (now known as the Center for Inquiry) purchased the Robert Green Ingersoll birthplace site sometime in 1986, shortly after I started working there as an editor of its publication, Free Inquiry.

Philip Mass, a psychotherapist in San Francisco and a longtime Ingersoll admirer, contacted Paul Kurtz, the Council’s Chair and editor-in-chief of Free Inquiry, to let him know that the home (which had been abandoned for many decades) was in danger of being torn down and made into a parking lot. Mass, Kurtz, Vance Vigrass (the Council’s building manager) and I drove from Buffalo to Dresden to check out the site. Kurtz made the immediate decision to save the birthplace. This became a costly and complicated venture, involving years of applications for permits, grants, and various governmental decisions to give it historic designation.

Mass was named the founding chair of the Robert Green Ingersoll Memorial Committee. He was also a wonderful supporter of the Museum and often traveled at his own expense from the West Coast to the East Coast to attend strategic meetings, engage in fundraising activities, and make presentations to various agencies. At times it seemed unlikely we would ever raise the funds or get the proper permits to save the home and make it into a museum.

I remember Mass saying to me, “It’s okay if you get discouraged or if I get discouraged, but let’s make sure we both don’t get discouraged at the same time.”

After finally getting all the proper permissions, we held an event on August 11, 1988 — a date chosen to coincide with Ingersoll’s birthdate — to mark the completion of the physical rehabilitation of the site, much of the work having been done by the valiant Vigrass.

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony we realized that no one had thought to bring any implements to cut the ribbon. Fortunately the ever-pragmatic Jean Millholland, executive director of the Council, reached into her purse and found a pair of cuticle scissors therein.

I cherish the photo of Mass triumphantly holding aloft the tiny scissors after laboriously using them to cut the ribbon. The black-and-white photo can be seen at the following website:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Ingersoll_Birthplace#media

Unfortunately Mass died shortly after this event, and never lived to see the site become a museum. Most of the credit for that achievement goes to Tom. He was hired as a staff member at the Council a few years after me. Like Mass, Tom was a longtime admirer of Ingersoll and it was his personal mission to make the site into a first-rate museum honoring the great freethinker. Tom was truly an Ingersoll “savior” and we would not be here today marking the 30th anniversary of the Museum’s reopening if not for his unstinting efforts on its behalf.

As Tom points out in his article in the current Free Inquiry magazine, the only “afterlife” available to humans is to be remembered by others. How appropriate, therefore, that his last posthumously published article in the journal he helmed so successfully for so many years is about his personal hero Robert G. Ingersoll and his many “afterlives.”

If not for Tom’s perseverance the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum would not be a reality. Mass would have been proud to know that Tom was never discouraged.

The gazebo that now graces the Museum’s backyard will be a reminder to all visitors of Tom’s good work. That is the kind of “afterlife” even a secular humanist can appreciate.
Presentation of the Robert Green Ingersoll Cornhole Game

Written by Margaret Downey and presented during the 30th Anniversary of the Reopening of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum on August 12, 2023 in Dresden, New York.

In honor of freethought and intellectual inquiry championed by Robert Green Ingersoll, I’m pleased to dedicate this cornhole game to the memory of the late Tom Flynn, a true advocate of reason and humanism.

Tom Flynn, a cherished member of our community, dedicated his life to promoting critical thinking, secular values, and the separation of religion and government.

Tom’s unwavering commitment to rationality and freedom of thought has left an indelible mark on countless lives. As we commemorate his, and Robert Green Ingersoll’s legacy, we do so with a little bit of playfulness.

This cornhole game serves as a reminder of the importance of the competition of ideas bound in camaraderie for our pursuit of knowledge and truth. Just as Tom approached life with a keen sense of humor and joy, so too shall this game provide moments of laughter and bonding among visitors to the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum.

The sound of laughter and the thumping of bags upon these boards echo the spirit of Tom’s tireless efforts to build a world that embraces reason and compassion. As players engage in friendly competition, may they be inspired by the ideals that encourage us to challenge tradition, authority, and revelation, all the while building a better understanding between us and those we challenge.

As future generations step forward to play this game they will discover the legacy of Robert Green Ingersoll. Tom Flynn would be so pleased that visitors will be having fun while learning about freethought, truth, and reason.

The Freethought Society is proud to donate this cornhole game as it stands as a symbol of gratitude for Tom Flynn’s extraordinary contributions. Please enjoy the game today and each time you visit the museum.

Margaret Downey is pictured above standing between the custom-made cornhole game boards. She designed the boards using colorized photographs of Robert Green Ingersoll that were provided by Roderick Bradford, the editor of The Truth Seeker magazine.

The game boards were made by Victory Tailgate. Below is a close-up photograph so that the Ingersoll photographs and quotations that were used can be seen clearly.
Greetings to my Ingersollian friends at this celebration of Robert Green Ingersoll's life and of the opening of the Museum thirty years ago. I very much wish I could have been there in person too, not least because I have never yet managed to see the Museum myself. I was hoping to get there while researching my book, but you-know-what got in the way. I feel sure I will make it eventually, though.

When working on *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope*, I made many surprise discoveries — surprises to me, that is, in the form of inspiring writers and thinkers about whom I had known little or nothing before. Ingersoll was foremost among them.

I had come across the famous "Happiness Credo," but I did not know how versatile and energetic a speaker and writer he was. And I didn’t know how downright funny he was. If he had not been kept busy enough trying to awaken the world to the beauty of freethinking attitudes to religion and other matters, he could have made a great stand-up comedian.

I laughed out loud — which was embarrassing, in the hush of a library when I came across the story of the woman who saw him emerging from a bar and said, "Why, Mr Ingersoll, I am surprised to see you come out of such a place." To which he responded, "Why, my dear madam? You wouldn’t want me to stay in there all the time!"

Along with the jests, and along with his high-drama orations and his eloquent writings and warm-hearted letters, what really won me over was his great love of life — his sheer joy in being alive on this planet.

When I need encouragement, I often go back to Ingersoll’s reply to the question: "Is life worth living?" He says:

"Well, I can only answer for myself. I like to be alive, to breathe the air, to look at the landscape, the clouds, the stars, to repeat old poems, to look at pictures and statues, to hear music, the voices of the ones I love. I enjoy eating and smoking."

OK, so maybe the smoking part hasn’t aged well. He goes on:

"I like good cold water. I like to talk with my wife, my girls, my grandchildren. I like to sleep and to dream. Yes, you can say that life, to me, is worth living."

So, I raise a glass, whatever it may contain (whether champagne or good cold water) to Robert Green Ingersoll, and to my fellow admirers of his work.
Dedication of Tom Flynn Memorial Gazebo

In loving memory and profound appreciation for the immense contributions of Tom Flynn, we gather today to dedicate this beautiful gazebo at the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum. This lovely space stands as a testament to Tom’s unwavering commitment to the principles of reason, freethought, and humanism, which he ardently championed throughout his life.

Tom Flynn, a visionary leader and staunch defender of secularism, was a guiding light for countless individuals seeking enlightenment and understanding. His tireless efforts in promoting critical thinking, rational inquiry, and intellectual integrity have left an indelible mark on the Free-thought movement and beyond.

As we gaze upon this elegant structure, we are reminded of the beauty of reason and the power of inquiry that Tom Flynn fervently upheld. The gazebo symbolizes a sanctuary of ideas, where all minds are encouraged to explore, question, and contemplate the wonders of our existence.

Through his prolific writings, thought-provoking presentations, and dedicated advocacy, Tom ignited a passion for secular values that will continue to shape the course of human progress for generations to come. This gazebo is a tangible representation of the legacy he leaves behind — a legacy of reason, compassion, and the ceaseless pursuit of truth.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Tom Flynn’s family and friends for their unwavering support in honoring his memory with this gazebo. It is a place where visitors from all walks of life can gather, discuss, and exchange ideas in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom — a tribute to the essence of Tom’s life’s work.

Let this dedication stand as a beacon of inspiration for all who seek to emulate Tom Flynn’s commitment to reason, secularism, and the betterment of humanity.

As we inaugurate this gazebo today, we vow to preserve and uphold the principles it represents, cherishing Tom’s legacy forevermore. May the Tom Flynn Gazebo at the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum be a sanctuary of enlightenment and a testament to the enduring power of ideas. Let it stand as a symbol of hope, fostering a world where reason and compassion prevail, just as Tom Flynn envisioned.

Pictured above are Sue Gibbons and Tim Madigan. Gibbons is the widow of Tom Flynn and Madigan was a longtime friend and admirer of Flynn. Below is a letter received from Gibbons shortly after the August 12th event:

Dear Friends,
I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation for the recognition given my husband, Tom Flynn, by the Council for Secular Humanism and the Robert Green Ingersoll Memorial Committee.

As you well know, Tom was a tireless advocate for science, reason and humanism, and the Ingersoll Birthplace Museum was an endeavor that was nothing less than a labor of love. I will never forget the first time Tom brought me to see the birthplace — it was shortly after Dr. Paul Kurtz purchased it back in the mid 80’s. At that time, it was a structure nearing collapse, with sagging ceilings and equally dangerous floors that couldn’t withstand the weight of a full grown person. My exact words to Tom that day were, “You guys really should just tear this down and start over.” He merely smiled and said, “We have a vision.” That vision was realized with the museum’s third reopening in 1993.

My husband was not only a staunch advocate for all the things I’ve already mentioned, he was a kind and loving man who left a lasting impression on anyone who had the privilege of knowing him. The gazebo is a tangible memorial to someone who truly cared about his fellow human beings and will serve as a reminder of the dedication and commitment Tom had to promoting the betterment of humankind.

Pictured left is the Tom Flynn Memorial Gazebo.
Jeff Ingersoll designed and installed the gazebo.
Sandy Parker planted the surrounding garden.
Pictured left (right to left) are Jeff Ingersoll and Sandy Parker welcoming Sue Lione to the event. Ingersoll (a seventh cousin of Robert Green Ingersoll) and Parker were the main organizers of the Museum’s reopening event. They worked closely with the Center For Inquiry to put on a wonderful outdoor event for the August 12, 2023 celebration.

Pictured right (left to right) are Misty Barbosa and Dennis Barbosa. Recently married, the couple took time from their honeymoon travels to participate in the festivities.

Pictured above left are Seth Andrews as he chats with Marcy Bacon (foreground left) and Kirsta Rodean (middle). Pictured right are (left to right) Gail Light Provine and John Sullivan. Provine resides in Horseheads, New York and has been a member of the Ithaca Atheist Meetup since 2004. Sullivan is a member of the Robert Green Ingersoll Memorial Committee, resident of Ithaca, New York, and a member of Ithaca Atheist Meetup.

Pictured left (right to left) are Jeff Ingersoll and Sandy Parker welcoming Sue Lione to the event.

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Pictured during a post-event dinner (left to right) are Debbie Allen, Robyn Blumner, and Margaret Downey.

Allen helped to organize the 30th Anniversary event. She is the Director of Development for the Center for Inquiry (CFI).

Blumner is the CFI President and CEO. She delivered an educational and informative speech during the 30th Anniversary event.

Downey is a board member of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum and the President of the Freethought Society (FS). She delivered three speeches during the 30th Anniversary event. FS donated a custom-made cornhole game to the Museum in honor of the life and work of Robert Green Ingersoll and Tom Flynn.
Today, as we gather to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the Reopening of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, I want to take a few minutes to recognize the remarkable lives and enduring legacies of Robert Green Ingersoll and Thomas Paine, two individuals who played pivotal roles in shaping the landscape of Freethought.

In their lifetimes, Paine, and Ingersoll both championed the values of reason, liberty, and human rights. There is a profound connection between Ingersoll and Paine. They were two luminaries from different eras, but united in their pursuit of truth and their unwavering dedication to the principles of Enlightenment.

First, let us delve into the life of Thomas Paine, a man whose words ignited the flames of the Revolutionary War and stirred the hearts of millions.

Born in Thetford, England, in 1737, Paine emerged as a passionate pamphleteer and political philosopher during the American Revolution. His most famous work, Common Sense, was published in 1776. The 46-page treatise brilliantly articulated the case for American independence from British rule.

With eloquent prose and powerful arguments, Paine inspired a nation to seek freedom and self-determination. Thomas Paine's contributions did not end there. He went on to publish The Rights of Man, defending the principles of the French Revolution and advocating for democratic governance and social justice.

Paine’s ideas challenged the prevailing orthodoxy, and his courageous stand for the rights of ordinary people earned him both fervent admirers and fierce adversaries.

Fast forward to the 19th century, and we encounter another towering figure, Robert Green Ingersoll, who proudly referred to himself as “The Great Agnostic.”

Born in 1833, Ingersoll was a gifted writer, orator, lawyer, and political leader. He was famous for his passionate advocacy of secularism and individual liberties.

Ingersoll’s speeches were not merely persuasive; they were captivating and infused with wit and humor, making his message appealing to a wide audience.

Ingersoll admired Paine deeply and often invoked his name in his own speeches. Ingersoll recognized Paine’s important role in shaping the foundations of American democracy and Ingersoll championed the same principles of freethought and skepticism that Paine espoused.

Like Paine, Ingersoll was unafraid to challenge the dogmas of his time, advocating for religious freedom, women’s rights, and the abolition of slavery. The connection between Ingersoll and Paine runs deeper than a shared passion for liberty.

Both men endured public ridicule, and they also faced the wrath of the religious establishment due to their skepticism and bold ideas. Despite the risks they remained committed to speaking the truth, defending the value of reason, and elevating human intellect over blind faith.

Paine once said, “The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark.” These words capture the essence of both Paine’s and Ingersoll’s enduring influence on the human experience. Their ideas continue to illuminate our minds, guiding us toward a future where reason, compassion, and equality flourish.

Let us not only honor their memory but also embrace the torch of intellectual curiosity they have passed down to us. Let us cherish the gift of critical thinking and the courage to challenge conventional wisdom. Together, let us ensure that the flame of their legacy continues to burn brightly, inspiring generations to come.
You can’t imagine how sad I am about the death of Woody Kaplan. Next to my wife, Sharon, I considered Woody my best friend. I don’t use the word “love” lightly, but I loved Woody.

I first met Woody before there was a Secular Coalition for America (SCA). In 2000, the national ACLU sent Woody to Charleston, South Carolina to try to teach our dysfunctional state chapter how to fundraise. Woody’s educational visit turned out to be a failure. He gave a terrific presentation, but our local ACLU members had neither Woody’s charm nor his fundraising ability when we were left on our own. This story does have a happy ending.

A couple of years later, Woody and I met again when we both attended the Godless Americans March on Washington. I invited Woody to join me and leaders of the Atheist Alliance International, Institute for Humanist Studies, and Internet Infidels for breakfast on Sunday, November 3, 2002, the morning after the Godless Americans March. At this breakfast, we set in motion the founding of SCA. Even though Woody had been unknown to the other atheist leaders at the time, everybody appreciated his good advice, and Woody agreed to become chair of the newly formed advisory board of the SCA.

We started with an all-volunteer staff, but with Woody’s help we could eventually afford to hire our first lobbyist to take our secular issues to Congress. I’m pleased that we now have a wonderful and dedicated professional staff that gets paid.

Over the years, without seeking publicity (in fact, trying to avoid it), Woody helped me and our mutual causes in countless ways. I receive much more credit for SCA than I deserve. Most people don’t know about the many behind-the-scenes contributions by Woody (financial and otherwise) that helped SCA grow to what it has become today.

Through Woody’s power of cajoling and encouraging, he brought many organizations into SCA that were initially reluctant to join. Woody helped form and direct our leadership, kept SCA on the right track, and showed us what was important to try to fulfill our mission. I have trouble picturing SCA without Woody.

From time to time various secular organizations have wanted to honor Woody with an achievement award, but he always refused the recognition. At an SCA meeting in February 2023, it was my pleasure and honor to surprise Woody by presenting him with the “Secular Coalition for America’s Lifetime Achievement Award.”

Every organization in the secular movement has Woody Kaplan to thank for where they are today. Woody was passionate about advocating on behalf of atheists and envisioned a lobbyist on Capitol Hill who would represent all secular Americans. He was the one most responsible for secular groups uniting to become an organized political movement. We in the secular movement were privileged to have had Woody for our friend and mentor. I miss him so.

Woody is survived by his wife, author and lawyer Wendy Kaminer, family, and countless friends and admirers. You can donate to SCA in Woody’s honor, as did I, by visiting:

www.secular.org/donate

About the Author:
Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to The Freethought Society News. His past submissions can be found at the following Freethought Society website page:

https://www.ftsoc.org/herb-silverman-articles/

Silverman is the author of two highly recommended books, Candidate Without a Prayer and An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land. Both books are available online and bookstores.

Silverman welcomes communication from readers. He is also available for speaking engagements. Contact him at the following email address:

silvermanh@cofc.edu

The Freethought Society and the Secular Coalition for America
The Freethought Society (FS) is one of twenty-one Secular Coalition for America’s (SCA) affiliates, paying yearly dues to support SCA’s mission and goals.

SCA is comprised of diverse nonprofit organizations representing atheists, agnostics, humanists, and other nonreligious Americans. SCA is a dedicated lobbying organization whose mission is to advocate for the equal rights of nonreligious Americans and defend the separation of religion and government.

SCA conducts monthly calls with representatives from each affiliate group. Important legislative information is shared and affiliates provide updates during the calls.

Each year SCA also sponsors a Leadership Summit. FS is a regular participant in the calls, the Summit, and works closely with SCA affiliates in hosting cosponsored events.
October 1–7

The Freethought Society (FS) is looking for volunteers who will help place a Tree of Knowledge at the Chester County Free Speech Zone (Old Courthouse, 2 North High Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania 19380) during Banned Book Week. The Tree will be decorated with laminated color copies of the covers of banned books. There is much work to do. Contact FS for details about the project at: info@FtSociety.org

Donations to FS are also being sought for this project. Costs include the purchase and delivery of a tree (will be donated after Banned Book Week), signage, and the creation of ornaments. If a total of $1,000 is not raised, the project will be abandoned. Please earmark a donation at this link:

https://www.ftsoociety.org/donate/

November 2

The Freethought Society will once again cosponsor an international Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Zoom event on Thursday, November 2, 2023. The bilingual event will start at 4:00 PM (PDT)/7:00 PM (EDT). Other sponsors are Hispanic American Freethinkers, Black Nonbelievers, Center For Inquiry, Freedom From Religion Foundation, and the Secular Coalition for America.

If you would like to see a pre-event video addressing the “appropriations” question, please log into the event 15-minutes early. We will be showing the 2022 educational and entertaining video created by Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular board member Memo Benumea. The video can also be seen any time at the below link:

https://youtu.be/9zKXHrAa0d4

December 3

The Philadelphia Tree of Knowledge will be installed and decorated at an in-person event on Sunday, December 3, 2023, in the lobby of the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) located at 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The event begins at 11:00 AM (EST) with a presentation by Hugh Taft-Morales. The title of his presentation is “Statues Like US.”

The Taft-Morales presentation will address the questions, “Why do humans make statues that look like us? Why have artists over the ages carved marble and sculpted clay to depict people as beautiful, heroic, or infamous? What purposes do they serve as cultural symbols and historical markers? How does it help make life meaningful?” Taft-Morales will be using insights from conversations with world famous sculptor Zenos Frudakis to shed some light on this very human activity. Frudakis will be attending the event to answer any questions about sculpture and philosophy.

Freethought Society founder and president, Margaret Downey will create ornaments onsite for anyone who brings two color copies of the front cover of their favorite book.
The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates for 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, 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 when 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 (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Donations can be earmarked for use in a committee (see list below), project, and/or an event. Non-earmarked donations will be applied to a general fund which finances office related expenses. 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: ___________________________________________________________________________________________________
Street Address: ______________________________________________________________________________________________
City, State and Zip: ___________________________________________________________________________________________
Email Address: ______________________________________________________________________________________________
Phone: ___________________________________________Cell: ___________________________________________________

( ) 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. FS will never share or sell a subscribers contact information.

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)

**Community Outreach**  
(locate tabling opportunities)

**Diversity Outreach Committee**  
(brainstorming about and developing programs to appeal to minorities)

**Free Speech Zone Committee**  
(research and implement displays in public venues)

**Helping Hands**  
(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

**Jump into the Jean Pool**  
(collection of jeans for donations)

**Literature Placement for Prisoners**  
(providing literature to prison libraries)

**Meetup Committee**  
(planning events)

**Monthly Meeting Coordinators**  
(schedule, manage speakers and venues)

**Secular Celebrations**  
(develop new nontheist celebrations)

**Southern California Secular Coalition**  
(connect, share, and grow together)

**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 donations)

**Thomas Paine Memorial Committee**  
(work on themed events)

**Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee**  
(promote and support the concept nationwide)