

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

January, 2016

Darwin Day/SHSNY Anniversary Celebration February 12 – Book now – page 7.

Happy New Year! As the calendar turns over we consider a political calendar change. Herein we compare science, bad science and art, play language games with religion and decry the politics of language itself. We evaluate a life lost, value elitism, welcome a bright new Board member and sum up the Year in Dumbth. But first we rail, futilely, hopelessly, against a national disgrace. – JR

THE NRA AND ITS BOUGHT-AND-PAID-FOR CONGRESS ARE ACCESSORIES TO MURDER

John Rafferty

The bloody statistics keep piling up. We now have more mass shootings by guns (3 or more victims) each year than there are days in the year, and the horror stories crowd each other out of our consciousness.

A rampage in Savannah early on December 2 (1 dead, 3 wounded) was on all the wire services until the headline-grabbing bloodbath in San Bernardino erupted.

San Bernardino (14 dead, 21 wounded) loosened our focus on November's Colorado Springs massacre by a Christian terrorist (3 & 9), which bumped Roseburg (9 & 9) off TV screens. Roseburg eclipsed Chattanooga (5 & 3), which wasn't as dramatic as Charleston (9 & 3). That made us forget Isla Vista (6 & 7), which was peanuts compared to the Washington Navy Yard (12 & 3), the shocker of child slaughter at Newtown (27 & 1), the theater massacre at Aurora (12 & 58) and the near-killing of Congresswoman Giffords in Tucson (6 & 11).

Honestly now – how many of those had you forgotten?

We forget because mass murder and individual death by gunshot are everyday happenings in America. Every day, 297 Americans are shot, and 89 of them die. Every year, over 108,000 Americans are shot in murders, assaults, suicides and suicide attempts, or by police intervention – and 32,500 or more of them die.

Here's the kicker: nothing will change. The NRA, its bootlickers in Congress and the Supreme Court majority – and every Republican presidential contender – will continue to lie that the Second Amendment guarantees unfettered individual gun ownership (“a fraud”, said Chief Justice Burger), and will kill (verb chosen carefully) any attempt to end the horrors.

They are, each and every one, accessories to murder.

Our First Election-Year Essay:

SHOULD ELECTION DAY BE A NATIONAL HOLIDAY?

Matthew Rozsa

(Reprinted from “The depressing explanation why so many Americans don't vote”, at The Daily Dot on salon.com, 11/28/2015)

Earlier this week, *The Nation* magazine declared its support for an online petition urging President Obama to declare Election Day 2016 a national holiday. In doing so, they have joined forces with presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), who has already introduced a bill to do the same thing. Not surprisingly, the movement has also caught fire on Twitter. But to understand the issue, it's important to realize why many Americans don't vote. While the popular notions are that non-voters are lazy and unmotivated or they “just don't care”, some voters just can't afford to.

When the government first established that presidential elections should be held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, the year was 1845. This was a time when most Americans lived in farms or small towns, and there was less concern that voting in the middle of the workweek would be economically prohibitive for large sections of the population. Consequently, Tuesday was chosen because Sunday was widely accepted as a day of worship and Monday needed to be set aside as a travel day to reach the polls.

But America today is a different landscape for workers – in a culture where Americans get little time off, whether it's to vote or do anything else. Forty-two percent of Americans didn't take a single vacation day last year, partially because they felt too economically insecure to afford it and partially because many of their employers actively discouraged them from doing so. Meanwhile, 23

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Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only: \$30.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived in www.shsny.org. They may be reprinted, in full or in part, in other newsletters. SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

percent of American workers did not receive paid vacation time, 24 percent did not receive paid holidays, and nearly 40 percent did not receive paid sick leave.

As a result, a Caltech/MIT survey on voting patterns discovered that three of the five most common reasons given by eligible adults who did not vote had an economic component to them: they were too busy, they struggled with transportation, or they faced registration problems. One telling statistic is that 40 percent of voters reported waiting in line to vote—with 17 percent being forced to wait for more than half an hour. That's prohibitively expensive in a country where time is literally money.

Not surprisingly, the end result is that low-income Americans turn out to vote in far lower numbers. The U.S. Census found that only 47 percent of eligible adults with family incomes of less than \$20,000 a year voted in the 2012 presidential election, compared to 80 percent of those whose earning exceeded \$100,000. Overall, only 19 percent of likely voters come from families with incomes of less than \$30,000 a year, even though that same group comprises 46 percent of nonvoters.

Similarly, because the poverty rate for Latinos and black Americans is almost three times that of whites, non-whites are disproportionately likely to not vote; although these groups comprise only 22 percent of likely voters, they make up 43 percent of non-voters.

Exacerbating all of this is the recent rash of Voter ID laws that, along with combating a problem that doesn't exist (as there is no evidence that in-person voter fraud is a serious issue), wind up disenfranchising large numbers of low-income voters who don't have the time or money to obtain photo IDs.

Although hard data on the impact of voter ID laws is inconclusive, experts from statistician Nate Silver to the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (which writes reports for members of Congress) suggest that they could lead to anywhere from a two-to-three point drop in turnout—more than enough to determine the outcomes of close local elections and swing state match-ups.

UM, LET'S THINK ABOUT THAT

John Rafferty

While I understand and agree with the central argument of the above essay, as an experienced realist I know that one of the most dependable of the Universe's Universal Laws is the one about Unintended Consequences, i.e., "Be careful what you wish for."

I addressed this same question in these pages in November, 2004, in an essay titled "Get Out the Vote? Not Necessarily". I think some of my argument still holds. Here's part of what I wrote then:

I can't get terribly upset about the fact that almost half the Americans eligible to vote in this election won't. Of course it's a disgrace that this presidential race will produce the best turnout in decades, and probably still only attract 60% – just three of every five eligible voters – to the polls.

Of course it's a shame that some people eligible to vote this year will be denied the opportunity by dirty-tricksters manipulating the rolls or preying on fears ("If you owe a parking ticket or back taxes you'll be arrested at the polls"), and I want those people – who want to vote – to get the chance. (Somehow, the old Democratic trick of voting the dead and the drunks doesn't seem as reprehensible as the new Republican system of denying the live and sober.)

But if you're too dumb or uninterested to want to vote in this most crucial election, then I don't want the government spending my tax dollars to beg you in a multimedia campaign to get off your lazy fat ass. If you don't see any difference between these candidates, if you don't understand the issues, if you've conveniently convinced yourself that "they're all alike" and that your vote doesn't count anyway, then certainly don't bother. If you'd rather use the time off from work to go to the mall or the movies, by all means, go. Don't offset my reasoned vote for Kerry because you think Bush looked John Wayne-ish in his dress-up flight suit. Don't negate the ballot for Bush of any of my (misguided) conservative friends because you think Kerry's daughters are hot.

There was a time in America when only adult, male, white, property-owning taxpayers could vote. The thinking behind the taxpayer part of the equation was that men with a financial interest in the community were best suited to elect its leaders. A narrow-minded concept, but logical. In today's broader-minded America, the franchise is generally available to all un-incarcerated adults who will make the effort to exercise it.

But about half of them routinely do not.

Am I narrow-minded if I'd just as soon the people not interested not vote? I don't think so. Do I want them standing in line before and behind me on November 2?

No.

Two further, 11-years-later thoughts ...

First, there is no requirement (and there shouldn't be) that retail stores close on national holidays, and both Thanksgiving and Christmas are now "Door-Buster Values Days". Make Election Day a national holiday and I guarantee that it will immediately become the "Official Beginning of the Holiday Shopping Season!" complete with breathless TV "news" reports of sales volumes.

Will people go to the polls rather than Macy's? Next question.

Second, solve the workday problem by broadening and encouraging both mail and online voting (*You can give the government your Social Security number – they already know it*), and turn the first Saturday and Sunday in November – 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. both days – into Election Weekend.

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country; corporations have been enthroned, an era of corruption in High Places will follow, and the Money Power of the Country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the People, until the wealth is aggregated in a few hands, and the Republic is destroyed.

– Abraham Lincoln

SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT CHURCH AND STATE?

Jonathan Engle

The separation of church and state (SOC&S) is one of my primary areas of interest. I have therefore programmed my internet browser to provide me with alerts when items appear online that concern this issue. Frequently, these alerts bring me to letters to the editor (run online by various news outlets) that claim that the United States doesn't or shouldn't separate, invariably repeating the shopworn meme, "*Separation of church and state isn't in the Constitution.*" This is patently untrue, as a clear reading of the Constitution (augmented by writings of the framers) shows that the separation of church and state was indeed intended as a founding principle of our country. I've dealt specifically with this issue in some previous essays and so will not do so again here. But a recent news story that caught my eye has me wondering if all those who decry the SOC&S might now have reason to rethink their position regarding this essential American concept.

On November 12 Stephen Wolf reported in the Daily Kos that Hamtramck Michigan, a municipality of 22,000, just elected the nation's first Muslim-majority city council. So what do those who deny the SOC&S (almost always Christian) in letters to their local newspapers have to say now? Do they now think that maybe it would be a good idea to separate church and state in Hamtramck? Do they suddenly see the value of this doctrine? I suppose they might. If the Hamtramck City Council now passed laws (this is purely hypothetical; I have no reason to believe that they are considering such laws in any way) requiring Muslim prayers in the schools, or the posting of Muslim symbols in all government buildings, would they be okay with it? Somehow, I expect not.

As usual, we can look for guidance here to the great draftsman of the Constitution, James Madison. In his *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785), Madison argued: "Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity in exclusion of all other religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects? That the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of only one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?"

Do you hear that, SOC&S deniers? It's a warning from over 200 years ago that your particular religion might not always be the one in power in your little corner of the world. So if you don't separate church and state you may find some day that another religion is ascendant and is imposing its beliefs on *you*. But by then it will be too late to do anything about it. And so I invite Americans who deny and/or rail against the separation of church and state to re-think their position on this vital issue, if only for their enlightened future self-interest. And I suggest they do so before it is too late, for themselves and for us all.

CASE CLOSED: CLIMATE SKEPTICISM IS JUST BAD SCIENCE

Michael Shermer

(Reprinted from "*Consilience and Consensus, Or why climate skeptics are wrong*", Scientific American, 12/2015)

At some point in the history of all scientific theories, only a minority of scientists—or even just one—supported them, before evidence accumulated to the point of general acceptance. The Copernican model, germ theory, the vaccination principle, evolutionary theory, plate tectonics and the big bang theory were all once heretical ideas that became consensus science. How did this happen?

An answer may be found in what 19th-century philosopher of science William Whewell called a "consilience of inductions". For a theory to be accepted, Whewell argued, it must be based on more than one induction—or a single generalization drawn from specific facts. It must have multiple inductions that converge on one another, independently but in conjunction. "Accordingly the cases in which inductions from classes of facts altogether different have thus jumped together," he wrote in his 1840 book *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*, "belong only to the best established theories which the history of science contains." Call it a "convergence of evidence".

Consensus science is a phrase often heard today in conjunction with anthropogenic global warming (AGW). Is there a consensus on AGW? There is. The tens of thousands of scientists who belong to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Chemical Society, the American Geophysical Union, the American Medical Association, the American Meteorological Society, the American Physical Society, the Geological Society of America, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and, most notably, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change all concur that AGW is in fact real. Why?

It is not because of the sheer number of scientists. After all, science is not conducted by poll. As Albert Einstein said in response to a 1931 book skeptical of relativity theory entitled *100 Authors against Einstein*, "Why 100? If I were wrong, one would have been enough." The answer is that there is a convergence of evidence from multiple lines of inquiry—pollen, tree rings, ice cores, corals, glacial and polar ice-cap melt, sea-level rise, ecological shifts, carbon dioxide increases, the unprecedented rate of temperature increase—that all converge to a singular conclusion. AGW doubters point to the occasional anomaly in a particular data set, as if one incongruity gainsays all the other lines of evidence. But that is not how consilience science works. For AGW skeptics to overturn the consensus, they would need to find flaws with all the lines of supportive evidence *and* show a consistent convergence of evidence toward a different theory that explains the data. (Creationists have the same problem overturning evolutionary theory.) This they have not done.

A 2013 study published in *Environmental Research Letters* by Australian researchers John Cook, Dana Nuccitelli

and their colleagues examined 11,944 climate paper abstracts published from 1991 to 2011. Of those papers that stated a position on AGW, about 97 percent concluded that climate change is real and caused by humans. What about the remaining 3 percent or so of studies? What if they're right? In a 2015 paper published in *Theoretical and Applied Climatology*, Rasmus Benestad of the Norwegian Meteorological Institute, Nuccitelli and their colleagues examined the 3 percent and found "a number of methodological flaws and a pattern of common mistakes". That is, instead of the 3 percent of papers converging to a better explanation than that provided by the 97 percent, they failed to converge to anything.

"There is no cohesive, consistent alternative theory to human-caused global warming," Nuccitelli concluded in an August 25, 2015, commentary in the *Guardian*. "Some blame global warming on the sun, others on orbital cycles of other planets, others on ocean cycles, and so on. There is a 97 percent expert consensus on a cohesive theory that's overwhelmingly supported by the scientific evidence, but the 2-3 percent of papers that reject that consensus are all over the map, even contradicting each other. The one thing they seem to have in common is methodological flaws like cherry picking, curve fitting, ignoring inconvenient data, and disregarding known physics." For example, one skeptical paper attributed climate change to lunar or solar cycles, but to make these models work for the 4,000-year period that the authors considered, they had to throw out 6,000 years' worth of earlier data.

Such practices are deceptive and fail to further climate science when exposed by skeptical scrutiny, an integral element to the scientific process.

DOING SCIENCE IS SIMPLE

Neil deGrasse Tyson

(Excerpted from "You Can't Bend Science to Suit Religious or Cultural Mores", Huffington Post, 11/22/2015)

If you cherry-pick scientific truths to serve cultural, economic, religious or political objectives, you undermine the foundations of an informed democracy.

Science distinguishes itself from all other branches of human pursuit by its power to probe and understand the behavior of nature on a level that allows us to predict with accuracy, if not control, the outcomes of events in the natural world. Science especially enhances our health, wealth and security, which is greater today for more people on Earth than at any other time in human history.

The scientific method which underpins these achievements can be summarized in one sentence: Do whatever it takes to avoid fooling yourself into thinking something is true that is not, or that something is not true that is.

This approach to knowing did not take root until early in the 17th century, shortly after the inventions of both the microscope and the telescope. The astronomer Galileo and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon agreed: conduct experiments to test your hypothesis and allocate your confidence in proportion to the strength of your evidence. Since then, we would further learn not to claim knowledge of a newly

discovered truth until multiple researchers, and ultimately the majority of researchers, obtain results consistent with one another. It's that simple.

SCIENCE AND ART: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL SHERMER

Donna Marxer

I was dismayed by Michael Shermer's "Science is different" excerpt, "Why People Believe Weird Things" (November), to see that he includes art (last listed) with "paradigms" like pseudoscience and superstition.

As a well-trained professional artist, I know the arts to include literature, music, the plastic as well as the visual arts, and sometimes—a stretch—architecture, which is actually a profession. Since when are the arts not progressive because "they do not have the goal or the mechanism to allow the accumulation of knowledge that builds on the past"? The history of art and the knowledge acquired is deep and rich and begins with the rise of humanity itself. The study and application of the arts require study and discipline. It is true that amateurism often prevails, that anyone can call themselves an artist, and that there is a lot of bad art around. But that just represents a trough in which bad taste prevails in a long history of intense practice.

Art does not progress, just changes? Science and art *are* different and must be measured differently, granted. Sometimes change is progress for the better, and sometimes progress is not an improvement. Sometimes scientific progress results in more destructive weaponry. On the other hand, sometimes changes in art, as in the invention of perspective in the Renaissance, results in progress. Today, developments in technology have caused deep changes to the arts in substance, not just style, as Shermer claims. Whether that change is for the better is debatable.

But the idea that artists do not stand on the shoulders of the geniuses of the past is simply rubbish. Every serious artist recognizes those greats. Art is harder to measure than science because it is ruled less by reason than by emotion and intuition. The arts are often treated with less respect for this reason. Aesthetics belonging to soft science rather than the hard sciences is part of that reason. Shermer says "no criticism is intended". Just condescension.

I have long been an admirer of Michael Shermer—for his talks, terrific lecture series and writing—but less so now, as I am disappointed in his narrow view.

The arts are major and vital to the progress of civilization. They should never be lumped together with pseudoscience and other weird bedfellows, Mr. Shermer. You may be greatly versed in knowledge of the sciences, but you show little understanding of art.

The origin of science is in the desire to know causes; and the origin of all false science and imposture is in the desire to accept false causes rather than none; or, which is the same thing, in the unwillingness to acknowledge our own ignorance." — *William Hazlitt*

CLAIRE MILLER JOINS THE SHSNY BOARD

Ebullient Claire is a relatively new member of SHSNY, but distinguished herself almost immediately upon joining by asking “What can I do?” Raised in a Unitarian atheist family, she has lived in many different states across the U.S., and has spent much time in more conservative environments than New York, which she now calls home.



With 28 years experience in publishing, she has been the director of Taylor & Francis’ Encyclopedia Department for the past 10 years, a job she says she loves.

“I’m thrilled to have found the SHSNY community,” she says, “and I look forward to working in and enjoying it for many years to come.”

Welcome, Claire.

HOW I BECAME A NONE

Anton Spivak

I’ve always been something of a skeptic, and never really liked religious fundamentalism. It was around the time I was approaching adolescence I began to wonder a lot about life after death. Perhaps solving murder mystery puzzles is what gave me so many thoughts about dying. I have to admit, the idea of there being no life after death does frighten me, to go from a state of awareness to complete oblivion, I can hardly imagine what that would be. But I suppose that if there is no life after death, at least I would not have to worry about burning in hell.

Despite my lifelong leaning toward science, I didn’t become passionate about my nonbelief until the mid “Oughts”. I saw an episode of “Cold Case”, “Creatures of the Night”, since I heard it was fully devoted to “The Rocky Horror Picture Show”, of which I had become a huge fan in college. The part of the episode that stood out to me wasn’t the use of RHPS songs or a case centered around a screening of the film, but the fact that—spoiler alert—the killer in the episode was a deranged Mormon from a severely repressive family who killed because he believed God had told him to. I decided to do the research myself to see if such insanity was common among Mormons.

I came across *Under the Banner of Heaven*, by Jon Krakauer, in which I read about Fundamentalist Latter Day Saint (FLDS) polygamous compounds and how Fundamentalist Mormons Dan and Ron Lafferty killed their sister-in-law and her infant daughter because they thought God had ordered them to. That led me to look at other criticisms of Mormonism, which in turn led me to disbelieve all faiths.

So by 2006 I was able to identify myself as a nonbeliever and began joining atheist groups. It was at this time that many atheist books such as *The God Delusion* were hitting the bestseller list, and I figured that the events of the time, such as the 9/11 attacks and the Catholic Church’s sex abuse

scandals, were driving the world away from religion. It was a good time to become a “none”. I attended a signing of *The God Delusion* and would go on to buy autographed copies of *God is Not Great* and *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Even though I have not read these books in their entirety, I am glad to have them on my shelf.

I wasn’t sure how to disclose this to my parents. They and some of my relatives could accept it, though others tended to look on with pity. However, when I mentioned my lack of faith to my uncle, he just blasted me, saying I had no right to question the Bible since I had not read all of it, and went on and on about how his Christianity had gotten him through the Vietnam War. My parents excused him like a Philadelphia attorney, explaining that he wasn’t expecting us that night, he was in a bad mood, and that he’s not that religious anyway. Yet for a long time I could not pardon him for how he dismissed me. Would I have been allowed to berate him like that? This is one thing that is probably not unique to nonbelievers, that if others take offense when we disclose our lack of faith, we will likely be blamed. We’re expected to downplay our nonbelief, saying “I’m not much of a churchgoer” or “I’m spiritual but not religious.”

Also, I would end up in passionate debates with my father about whether others should be allowed to act on beliefs I find abhorrent. He says there’s room for every belief, while I say there’s no room for creationism in science class. One time I pointed out how most people would not vote an atheist into office. He retorted that if I were running for office he would never vote for me, accusing me of wanting to take away everybody else’s freedom, just because I would rather not have creationism in science class or parents denying their children proper medical treatment.

However, I did have the support of my mother, whose beliefs are closer to mine, though she doesn’t call herself a “none” because she doesn’t like being labeled. Over time, I have learned to uphold my beliefs while respecting the rights of others to disagree with me. It does not bother me as much as it used to if someone’s beliefs differ from my own. However, I am still a “none”, and I will continue to defend my convictions and the rights of other nones to do so as well.

Tell Us Your “None” Story, And Get A Free Humanist Book

Send your How (or When) I Became a None story (250-750 words) to editor@shsny.org and, if yours is chosen for publication (we’ll help with the editing), choose one of these books by SHSNY members as our “Thank you”.

- Philip Appleman: *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin, and the Meaning of Life*
- Giddian Beer: *Kouken: Jewels, Jolts & Jeremaids*
- Jennifer Michael Hecht: *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It*
- Philip Kitcher: *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*
- Massimo Pigliucci: *Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to a More Meaningful Life*
- John Rafferty: *A Fit of Pique: Dispatches from the Culture Wars*

SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - MARCH 2016

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 7, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

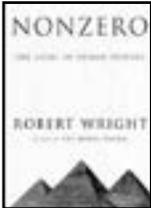
40 East 35 St. (basement)

We'll discuss

NONZERO

The Logic of Human Destiny

Robert Wright



Evolution meets game theory in this follow-up to Wright's *The Moral Animal*. Wright contends that history progresses in a predictable direction and points toward a certain end: a world of increasing human cooperation where greed and hatred have outlived their usefulness. "Non-zero-sumness", which in game theory means a kind of win-win situation, he argues, is the future of human society.

"Insightful, witty, profound, *Nonzero* offers breathtaking implications for what we believe and how we adapt to technology's ongoing transformation of the world." – *All formats.*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday

at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org,

and/or 646-922-7389

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, FEB 4, 7-8:30 pm

Community Church of New York

BEFORE RELIGION: A History

of a Modern Concept

Brent Nongbri

For much of the past two centuries, religion has been understood as a universal phenomenon, a part of the "natural" human experience that is essentially the same across cultures and throughout history. Brent Nongbri shows that the idea of religion as a sphere of life distinct from politics, economics, or science is a recent development in European history.

Examining a wide array of ancient writings, Nongbri demonstrates that in antiquity, there was no conceptual arena that could be designated as "religious" as opposed to "secular". – *All formats.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAR 3, 7-8:30 pm

Community Church of New York

THIS IDEA MUST DIE:

Scientific Theories that are

Blocking Progress

John Brockman, Ed.

Each year, John Brockman, publisher of Edge.org – "The world's smartest website" (*The Guardian*) – challenges some of the world's greatest scientists, artists, and philosophers to answer a provocative question crucial to our time.

In 2014 he asked 175 brilliant minds to ponder: What scientific idea needs to be put aside in order to make room for new ideas to advance? Dawkins and Pinker head the list, while Geoffrey West challenges the concept of a "Theory of Everything" and Alan Guth rethinks the origins of the universe. – *Paper, Kindle, Audio*

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, JAN 11, 6:30 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

THE REVISIONARIES

The theory of evolution and a re-write of American history are caught in the crosshairs when an unabashed Creationist seeks re-election as chairman of the Texas Board of Education.



"A must-see film for anyone concerned about forced ignorance ... I hope every American sees this film." – *Michael Moore*

After-Film Discussion:

Is taking politics out of our schools even possible? How?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, JAN 17, 11:30 am

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where we have enough privacy to have different conversations around the several large tables, as well as the big one led by Dorothy Kahn.

The expanded pub-grub menu has been enhanced with an \$11 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.



Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and conversation.

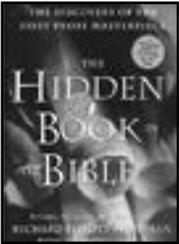
Discussion:

Islamophobia: What is it good for?

SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - MARCH 2016

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, JAN 27, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
**THE HIDDEN BOOK
IN THE BIBLE**

Dr. Richard Elliott Friedman



As all biblical scholars know, the Bible was written by a number of authors over a long period of time and then edited down into the work with

which we are all familiar (more or less; mostly less).

But now the renowned biblical sleuth and scholar, Dr. Richard Elliott Friedman, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, reveals his most startling and revolutionary discovery: buried within the Bible is a continuous narrative, a 3000-year-old epic of love, deception, war, and redemption, written by a single, masterful author but subsequently sliced apart by ancient editors who interlaced it with other stories, laws and poetry.

Using a creative blend of scholarship and detective work, Dr. Friedman has joined together this story from the dawn of written history into the extraordinary form in which it was originally written, what he calls "the first prose masterpiece".

Great Lectures on DVD is FREE
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

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www.meetup.com/shsny-org/
TEXT US ON TWITTER
@NY_Sec_Humanist

STUDYING HUMANISM
MON, JAN 25, 6:30-8:30 pm
Community Church of NY
40 East 35 St. (basement)
2015-16 Meeting/Discussion #4
**ROMANTICISM & THE
EVOLUTION OF HUMANISM**

Our November discussion of "The Enlightenment and Romanticism" was so interesting that we agreed to continue the conversation in January.

Scholar Mike Orzechowski has put together short passages on three Romantic icons - Victor Hugo, Wordsworth and Baudelaire - to guide our discussion.

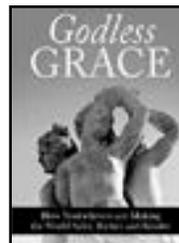
The file is on the Calendar page for Jan 25, on the website, www.shsny.org, and you can (should!) read it in under half an hour.

February Heads-Up: Want to get a jump on our Feb 29 "Anti-Intellectualism in America" reading? The main text is Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason*. Fascinating, easy read.

**DAVID (The Paleolibrarian)
ORENSTEIN'S BOOK IS OUT!**

GODLESS GRACE: *How Non-Believers are Making the World Safer, Richer and Kinder*, by our own SHSNY Board Member David Orenstein and Linda Ford Blaikie, was released December 18 and is available now in paperback and Kindle editions from Amazon.

With dozens and dozens of examples of non-theists around the world being good and - more importantly - *doing* good without any god, *Godless Grace* is an important book and timely read. - JR



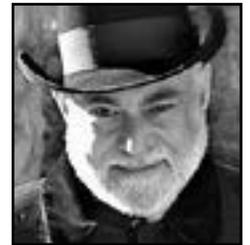
BOOK NOW
FOR OUR BIGGEST EVENT
OF THE YEAR!

**SHSNY 8th Annual
Darwin Day Celebration**
FRIDAY, FEB 12, 7pm
Byblos Restaurant
80 Madison Ave. (28 Street)

Confirm your place at our celebration of Charles Darwin's

207th birthday

- and the 28th Anniversary of the founding of SHSNY - along with 60 or more of your fellow freethinkers at top-rated Byblos in midtown.



The highlight of the evening will be a brand-new performance by our own Richard Milner.

**"Darwin, Wallace, and Other
Voices in My Head"**

After a lifetime of study, he says, Mr. Milner has developed close personal friendships with certain famous dead white men, and will channel their quirks, their humor, and their wisdom. He promises also to demonstrate how Victorian spiritualists produced "ghostly writing".

Don't miss it, because it's going to be fun! We'll feast on a bountiful buffet (lots of veggie choices) ... mingle, mix and make new friends ... vote for the Dumbth of the Year ... and enjoy a fascinating and fun presentation ... all for ...

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RELIGION AS THE ULTIMATE CON

Maria Konnikova

(Excerpted from "Born to Be Conned", in The New York Times Sunday Review, 12/5/2015)

The power of the good con artist [is] the ability to identify your deepest need and exploit it. It's not about honesty or greed; we are all suckers for belief.

The confidence game existed long before the term itself was first used, most likely in 1849, during the trial of William Thompson. The elegant Thompson, according to *The New York Herald*, would approach passers-by, start up a conversation, and then come forward with a unique request. "Have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until tomorrow?"

Think how much is loaded into that simple query: You are a respectable person, since I approached you, but are you also someone who believes the best in people, or are you a cynical blight on humanity? Faced with such a conundrum – a story about the kind of person you are contained in a single question – many a stranger proceeded to part with his timepiece. And so, the "confidence man" was born: the person who uses others' trust.

Stories are one of the most powerful forces of persuasion available to us, especially stories that fit in with our view of what the world should be like. Facts can be contested. Stories are far trickier. I can dismiss someone's logic, but dismissing how I feel is harder. And the stories the grifter tells aren't real-world narratives – reality-as-is is dispiriting and boring. They are tales that seem true, but are actually a manipulation of reality. The best confidence artist makes us feel not as if we're being taken for a ride but as if we are genuinely wonderful human beings who are acting the way wonderful human beings act and getting what we deserve. We like to feel that we are exceptional, and exceptional individuals are not chumps. ...

Given the right circumstances, we all exhibit a similar myopia. As the psychologist Seymour Epstein puts it, "It is no accident that the Bible, probably the most influential Western book of all time, teaches through parables and stories and not through philosophical discourse." ...

"When people want to believe what they want to believe," David Sullivan, a professional cult infiltrator, told a public affairs forum in July, 2010, "they are very hard to dissuade." And the reason it happens (and often happens to the most intelligent people) is that human nature is wired toward creating meaning out of meaninglessness.

"There's a deep desire for faith, there's a deep desire to feel there's someone up there who really cares about what's going on. There's a desire to have a coherent worldview: There's a rhyme and reason for everything we do, and all the terrible things that happen to people ... there's some reason for it. And here's this guru who says, 'I know exactly the reason.'" Meaninglessness is, well, meaningless. It's dispiriting, depressing and discouraging. Nobody wants reality to resemble a Kafka novel.

Before humans learned how to make tools, how to farm or how to write, they were telling stories with a

deeper purpose. The man who caught the beast wasn't just strong. The spirit of the hunt was smiling. The rivers were plentiful because the river king was benevolent. In society after society, religious belief, in one form or another, has arisen spontaneously. Anything that cannot immediately be explained must be explained all the same, and the explanation often lies in something bigger than oneself.

The often-expressed view of modern science is that God resides in the cracks between knowledge. That is, as more of the world is explained – and ends up being not so divine after all – the gaps in what we know are where faith resides. Its home may have shrunk, but it will always exist, so there will always be room for things that have to be taken on faith – and for faith itself.

Nobody thinks they are joining a cult, David Sullivan explains. ... [but] we embrace something we think is as true as it gets. We don't set out to be conned. We set out to become, in some way, better than we were before.

That is the true power of belief. It gives us hope. If we are skeptical, miserly with our trust, unwilling to accept the possibilities of the world, we despair. To live a good life we must, almost by definition, be open to belief. And that is why the confidence game is both the oldest there is and the last one that will still be standing when all other professions have faded away.

IN DEFENSE OF ELITISM

Richard Dawkins

(Excerpted from his new book, *Brief Candle in the Dark: My Life in Science*)

[Editor: He references a 2006 Manchester, UK, conference on making science documentaries for television ...]

I sympathized with the need to chase ratings, but made an unfashionable plea for elitism – elitism as a mark of respect for the audience, rather than the patronizing, indeed insulting assumption that they need science to be dumbed down to render it accessible.

The worst example of this patronizing attitude that I ever came across was expressed by a participant in another conference on public understanding of science. He suggested that dumbing down might be necessary to bring "minorities and women" to science. Seriously, that is what he said, and no doubt it brought a warm, cozy glow to his condescending little liberal breast. In my Manchester lecture I said:

Elitism has become a dirty word, and it is a pity. Elitism is reprehensible only when it is snobbish and exclusive. The best sort of elitism tries to expand the elite by encouraging more and more people to join it. ... Science is inherently interesting, and the interest will shine through without the need for soundbites, gimmicks or dumbing down.

[Editor: 34 pages later, he returns to the theme ...]

A former and highly successful editor of New Scientist magazine ... was asked: "What is your philosophy at New Scientist?" He said, "Our philosophy in New Scientist is this: science is interesting, and if you don't agree you can fuck off."

THE DEATH OF FAIGY MAYER

Sidney Finehirsh

No one knows why vibrant young adults commit suicide. Even if they leave behind a note before choosing to pass out of life, the words offer nothing more than a clue rather than an explanation.

Faigy Mayer walked off the edge of a trendy midtown roof bar twenty floors above the street on July 20. She was 30 years old. Photos and descriptions of friends profile a prototypical, vivacious young woman with a lifetime of opportunity before her. At her young age, she had already founded a software company for which she served as CEO.

Her worldly accomplishments began just five years ago when she left her ultra-orthodox community in Brooklyn to seek an independent life. Her desire for personal freedom and modernity was met by being cut off from all support by family, neighbors, teachers and former associates.

Unsurprisingly, she faced vast challenges finding her footing in the secular world for which she had been given no preparation. Her ultra-orthodox education consisted of little beyond the role of a wife, mother, and protector of the sect's "traditional" values. But even as a child, Faigy never could adjust to the insularity of the rigid Hasidic life, purposely flunking her class on Jewish dietary law — a major act of rebellion. As an adult, she propelled herself towards a different life, enrolling in college programs of Business and Information Technology with her sights set on a Masters Degree.

When she died, her family put out a story that she was simply crazy. Indeed, they had previously forcibly hospitalized her for bi-polar disorder, a diagnosis pronounced by her barely educated mother. But as one of her new friends wrote, "In Faigy's case, whatever mental illness she may have suffered from, the upheavals in her life—the lack of family support, the troubles finding work and shelter—are enough by themselves to explain her despair." The friend also added, "Mental illness, while affecting some ex-haredim, needs management and treatment; it should certainly not be a death sentence."

She didn't leave a note, but she did leave a 1,500-word draft memoir composed several weeks before her suicide. Here are some excerpts:

FAIGY MAYER: IN HER OWN WORDS

Until I left the religion of Hasidic Judaism at the age of 24, I would not have any friends. I thought a girl named Chevy was my friend in the 10th grade, but when she had to tell her sister that I was at her house, she said: 'My classmate is here.' I remember being stung by her not referring to me as her friend.

"It is now, having recently celebrated my 5-year anniversary for leaving Hasidic Judaism that I realize what my problem probably was. It was probably due to the fact that my mom's parents are converts to Hasidic Judaism, my



grandmother had most of a college degree from Brooklyn College at the age of 18, is highly intellectual, and I take after her and strongly identify with my American roots.

"The two parts of the day [at her all-girls religious school] were 'Yiddish' [i.e., Jewish traditions] and 'English'. I purposely flunked out of Yiddish as I knew there would be no consequences as there were separate diplomas for English and Yiddish. But Hasidic boys aren't as lucky as Hasidic girls. They do not know simple math such as division or fractions. That is because their day isn't divided in two. They have only 'Yiddish' all day. I remember wondering what I would do if I would have a son and he would be subjected to the torture of learning Yiddish all day.

"Without knowing I was agnostic I refused to study rules that were clearly not applicable to 2001.

"However, I feel as though Hasidic Judaism shouldn't exist at all. My 3 nephews are being raised in a very strict hasidic Jewish environment. It isn't fair to them that they have to live their lives the way they do. The most fun they have is to color with crayons. Even if I would be allowed to be in their lives, they would not be allowed to play games on my iPhone.

"Atheist hasidic Jews pretend to believe and Facebook is their only outlet for speaking with like-minded Jews (unless Facebook is tipped off that their account is fake and automatically deletes it). But rabbis do not allow computers or smartphones, so internet.org couldn't help my people.

"The austere lifestyle my people face of arranged marriages, strict segregation of the genders, the wife shaving her head, the couple having sex with the wife wearing a bra in the complete dark (hole in the sheet, anyone) but still producing 13 children generally throughout her lifetime, working for cash only so that Uncle Sam can help with food stamps, section 8, and Medicaid and seeing on average worse doctors because they have the worst insurance.

"If people were allowed to think, they would not be religious."

"Thinking analytically when it comes to basic life decisions is something new to me and something I still struggle with, 5 years after leaving."

POSTSCRIPT

From the pages of The New York Post:

November 22, 2015: The sister of a Hasidic woman who jumped to her death off a rooftop bar in July was discovered dead Sunday ... hanging by a cord in the staircase of her parents' home in Borough Park.

November 24, 2015: The Hasidic woman who committed suicide four months after her sister also killed herself suffered years of depression following her forced marriage to a first cousin. ...

"Ever since her marriage she has been in and out of mental hospitals," a [family source] explained. "Growing up, some relatives kept calling her retarded, ugly, etc.. ... She had been coerced by her mother's side of the family to marry ... the son of the mother's sister.

THE LAST WORD GOES TO FAIGY

"I feel as though Hasidic Judaism shouldn't exist at all."

WHY EVOLUTION IS A TAUTOLOGY, YET MAY BE THE ULTIMATE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING (EVEN BETTER THAN '42')

Douglas Adams

(Excerpted from an extemporaneous speech given by the author of the Hitchhiker's Guides books at Digital Biota 2, Cambridge, September, 1998, and published in the posthumous collection, The Salmon of Doubt – Thank you, Elaine Rafferty.)

A guy said to me, "Yes, but the whole theory of evolution is based on a tautology: That which survives, survives. This is tautological, therefore it doesn't mean anything."

I thought about that for a while and it finally occurred to me that a tautology is something that means nothing, not only that no information has gone into it, but that no consequence has come out of it. So we may have accidentally stumbled upon the ultimate answer; it's [evolution is] the only thing, the only force, arguably the most powerful of which we are aware, which requires no other input, no other support from any other place, is self-evident, hence tautological, but nevertheless astonishingly powerful in its effects.

It's hard to find anything that corresponds to that, and I therefore put it at the beginning of one of my books. I reduced it to what I thought were the bare essentials, which are very similar to the ones you came up with earlier, which were "Anything that happens happens, anything that in happening causes something else to happen causes something else to happen and anything that in happening causes itself to happen again, happens again." In fact you don't even need the second two because they flow from the first one, which is self-evident and there's nothing else you need to say; everything else flows from that.

So I think we have in our grasp here a fundamental, ultimate truth, against which there is no gainsaying. It was spotted by the guy who said this is a tautology. Yes, it is, but it's a unique tautology in that it requires no information to go in, but an infinite amount of information comes out of it. So I think that it is arguably therefore the prime cause of everything in the universe. Big claim, but I feel I'm talking to a sympathetic audience.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #215

(Excerpted from KTRK-TV, 12/4/15, and embellished)

A new church has opened in Spring, Texas: the Greater Church of Lucifer. "We have gatherings, but they're not services," says Michael Ford, church co-president. They don't sacrifice animals, he says, worship the devil, or try to convert Christians.

Christians are outraged, and have picketed the church in force. "We are all Christians here, together against this," said protestor Christine Weick. "We ought to be filling up the whole street here that they have to pass through us to get into that church. This is what we get when we have freedom of religion."

THIS WORRIES ME

John Rafferty

Much is at the boil right now on college campuses across the country. Issues of race, gender and social equality, of real and perceived discrimination, of "sensitivity" and "safety", of hate speech and free speech, have led to protests, sit-ins, the cancellation of events and the withdrawal of speaker invitations, and even the resignations of several administrators.

Just like the "Free Speech" movement of the 1960s? Actually, no. That movement was all about, well, speaking freely, while what many of today's young "progressives" and multi-culturalists seem to be saying to conservatives and anyone with whom they are at odds is, "Shut up!"

For instance, ex-Muslim atheist Aayan Hirsi Ali was disinvited from speaking at Brandeis because of her anti-Islam opinions, and ex-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice withdrew from her commencement speaking engagement at Rutgers after student and faculty protests about her association with the late, unlamented Bush administration and the Iraq War.

While I'm a fan of Ali, I yield to no one in my liberal loathing for Rice, but both cases brought to mind my experience being chased by baseball bat-wielding American Legionnaires ("Feet, do your stuff!") at the gates of Queens College in 1952 when a hundred or so of us demonstrated in support of Communist Party USA Chairman Gus Hall's right to speak on campus.

We were demonstrating for free, unfettered and uncensored speech (*Okay, and a little bit just for the hell of it*). Today's kids—many of them, anyway—would demand that today's Gus Halls shut up.

And that's not just my opinion. A study by the Pew Research Center finds that the younger Americans are, the more likely they are to believe that the government should prohibit offensive speech, despite freedom of speech being a cornerstone of American freedoms. For instance, when it comes to offensive speech about minorities, only 12 percent of the Silent Generation (ages 70-87, that's me) think the government should outlaw such speech. That increases to 24 percent of Baby Boomers (ages 51-69), 27 percent of Gen-Xers (ages 35-50), and 40 percent of Millennials (ages 18-34).

40 percent! – 2 out of every 5 young adults think the government should determine who is allowed to say what in America.

I hate to quote anyone from the libertarian Cato Institute, but research fellow Emily Ekins has it sort-of right, even as she uses too broad a brush. Protesting college students, she says, "believe free speech and promoting social equality are at odds and remain unaware of free speech's vital importance. For some, this may have been the first time they heard that allowing free speech is not synonymous with endorsing its content."

So, Gentle Reader, what is your opinion? Your thoughts, measured or immoderate, are solicited, and will be welcomed at editor@shsn.org.

2015: IT WAS A GREAT YEAR IN DUMBTH

John Rafferty

"My own personal theory is that Joseph built the pyramids to store grain."



Dr. Ben Carson said that in a 1998 commencement speech at Andrews University. One of the loose rules I made up for Dumbth-of-the-Year nominations is that the idiotic utterance must be made in that calendar year. So when the video of the presidential hopeful making his jaw-dropping, anti-historical, damn-the-archeologists claim first surfaced, I thought, "Too bad it's 17 years old."

But then, in an early-November interview on CBS, the doctor—who doesn't believe in evolution, but does believe that Obamacare is "slavery" and that God gave him the answers for his college Chemistry exam—repeated it.

Okay, we've never before had a candidate earn two nominations in a single year, but we'd already nominated the good doctor back in April after he argued that being homosexual is a choice.

"Because a lot of people who go into prison go into prison straight – and when they come out, they're gay. So, did something happen while they were in there?"

So now you have two reasons to vote for a science-denying doctor (*If he wins do we give him two horse's-ass awards?*) who wants to be President. Anyway, Dr. Carson, meet your fellow nominees for Dumbth of the Year 2015.



Addressing the problem of sexual assaults on college campuses, anti-feminist founder of the Eagle Forum **Phyllis Schlafly** has a simple solution: Get rid of the women. Oh, and college loans, too.

"The imbalance of far more women than men at colleges has been a factor in the various sex scandals ... One solution might be ... to arbitrarily admit only half women and half men. ... Another solution might be to stop granting college loans, thereby forcing students to take jobs to pay for their tuition and eliminate time for parties."

Our guess is Schlafly was no party animal in college.



Nevada Assemblywoman **Michele Fiore** (that's her with the strapped-on sidearm, in her own preferred-use photo) believes that cancer is a fungus that can be flushed out of the body with baking soda.

"If you have cancer, which I believe is a fungus, and we can put a pic line into your body and we're flushing with, say, salt water, sodium carbonat [sic – it's "biocarbonate"] through that line and flushing out the fungus."

She also suggested, by the way, that college women who don't carry firearms as she does "must like rape".



When President Obama referenced Christian terrorist history, e.g., the Crusades and the Inquisition, the Catholic League's **Bill Donohue** reacted not only predictably but, even for him, insanely. *"Regarding that other fable, the Inquisition, the Catholic Church had almost nothing to do with it."*

So, the Church was actually okay with Galileo and Bruno?

New Age actress/multiple-lives nutcase **Shirley MacLaine** has written another book, "What If?" in which she suggests that perhaps the Holocaust was karmic payback.



"What if most Holocaust victims were balancing their karma from ages before, when they were Roman soldiers putting Christians to death, the Crusaders who murdered millions in the name of Christianity ... or those who stormed across the Near East with Alexander? The energy of killing is endless and will be experienced by the killer and the killee."

Um, Shirley, honey, six million killees might demur.

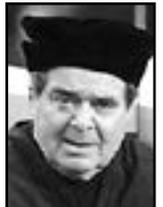


Congressman **Sam Johnson** (R-TX), who has yet to be introduced to the U.S. Constitution, is outraged that cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy are no longer required to say "so help me God" when reciting the academy's Honor Oath.

"Let me be clear, Americans have the freedom of religion – but not freedom from religion."

What's clear is the extent of his stupidity.

Giving the commencement address at his grand-daughter's school, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States **Antonin Scalia**, referring to the challenges the graduates would face, actually said out loud:



"Class of 2015 ... Humanity has been around for at least some 5,000 years or so, and ..."

Oh, who cares what the hell else he said?



For Fox News host **Gretchen Carlson**, the "War on Christmas" is never over, and even though she has a free-speech job, she's not year-round crazy about free speech. Complaining about a Festivus pole display in the Washington state capitol next to a Christmas tree, she announced:

"I'm all for free speech and free rights, just not on December 25th."

Don't know Dumbth? Turn the page ...

**DON'T KNOW ABOUT DUMBTH?
HERE'S YOUR PRIMER**

Comedian/secular humanist Steve Allen coined "dumbth" to describe the willfully witless among us. And in 1992 then-PIQUE editor Warren Allen Smith proposed that SHSNY give Dumbth Awards to "those who deserve to have their illogic pointed out".

The idea didn't fly at first but we picked it up again in 2005 and have conducted our search for the dunces among us every year since.

Who deserves a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example,

"A person who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with 'a miracle'."



Actual winners of our not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy? Our first, 2005 winner, was talk-show personality Star Jones, who announced on nationally-televised "The View" that she felt she was "blessed" by God because He delayed the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed over 200,000 [less important] people until after her honeymoon vacation in the Maldives.

The Wicked Witch of the Right Wing, Ann Coulter, was our 2007 winner after she announced that she wanted to "perfect Jews" by making them Christians.

The landslide 2012 winner was anti-choice Rep. Todd "Legitimate Rape" Akin (remember?), who opined that pregnancy caused by rape was "really rare" because "the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down."

2013 winner Rep. Steve Stockman (R-TX) offered the wisdom that, "If babies had guns they wouldn't be aborted."

And maybe my all-time favorite, ex-TV sitcom star and now rich Craig T. Nelson, who in 2010 told Glenn Beck that he didn't want to pay taxes ever again because he doesn't believe in government bailouts, complaining,

"I've been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?"

VOTE NOW ... AND AGAIN IN FEBRUARY

Online balloting begins now, and continues through January 31. Cast your vote at editor@shsny.org. Celebrators will also get a paper ballot at our February 12 Darwin Day/Anniversary dinner (see page 7), at which the winner will be announced and acclaimed. - JR

**Vote for the Dumbth-of-the-Year
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**Leaving Hasidic Judaism
... and Life
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