



THE SECULAR CIRCULAR

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

March, 2009

<http://www.sbhumanists.org>

March Meeting: Prof. Dennis Clegg: Stem Cell Research and Regenerative Medicine

Stem cell research has tremendous potential to transform medical practice, with the development of regenerative cellular therapies for many insidious diseases. Recent work shows that human skin cells can be reprogrammed to become pluripotent stem cells with all the properties of embryonic stem cells. These cells have tremendous implications for regenerative medicine, since it should now be possible to generate patient-specific, immunologically matched stem cells without using embryos. In this talk, Professor Dennis Clegg will explain where embryonic and adult stem cells come from, and describe the most recent findings in the exciting field of Regenerative Medicine.

Dennis Clegg earned his B.S. degree in biochemistry at UC Davis and his Ph.D. in biochemistry at UC Berkeley, where he used emerging methods in recombinant DNA to study the sensory transduction systems of bacteria.

As a Jane Coffin Childs Postdoctoral Scholar at UCSF, he studied neural development and regeneration. He has continued this avenue of research since joining the UCSB faculty, with a current emphasis in stem cell research.

Dr. Clegg is the recipient of the UCSB Distinguished Teaching Award in the Physical Sciences, and has served on the editorial board of the Journal of Biological Chemistry. He is a member of the UCSB Neuroscience Research Institute, and is currently Chair of the Department of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology and Co-Director of the UCSB Center for Stem Cell Biology and Engineering.



Professor Dennis Clegg

Prof. Dennis Clegg

Saturday, March 21st, 3-5 p.m.

In the Patio Room at Vista del Monte

3775 Modoc Road, Santa Barbara

Join us for socializing at 2:30 p.m.

Meeting starts promptly at 3 p.m.

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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 and Mary Wilk

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

Nancy Alex
P.O. Box 50302
Santa Barbara, CA 93150

Mario Barrera
2522 Orellal
Santa Barbara, CA 93105
962-1210

Jenna Castle
6689 El Colegio #86
Goleta, CA 93117
735-3900

Jean Gilbert, Ph.D.
5254 Calle Morelia
Santa Barbara, CA 93111
683-4661

Margaret Gosfield
3136 Calle Mariposa
Santa Barbara, CA 93105
705-3359

Meredith McMinn
5446 8th St. #13
Carpinteria, CA 93013
684-4274

Also we wish to thank the following new sponsor:

Frank Dobyns
490 Pimiento Lane
Montecito, CA 93108
969-0944

Letters to the Editor: In the *News-Press* of January 30th, 2009, Mareth Meliora Sapiens wrote about the religious right being wrong

on Prop. 8, while Merle Betz suggested that federal withholding should take a holiday.

The *News-Press* of February 22nd had a photo of Mark Hamilton (with wife Sally, board president of Domestic Violence Solutions for Santa Barbara County) at a reception for DVS's Leadership Circle. The same page showed Carol Palladini, founder of the Women's Fund, at the annual celebration luncheon when funds were distributed among non-profit groups. Also, *Choice Affairs 2009*, listing Planned Parenthood fundraising events, shows Carol Palladini and Judy Egenolf among the planners/sponsors.

Upcoming Events By Dick Cousineau

For our meeting on April 18th, we have scheduled an open meeting with the membership of HSSB free to express their likes, dislikes, suggestions and hopes for the continual growth and activities of our Society. Please attend.

A Fond Farewell from Lori Lipman Brown By Diane Krohn

Lori Lipman Brown has stepped down as the Director of the Secular Coalition for America. You can read her farewell letter on the Secular Coalition for America website:

http://www.secular.org/news/Lori_Lipman_Brown_farewell.html

We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.

---H.L. Mencken, American editor and critic

Social Scene

By Anne Rojas

Darwin Week has come and gone, and we finished up on Feb. 27th with a visit from American Atheist President, Ed Buckner. The cocktail reception was well received and we plan on doing more such events in the future.

Dining Out this month after the March 21st meeting will be at Ming Dynasty, next to the K Mart shopping center on Storke Road. This is a very popular venue for us so I must have your reservation ASAP. We have room for about 30 and we always fill up.

This dinner is open to members and guests with reservations to me. Separate checks are given at the restaurant.

We will also have our Last Sunday Brunch at Cody's on March 29th. Reservations are not necessary for this activity.

In Darwin's Footsteps: Alliance for Science Essay Contest

By Ray Stone

Last fall, HSSB became a co-sponsor of the Alliance for Science's essay contest for high school students. This annual event offers cash prizes for the best essays on themes relating to Charles Darwin. This year's theme, "In Darwin's Footsteps," asked students to write about a single scientist or group of scientists that best exemplifies the character and quality of Darwin's work. Essays are not to exceed 1000 words. Student prizes start with \$300 for first place, and cash prizes and educational materials are also awarded to teachers of the winning students.

As part of our co-sponsorship agreement HSSB agreed to publicize the contest in Santa Barbara County schools, and to augment any prizes won by County residents. The current contest ended last February 12th, Darwin's birthday, and our county-wide publicity efforts resulted in two students entering the contest. Carryn Barker of Cate School in Carpinteria wrote about Dr. Susanna Porter, a UCSB Paleontologist, and Jessica Richardson of Righetti High School in Santa Maria wrote about James Thomson, Biologist and Stem Cell research pioneer, also of UCSB.

This month's newsletter features Carryn Barker's essay, starting on page 6.

HSSB Book Club

By Marty Shapiro

Our Humanist Book Club will be meeting on Wednesday, March 18th at my house (Chez Shapiro). The book of the month is *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* by Elizabeth Kolbert, a best-selling communiqué on the current state of our global environment. A review excerpt from Amazon.com:

Known for her insightful and thought-provoking journalism, *New Yorker* writer Elizabeth Kolbert now tackles the controversial subject of global warming. Americans have been warned since the late nineteen-seventies that the buildup of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere threatens to melt the polar ice sheets and irreversibly change our climate. ...Growing out of a groundbreaking three-part series for the *New Yorker*, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* brings the environment into the consciousness of the American people and asks what, if anything, can be done, and how we can save our planet.

When: Wednesday, March 18th, 1:30 p.m.
Where: Chez Shapiro, 249 Savona Avenue, Goleta; (805) 968-0478
martinshapiro@cox.net

Exclusivity

By Roger Schlueter

Several months ago I was interviewed by a Fuller Theological Seminary student, Denise Bogard, as part of a class assignment to interview and analyze the world view of someone who held a different perspective than that of Christianity. We had a pleasant conversation and I found her class paper to be very well written and insightful. So when she contacted me last month to see if I would be interested in participating in a class she was teaching, I was quite happy to do so.

Her class is being taught at the Goleta Covenant Church and deals with faith and doubt and is based primarily on the book *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* by Timothy Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. We decided to focus on Exclusivity, or “how can there be just one true religion?” as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3 of his book and as discussed in a lecture, which can be found at <http://www.thereasonforgod.com>.

My assignment was not to decide whether Keller was right or wrong but rather to analyze the quality of the argument used. Are there any logical flaws in his argument? What hidden or implicit assumptions is he making to support his argument? Does his conclusion follow from his premises?

Most of my analysis was based on the audio at the above link so you can listen yourself and make your own evaluation. I must say that I thought Keller did an excellent job of defining the problem he intended to address, namely, how can any religion claim to be the One True Religion? More specifically, how can Christianity claim to represent the exclusive truth regarding god? In fact, after he defined the problem, I thought to myself,

“Wow, he really painted himself into a corner with that one! I could not have said it better myself. How’s he gonna escape his own predicament?”

Stop reading here if you want to come to your own conclusions, then read on.

I won’t go into all the problems I found but will focus on the fact that he ended up arguing for the uniqueness of Christianity, not its exclusive hold on the truth. While I have a number of issues with the details of his argument, I have no doubt that his final conclusion regarding the uniqueness of Christianity is true. That said, I also have no doubt that Shintoism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. are all unique as well. But uniqueness does not equate to exclusivity, which is the major flaw in his argument.

In class, I presented a summary of my thoughts, then we had a lively discussion which I thoroughly enjoyed. We soon strayed from the issue of exclusivity and covered a wide range of topics such as the afterlife, morality, etc. The class had me on my toes and raised a number of good points. One question dealt with the source of ethics without religion. I was reminded again of this question last Thursday when I sat in on Ed Buckner’s talk to the Philosophy Club at SBCC. During the Q&A period, Ed was asked basically the same question: Where do moral values come from without god and religion? I think this is one of the hardest things for theists, especially Christians, to understand about nontheists.

All in all, it was a stimulating experience. I hope I get more opportunities to present the Humanist perspective to those with alternative world views and to learn more about their ideas.

In Darwin's Footsteps By Carryn Barker

Charles Darwin, born in 1809, discovered the unimaginable. His ideas drastically changed the scientific world, creating much doubt and controversy. Darwin proposed a theory that encompasses all life, a theory that clearly explains why humans walk on two legs, why whales thrive in the great blue sea, why the weak suffer, and why the strong survive. Darwin's theory explains how, starting 3.8 billion years ago, simple cells began morphing into modern day *Homo sapiens*, and how all life has descended from a common ancestor. In other words, Darwin's theory was evolution. Furthermore, evolution is still researched today, for it is an ongoing process. Scientists like Dr. Susanna Porter, from UCSB, search every day to answer what Darwin could not. Exciting new research has further explained Darwin's theory of evolution. Yet, no matter how much is discovered, there will always be more to find, for evolution is endless. As Charles Darwin stated, "There is a grandeur in this view of life, a life in which endless forms most beautiful, and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved ("Charles Darwin," 2009)."

To start, one must understand Darwin's theory before modern day research is discussed. At the age of twenty-two, a voyage around the world on the HMS Beagle opened Darwin's eyes to the world of evolution. The stratum in St. Jago, the tropical rainforests in Brazil, the fossils in Patagonia, and the wildlife on the Galápagos Islands led Darwin to understand life in all of its forms ("Charles Darwin," 2009). When Darwin returned to England, his elaborate notes allowed him to develop two concepts, natural selection and descent with modification. Natural selection is a process in which organisms with beneficial traits are more likely to survive and reproduce.

Consequently, the organisms that lack beneficial traits are less likely to survive (Shermer, 2009). Descent with modification acts as the result of natural selection; when an organism is born with a favorable mutation, the mutation is almost always passed down to offspring (Campbell, 2008). Hence, over time a new species is formed. Although Darwin's theories were the first of their kind, he only took a small step on the path of evolution.

Dr. Porter continues to research what Darwin was unable to understand. One of the greatest challenges to Darwin's theory of natural selection is presented in the *Origin of Species*. Darwin supposed that evolution was a gradual process, and that all life descended from a common ancestor. Yet, a gradual process fails to explain the Cambrian explosion, 535 to 525 million years ago. Fossils originating during this time period show that many phyla of living animals suddenly appeared, including hard-bodied, carnivorous organisms. More specifically, the sudden burst of life included many complicated organisms, also called trilobites. All larger organisms that roamed the Earth long before the Cambrian explosion were soft-bodied herbivores. Yet, there was an absence of proof for any life leading up to the Cambrian explosion. How could these simple organisms have rapidly turned into carnivorous predators covered in sharp spines? In 1957, the first evidence of pre-Cambrian life surfaced, answering the question that Darwin could not. Dr. Porter's work has built on this discovery, as she seeks to more fully develop a record of pre-Cambrian life on Earth. Dr. Porter examined some of the most ancient fossils, which were found in the Grand Canyon. In 1988, prior to Dr. Porter's research, *Chuarina circularis* was discovered in the Grand Canyon. It was the first body fossil uncovered from the pre-Cambrian time period.
(See **Barker**, page 7)

(*Barker*, continued from page 6)

This led to many more discoveries that have deepened our understanding of life during this era. For example, Dr. Porter discovered carbonate nodules in shale, which happened to be at the top of the Chuaria group, originating between 750 and 800 million years ago. These organisms were the first diversifying eukaryotes at the beginning of the pre-Cambrian era. After the shale was dissolved, trillions of specimens of many different species were found. The fossils were between 0.01 and 0.5 millimeters wide, and they looked virtually identical to a group of testate amoeba, single celled protists that are alive today. Through this type of biological research, scientists have an accurate idea of where different groups of organisms fit into the tree of life. The data in the tree of life shows that Dr. Porter's discovery provides evidence that there were two different clades that had evolved by the Cambrian era. One of them being the Amoebozoa, otherwise known as slime molds, and the other being Rhizaria. Amoebozoa are closely related to animals, and Rhizaria are important due the fact that they contain foraminifera, or shells that consist of isotopes of carbon and oxygen. The fossils from the Chuaria group reveal that Rhizaria were on Earth hundreds of millions of years ago. In other words, this discovery supports the theory that eukaryotes were diversifying 750 million years ago. The scanning electron microscopy (SEM) technology that exists today has made Dr. Porter's, and many other scientists', discoveries possible. Dr. Porter has filled in one of the many missing pieces in the puzzle of life, and opened up a window to a pre-Cambrian world that Darwin clearly wished he could find (Porter, 2009).

Not long after one discovery is made, many new questions appear. What has happened in

the past can be uncovered, yet what will happen in the future cannot be determined. Each day human beings learn more about their origin, yet we, along with all other organisms, are slowly evolving. Only time will tell what will happen next in the mystery of evolution.

References

Campbell, N. A., and Reece J. B. "Descent with Modification: A Darwinian View of Life," in *AP Biology 8th Edition*, ed. B. Wilbur. San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings, 2008, pp. 452-466.

"Charles Darwin."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin

Accessed February 1, 2009.

Shermer, Michael. "Darwin Misunderstood." *Scientific American*, 2009, pp. 34-35.

Interview

(S. Porter, personal communication, February 6, 2009)

The Boss on Evolution: An Excerpt from Ed Humes' Amazon.com Blog

I hadn't heard this one before. Judge John E. Jones III reported during our joint Darwin Week appearance this weekend at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History that Bruce Springsteen followed Jones' famous case, *Kitzmiller v. Dover* -- the intelligent design versus evolution case portrayed in *Monkey Girl*. During an August 2005 concert, The Boss quipped to his audience:

*In Dover, PA, they're not
sure about evolution. Here in
New Jersey, we're countin' on
it.*

Annual Neologism Contest

From *The Washington Post*, a few of the winning submissions to its yearly contest in which readers are asked to supply alternate meanings for common words.

A few of the winners:

- Flabbergasted (adj.) appalled over how much weight you have gained
- Esplanade (v.) to attempt an explanation while drunk
- Gargoyle (n.) olive-flavored mouthwash
- Pokemon (n.) a Rastafarian proctologist
- Frisbeetarianism (n.) the belief that, when you die, your Soul flies up onto the roof and gets stuck there
- Lymph (v.) to walk with a lisp
- Coffee (n.) the person upon whom one coughs
- Abdicate (v.) to give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach
- Willy-nilly (adj.) impotent
- Negligent (adj.) describes a condition in which you absent-mindedly answer the door in your nightgown



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