



THE SECULAR CIRCULAR

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

April, 2009

<http://www.sbhumanists.org>

April Meeting: The State of the Society

By Andrew Hankin

You are invited to a members-only discussion forum; there won't be a specific speaker, film or presentation.

Please come to this discussion, especially if you don't usually attend our events. We would like to know, for example:

- Why is the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara important to you?
- If you don't usually come to our events, is there something you would prefer to attend instead? We are seeking new ideas beyond our speakers, films and presentations, to try and attract new people each month.
- If you do come to our events, do you like the format? Are there speakers, films or subjects you would like to see?

You won't be put on-the-spot to speak, but you will learn a little more about your fellow Humanist Society members, how the Board works behind-the-scenes, and you might make some new friends.

An important aspect of our discussion should be Board membership for the next Fiscal Year (note that our FY begins July 1st and ends the following June 30th). All positions are open for anyone to serve the society. In addition, we are always looking for more involvement helping the many Chairs run the Society on a monthly basis. If you are interested in any position, just notify any Board member. Also, feel free to suggest any other person who you think would make a valuable addition to the Board.

Thank you for your membership and participation. You can call or e-mail any of the Boardmembers with your ideas and comments for inclusion in the discussion, if you won't be able to attend the discussion on that day. Boardmembers' phone numbers and e-mail addresses are shown in the Secular Circular newsletter and on our website:

<http://www.santabarbarahumanists.org/information.html>

Saturday, April 18th, 2009, at 2:30 p.m.

In the Los Padres meeting room at Vista del Monte, 3775 Modoc Road, Santa Barbara. The Los Padres room is NOT our usual Patio Room meeting place - it's nearby but upstairs, above the Vista del Monte business offices. There will be signs pointing the way.

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Membership Notes

By Mary Wilk

Humanist Society meetings are usually held on the 3rd Saturday of each month at 3 pm in the Patio Room of Vista del Monte, 3775 Modoc Road, Santa Barbara, CA. More information is available at our web site:

www.SantaBarbaraHumanists.org

or by contacting any of the board members listed in the left-hand column of this page.

If you would like a copy of this newsletter mailed to a friend or someone who might be interested in our Society, please send their contact information to: PO Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130, or call Mary Wilk. Alternatively, all of our newsletters are available at the web address shown above.

If you are not already a member, we encourage you to join our Society. Annual membership dues are \$36 for a single person, \$60 for a couple, and \$100 (or more) for a sponsor. Members receive the monthly newsletter and have the option of attending meetings, outings and special events sponsored by the Society.

Those unable to attend our monthly meetings may subscribe to our newsletter for an annual fee of \$20, but are not entitled to other membership privileges. When attending our meetings, a donation of \$2 from members and \$5 from non-members is appreciated. First or second-time visitors are welcome on a complimentary basis. For more information, please contact Mary Wilk or any member of our Society.

News About Members

By Hope Smith, Mary Wilk and Andrew Hankin

We are pleased to welcome the following new members to our Society:

Kenneth & Shirley Tucker
3987 Primavera Rd.
Santa Barbara, CA 93110
898-0908

We also wish to express our appreciation to our new sponsors:

Dennis Clegg & Teresa Burgess
908 High Pint Drive
Ventura, CA 93003
658-1581

On Thursday, March 19th, during the evening rush-hour, Andrew Hankin, Robert Bernstein and about forty other veterans and activists staged a peaceful demonstration at the busy intersection of Chapala and West Carrillo Streets in downtown Santa Barbara. They were commemorating the sixth anniversary of the 2003 attack on Iraq, calling for American soldiers to come home, and for the US Occupation to end. Robert's pictures are on website <http://swt.org/act/iraqsixthanniversary>. The story made the front page of the next day's Daily Sound newspaper and was featured in the Noozhawk online news service. http://www.noozhawk.com/noozhawk/article/032009_demonstrators_make_peace_pitch

On Saturday, March 21st, Andrew Hankin, Sandy Garcia and around 2,000 audience members filled the Arlington Theatre in Santa Barbara to hear Bill Maher. In almost two hours of stand-up comedy, Maher skewered the major religions, politicians of both parties, men's and women's sexual proclivities, and the richest-growing-richer 1% of Americans. Also, Bill Maher's 2008

documentary film "Religulous" explores religious faith around the world and is now available on DVD.

<http://www.religulousmovie.net>

Upcoming Events

By Dick Cousineau

For our May 16th meeting, we will meet at **FAULKNER GALLERY** at the main downtown Library where Barbara Oakley, of Oakland College in Detroit, will speak to us regarding her new and contentious book *Evil Genes*. Please come early to help set up chairs, and stay after the meeting to help put chairs away. Your help will be appreciated.

HSSB Book Club

By Marty Shapiro

Our April meeting will take place on Wednesday, April 15th, at my place. The Book of the Month? It's Reader's Choice! Pick one of your favorites to reread anew, or select something new, perhaps a title you've always wanted to read, but needed a little push. Then we'll meet on the 15th to share our experiences. Sounds like fun.

In May, we'll be meeting a week earlier than usual, on Wednesday, May 13th, to better coordinate with the May 16th appearance, at our Society's monthly meeting, of Barbara Oakley, author of the best-selling *Evil Genes* (sic). Locale to be announced. Readers be warned - the book has been said to contain some "highly controversial" and even deceptive material, which "may be upsetting to some readers."

When: Wednesday, April 15th, 1:30 p.m.

Where: Marty Shapiro's house, 249 Savona Avenue, Goleta; 805-968-0478
martinshapiro@cox.net

Religion v. The Constitution By Roger Schlueter

There has been progress in a couple of legal cases involving religion/government separation in which our Society has standing as an aggrieved party. Both embody that age-old expression, “two steps forward, one step back.”

One case, *Newdow v. Roberts*, seeks to eliminate the many religious components from the presidential inauguration ceremony; in this case “Roberts” is John Roberts, Jr., the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. I can do no better job of summarizing the case than by quoting the first sentence of the latest court decision:

On December 30, 2008, the plaintiffs filed this lawsuit seeking to enjoin defendant John Roberts, Jr., Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, from uttering the words “so help me God” as part of the presidential oath of office, which he delivered to the President-Elect during the Presidential Inaugural ceremony on January 20, 2009, as well as to enjoin the remaining defendants from permitting members of the clergy from presenting an invocation and benediction as part of that ceremony, and to declare that these acts violate the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment and 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-1 (2008).

The court denied a preliminary injunction and, as in *Newdow’s* pledge case, the court required the plaintiffs to show cause why the case should not be dismissed based on the plaintiffs' lack of standing. In order to bolster his argument regarding standing, *Newdow* sought an additional 100 plaintiffs who believed they were harmed by the pervasive inclusion of religious expression in the inauguration. Ultimately 230 plaintiffs were added to the case including both individuals and organizations. Our Society is one of the organizational

plaintiffs, and I am one of the individual plaintiffs.

On March 12th, 2009 the District Court for the District of Columbia ruled:

“Moreover, the Court finds that none of the plaintiffs in this case have standing to challenge the defendants' actions as pled in the complaint because they have identified no concrete and particularized injury. And, even if the plaintiffs could establish such an injury, they have failed to demonstrate how the harm they allege is redressable by the relief they seek, or that the Court has any legal authority to award the relief requested. Therefore, the Court finds that the plaintiffs lack standing to bring this action and that it must dismiss this case.”

The part of this ruling that rankles me is the assertion that our harm is not redressable by the relief sought, namely that, for example, Rick Warren not be allowed to give his invocation. It seems obvious to me that simply had Warren been removed the harm would have been removed.

Newdow is not only undeterred, he is happy with the ruling! He wrote in an e-mail, “Okay - it's time to celebrate. We lost, nice and quickly.” The “quickly” part refers to the fact that the Court took only 48 hours to issue its ruling. He explains as follows in this partial quote:

“It may sound disingenuous, but I have always advocated for losing in the District Court if possible. Basically - except for findings of fact (which rarely exist in constitutional cases such as this) - it is advantageous to lose. As the loser, you are the Appellant in the next round. That allows you to frame the issues, since you go first during the briefing.

(See *Schlueter*, continued on page 5)

(Schlueter, continued from page 4)

“During the oral argument, the advantage persists. The Appellant goes first, and then can reserve time for rebuttal, so that ree goes last as well.

“So pop the Champagne, and get ready for the round that really counts. Of course, we may lose again there, in which case the litigation will essentially be over (since the Supreme Court will never accept the case for certiorari if we lose in the Court of Appeals). But we have a very strong case, with that little detail called the Constitution of the United States on our side. So, in my opinion, at least, we're in very good shape.”

To be honest, I am dubious. But then I am not a lawyer and do not appreciate the subtleties of the practice of law, especially at the Supreme Court level. At a less subtle level, the constitution of the Roberts court suggests to me that Newdow is arguing to a hostile audience - at best. Good luck, Mike.

Note: Newdow uses “ree” instead of “he” or “she,” and “rees” instead of “his” or “her” in an effort to remove gender-specific pronouns in his own writing – Ed.

March Meeting: Dr. Dennis Clegg on Stem Cell Research

By Jim Balter

In March, Professor Dennis Clegg, Chair of the Department of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology at UCSB, enlightened us with a remarkably clear and humor-laced discussion of stem cells and the work his group is doing at UCSB.

A stem cell is a self-renewing cell capable of differentiating into a specialized cell. They are either pluripotent, giving rise to almost any cell type in the body, or multipotent, giving rise to a few cell types.

About three days after a sperm and an egg join and start dividing, a ball of 32 cells called a blastula develops; around day four it becomes a hollow cluster called a blastocyst, and around day five there are about 128 cells, with a group of cells within the blastocyst called the inner cell mass; these are pluripotent stem cells that will eventually differentiate to form the tissues of the human body.

In 1978, Louise Brown was the first baby born from *in vitro* fertilization. Now, over 20,000 have been born, with a 66% chance of success. Around 20 blastocysts are generated during the procedure, with 2-4 implanted. Since the first attempt usually succeeds, the remainder are frozen in case they are needed later. Most will be discarded -- or they can be used to obtain embryonic stem cells.

Two years ago, Shinya Yamanaka, a researcher in Kyoto, reported adding four genes to skin cells from the tail of a mouse, converting them to cells that look just like embryonic stem cells. This was hailed by researchers as “astonishing” and “cellular alchemy.” It wasn't long before Yamanaka was able to do so with adult human cells.

Independently, the same feat was achieved by James Thomson, who in 1998 had been the first person to grow human embryonic stem cells; he is now affiliated with the program at UCSB. These transformed cells are known as induced pluripotent stem cells (IPS). IPS cells have great potential for the treatment of disease because they can be produced from a patient's own cells, avoiding rejection by the immune system, and they avoid the ethical and legal issues around embryonic stem cells.

(See Balter, continued on page 6)

(Balter, continued from page 5)

The downside is that they are old cells that may have accrued mutations and other damage; there's also a risk that the gene insertion to create them may induce mutations, although methods are being developed to avoid that.

Multipotent stem cells can be found in amniotic fluid and cord blood, as well as adult tissues of the brain and some other organs. Blind downhill skier Michael May had sight restored in one eye via an implant of corneal stem cells along with a cornea from a cadaver. Bone marrow transplant is also an adult stem cell therapy, and exciting work has been done with spinal cord injuries in rats, with human trials about to go forward. Multipotent stem cells have more limited potential than pluripotent cells and are harder to culture because they don't grow indefinitely, but they are also less likely to form tumors.



Our March speaker, Dr. Dennis Clegg. Photo by Robert Bernstein.

The possibility exists for stem cell treatments for conditions such as cancer, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, diabetes, spinal cord injury, heart disease, and macular degeneration, but there are many difficulties and challenges.

In 2001, President Bush limited federally funded stem cell research to existing cell lines, but on March 9th, President Obama overturned that. In 2004, California passed Proposition 71, providing for state-funded research; the Center for Stem Cell Biology and Engineering at UCSB (stemcell.ucsb.edu) has benefited, generating new training programs, facilities, and research projects.

Dr. Clegg and his colleagues are trying to understand the molecular mechanisms of pluripotency and differentiation and are using their bioengineering expertise to address problems of regulation, sorting, and delivery of stem cells that must be solved before moving into a clinical setting. They are hoping to partner with clinical researchers to target specific diseases such as age-related macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in the Western world, which results from the death of retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) cells. They have succeeded in turning human embryonic cells and IPS cells into cells that are functionally indistinguishable from normal RPE cells, and have tested them in rat models. They hope to go to a clinical trial in humans within four years.

The Q&A featured the usual high caliber of questions from our members; it seems that we impressed Dr. Clegg and his wife Teresa Burgess enough that they joined our society!

The mixing of government and religion can be a threat to free government, even if no one is forced to participate.... When the government puts its imprimatur on a particular religion, it conveys a message of exclusion to all those who do not adhere to the favored beliefs. A government cannot be premised on the belief that all persons are created equal when it asserts that God prefers some.

---Harry Blackmun, US Supreme Court Justice

In Darwin's Footsteps By Jessica Richardson

(Ed. Note: The following essay was submitted for the Alliance for Science Essay Contest. Jessica Richardson is a student at Righetti High School in Santa Maria.)

Similar to Newton and Einstein, Charles Darwin produced timeless work that encompassed near to all aspects of science. His work was so vital to many following discoveries; he is considered one of the most influential scientists to have ever lived. The relativity and importance of his work is so vast that it's hard to compare any current scientist or organization to him. Although their work is surely just as difficult and important, we have not yet seen their influence over time as we have seen Darwin's. However I feel there are some, such as James Thomson of UCSB's stem cell research department, whose work is analogous to Darwin's and potentially as influential and important.

The theories that anchor the discoveries of these two scientists are very comparable. They both base on the idea that one factor (such as the environment or another animal's cell) can manipulate the characteristics of another. James Thomson, trying to use aborted cells to create new structures for another being, while Darwin dealt with natural selection and the traits that passed, eventually evolving species. In Thomson's case, another human's embryonic cell could manipulate another human by dividing and becoming the specialized tissues that make up circulatory, nervous and immune systems. Darwin's theory basically stated that an animal with a desirable gene manipulates future generations by reproducing and passing it's trait along, which, in time, will become commonplace. We can see that Darwin's contribution is responsible for the field Thomson works in; still Thomson exhibits characteristics parallel to Darwin's. This idea of "modification," first written by Charles Darwin, is fundamental to Thomson and is his empowerment for new discoveries.

In addition to the men's work, their characters and places in the scientific world are alike. Both scientists are well-rounded and have participated in various areas of science. Prior to writing *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin took a voyage for the purpose of studying geology. This was an essential part of his career which overlapped with his development of modern biology. Similarly James Thomson has degrees in more than one field. He received a Doctorate of Veterinary medicine as well as a

Doctorate in molecular and developmental biology. Although Veterinary medicine doesn't seem nearly as lab-confined as developmental biology, it certainly played a role in his accomplishments. It was his understanding of mammalian development that led to his ability to isolate an embryo, of first a primate's, and later a human's.

It is known that for any new development in the world, whether it be flatter TV's, nuclear weapons, or cures for diseases, that there was a scientist or a group of scientists who first broke through in that particular field to pave the way. These scientists are our pioneers. Darwin was a remarkable pioneer for an entire genre in the science world. His ideas are timeless. Thomson, also, had an incredible advance that took Stem Cell research to another level. He was the first to get an embryonic cell by itself. This opened many doors and was essentially the backbone for working with stem cells.

The controversies that go along with the research Darwin and Thomson have done are similar factors. In the 1800's when Catholicism and Protestantism were still a ruling hand in society, Darwin faced grief when his idea of evolution surfaced. Although he was a Catholic, the church felt he refuted their teachings. Thomson faces many ethical arguments as well. Many Pro-life advocates see his research as dishonorable. They believe, first that abortion should be outlawed; and second, manipulating the embryo is tampering with nature and should not be tolerated. Just as Darwin published his book, Thomson continues to advance in his studies.

Their influence on the world is another factor that should be compared. We know Darwin's influence because there is rarely anyone over the age of 15 who doesn't know who he is. Even those younger, who may not know his name, know of his ideas and theories. Not everyone knows James Thomson or anything about his work; however he has the potential to create something as colossal as Darwin's natural selection theory. Time magazine supports this by naming him one of 100 most influential people in the world. If the process of using stem cells to generate new tissue for vital structures of the human body is successful, most diseases plaguing us could be abolished. This would make James Thomson the scientist who cured cancer, numerous birth defects along with many other diseases. This would definitely open an entire field of science (or at least expand what's existing enormously). Thomson has a great potential to be equally as influential as Darwin.

(See **Richardson**, continued on page 8)

(Richardson, continued from page 7)

Darwin's *On Origin of the Species* broke down barriers in science and broadened the horizons to discoveries and augmented growth in many fields. There are many scientists and organizations that work persistently to go one step further and open even more doors; exhibiting Charles Darwin's character. James Thomson is one example of these hard working scholars, who work analogous to the legendary biologist. Although we can't tell yet if Thomson's findings will be as timeless as natural selection, we can see its significance and potential to change the world of science.

It is naïve to suppose that the acceptance of evolution theory depends upon the evidence of a number of so-called "proofs"; it depends rather upon the fact that the evolutionary theory permeates and supports every branch of biological science, much as the notion of the roundness of the earth underlies all geodesy and all cosmological theories on which the shape of the earth has a bearing. Thus antievolutionism is of the same stature as flat-earthism.

-----Sir Peter Medawar, British Immunologist and Nobel Laureate in Medicine

I was lucky to wander into evolutionary theory, one of the most exciting and important of all scientific fields. I had never heard of it when I started at a rather tender age; I was simply awed by dinosaurs. I thought paleontologists spent their lives digging up bones and putting them together, never venturing beyond the momentous issue of what connects to what. Then I discovered evolutionary theory. Ever since then, the duality of natural history—richness in particularities and potential union in underlying explanation—has propelled me.

-----Stephen Jay Gould, American Paleontologist



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