

# PIQUE

## Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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March, 2017

We had a great time at our Darwin Day bash – wish you'd been there (see page 5). More soberly, we begin our Board-election process this issue (see below), while we consider presidential power and myth in America and nutty politics in the UK, humanist “worship”, “agnostic atheism”, medicine vs. religion, and “torpedoing” religion. But most important, we focus in this second month of the Time Of Trump on new ideas, both big and small, for humanist activism – *let's get working.* – JR

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### SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

**T**he triennial election for the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York will take place this spring. Notice is given hereby, as it will be in the April and May issues of PIQUE.

Candidate statements will appear in this and subsequent issues of PIQUE, and those statements, along with ballots, will be mailed to all dues-paid members on or before May 1 (two ballots to Family Memberships). Returned ballots will be due May 15. Results will be announced in the June issue of PIQUE, and the new 3-year Board term will begin June 1.

#### *Who is eligible?*

All dues-paid members of SHSNY are eligible. You may nominate yourself or another member(s) – by letter to the P.O. Box (see masthead, below) or e-mail to editor@shsnys.org – at any time before March 15. Please include a brief statement (100-300 words) summarizing the candidate's/your qualifications and vision for the future of SHSNY, which may be written by the candidate and/or the nominator. If you nominate someone else, please include a statement by the nominee that s/he is willing to serve.

#### *Who will stand for election?*

Our by-laws\* require a minimum of five members on the Board, which elects the officers of SHSNY. Currently, the Board consists of 12 members (see masthead, below), all of whom are standing for re-election. Two new candidates (so far) have announced their willingness to serve (and work!): filmmaker Matt Callahan and freethought-activist attorney Jonathan Engel. Candidate statements begin on page 8.

All of them hope that even more people willing to work for SHSNY will nominate themselves, join us, and bring fresh attitudes and new ideas to our organization.

*\*If you are a member of SHSNY and do not have a copy of the bylaws, call and leave a message at 646-922-7389.*

### THE MYTH OF AMERICA

David Brooks

(Reprinted from “A Return to National Greatness”, The New York Times OpEd, 2/3/2017)

**T**he Library of Congress's main building is one of the most magnificent buildings in Washington, or in the country. It was built in a pivotal, tumultuous time. During the 23 years in the late 19th century that it took to design and build the structure, industrialization transformed America. More people immigrated to America than in the previous 250 years combined.

The building articulates the central animating idea that held this bursting, turbulent country together. That idea is best encapsulated in the mural under the dome of the main reading room. A series of monumental figures are depicted, each representing a great civilization in human history and what that civilization contributed to the human story.

It starts with a figure representing Egypt (written records) and then continues through Judea (religion), Greece (philosophy), Islam (physics), Italy (the fine arts), Germany (printing), Spain (discovery), England (literature), France (emancipation) and it culminates with America (science).

In that story, America is placed at the vanguard of the great human march of progress. America is the grateful inheritor of other people's gifts. It has a spiritual connection to all people in all places, but also an exceptional role. America culminates history. It advances a way of life and a democratic model that will provide people everywhere with dignity. The things Americans do are not for themselves only, but for all mankind.

This historical story was America's true myth. When we are children, and also when we are adults, we learn our deepest truths through myth.

Myths don't make a point or propose an argument. They inhabit us deeply and explain to us who we are. They

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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *V.P.*; Donna Marxer, *Treas.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty*;

Maria Astifidis; Kiwi Callahan; Dorothy Kahn; Carl Marxer; Claire Miller; Carlos Mora; David Orenstein; John Wagner

**SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / [www.shsnys.org](http://www.shsnys.org) / 646-922-7389**

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capture how our own lives are connected to the universal sacred realities. In myth, the physical stuff in front of us is also a manifestation of something eternal, and our lives are seen in the context of some illimitable horizon.

That American myth was embraced and lived out by everybody from Washington to Lincoln to Roosevelt to Reagan. It was wrestled with by John Winthrop and Walt Whitman. It gave America a mission in the world — to spread democracy and freedom. It gave us an attitude of welcome and graciousness, to embrace the huddled masses yearning to breathe free and to give them the scope by which to realize their powers.

But now the myth has been battered. It's been bruised by an educational system that doesn't teach civilizational history or real American history but instead a shapeless multiculturalism. It's been bruised by an intellectual culture that can't imagine providence. It's been bruised by people on the left who are uncomfortable with patriotism and people on the right who are uncomfortable with the federal government that is necessary to lead our project.

The myth has been bruised, too, by the humiliations of Iraq and the financial crisis. By a cultural elite that ignored the plight of the working class and thus broke faith with the basic solidarity that binds a nation.

And so along come men like Donald Trump and Stephen Bannon with a countermyth. Their myth is an alien myth, frankly a Russian myth. It holds, as Russian reactionaries hold, that deep in the heartland are the pure folk who embody the pure soul of the country — who endure the suffering and make the bread. But the pure peasant soul is threatened. It is threatened by the cosmopolitan elites and by the corruption of foreign influence.

The true American myth is dynamic and universal — embracing strangers and seizing possibilities. The Russian myth that Trump and Bannon have injected into the national bloodstream is static and insular. It is about building walls, staying put. Their country is bound by its nostalgia, not its common future.

The odd thing is that the Trump-Bannon myth is winning. The policies that emanate from it are surprisingly popular. The refugee ban has a lot of support. Closing off trade is popular. Building the wall is a winning issue.

The Trump and Bannon Anschluss has exposed the hollowness of our patriotism. It has exposed how attenuated our vision of national greatness has become and how easy it was for Trump and Bannon to replace a youthful vision of American greatness with a reactionary, alien one.

We are in the midst of a great war of national identity. We thought we were in an ideological battle against radical Islam, but we are really fighting the national myths spread by Trump, Bannon, Putin, Le Pen and Farage.

We can argue about immigration and trade and foreign policy, but nothing will be right until we restore and revive the meaning of America. Are we still the purpose-driven experiment Lincoln described and Emma Lazarus wrote about: assigned by providence to spread democracy and prosperity; to welcome the stranger; to be brother and sister

to the whole human race; and to look after one another because we are all important in this common project?

Or are we just another nation, hunkered down in a fearful world?

*Comment: While I consider Brooks's thought-provoking column important, I recognize that some (probably many) readers will disagree with his disparagement of "shapeless multiculturalism" and of "people on the left who are uncomfortable with patriotism" (not me!). Therefore, reader response is solicited. – JR)*

### ON THE POWERS OF THE PRESIDENT: THEN

**"T**he President is merely the most important among a large number of public servants. He should be supported or opposed exactly to the degree which is warranted by his good conduct or bad conduct, his efficiency or inefficiency in rendering loyal, able, and disinterested service to the Nation as a whole. Therefore it is necessary that there should be full liberty to tell the truth about his acts, and this means that it is exactly necessary to blame him when he does wrong as to praise him when he does right. Any other attitude in a citizen is both base and servile.

"To announce that there must be no criticism of the President, or that we are to stand by the President, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public. Nothing but the truth should be spoken about him or any one else. But it is even more important to tell the truth, pleasant or unpleasant, about him than about any one else."

*Theodore Roosevelt, 26th U.S. President – 100 years ago.*

### ON THE POWERS OF THE PRESIDENT: NOW

**"O**ur opponents, the media, and the whole world will soon see, as we begin to take further actions, that the powers of the President to protect our country are very substantial and will not be questioned."

*White House Senior Policy Advisor Stephen Miller – 2/12/2017*

### SHOULD YOU WRITE TO YOUR SENATOR?

**John Rafferty**

**W**hile it may feel good to write about the Constitutional crisis that is the Trump administration to kindred spirits like Chuck Schumer or Kirsten Gillibrand, what's the point? More practical, I think, is to try to persuade possible new political allies. Like this ...

*February 19, 2017*

*Dear Senator John McCain:*

*I am a lifelong Democrat and liberal who, nevertheless, has always been an admirer of yours because I believe you are a straight talker who puts (as your campaign slogan ran) "country first".*

*Today I ask you to put country first over party allegiance, to demand a full Congressional (or even independent prosecutor) investigation into the Russian interference in our 2016 election.*

*Sincerely, John Rafferty*

But even more important for humanists, I think, is to engage directly in activism. John Wagner has some ideas ...

## INTRODUCING A NEW FEATURE IN PIQUE:

### *The Humanist Activist*

John Wagner

**A**s humanists, we “affirm our ability to improve our lives through the use of reason and ingenuity”. This month we are inaugurating a new column, *The Humanist Activist*, with the hope that we will inspire humanists to improve our society via clever and effective political activism.

Each month we will present an essay on a topic that is being debated in the political arena. Sometimes we will recommend organizations that you might want to support with your money or with your labor. We solicit articles that address political issues from a humanist perspective. We anticipate creating a companion blog site where these issues can be explored and discussed.

The first in this series is an article by a Humanist Celebrant and political activist from the Syracuse area. The success of our new column will be gauged by the effectiveness of the humanist activists we empower.

There is much to do; let's go to work.

### **A HUMANIST VIEW OF A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE**

Jessica Dapson

*“The humanist view of life is progressive and optimistic, in awe of human potential, living without fear of judgement and death, finding enough purpose and meaning in life, love and leaving a good legacy.”*

— Polly Toynbee, V.P., British Humanist Association.

**I**reference this quote often, especially when contemplating the women's rights movement—particularly regarding abortion. According to a poll<sup>1</sup>, approximately 80 percent of the “non-religious” American population side with the pro-choice position. However, that still leaves a good question to consider: *Why does one-fifth of the non-religious American population side with the Pro-Life position?*

And perhaps a larger question: *What are the humanist positions on issues concerning life and death?*

As a secular humanist, I side with both the majority of non-believers and the American Humanist Association regarding pregnancy and abortion. As a mother of three children and a woman who once faced the decision of whether or not to terminate a pregnancy of my own, I have given much thought to this issue. As Executive Co-Chair of the Secular Coalition for New York<sup>2</sup>, I agree with the AHA's view<sup>3</sup> supporting women's freedom of choice and condemning violence and threats against women seeking abortions. My personal beliefs are three-fold: first, I believe there should be language in place for all states, similar to *Roe v. Wade*, that clearly outlines relevant details regarding the acceptable practice of abortion itself; second, non-religious counsel and support services before, during, and after the procedure should be widely available and easily obtainable; and third, protective measures need be created that safeguard clinics, doctors who perform abortions, and

women who seek them.

I enthusiastically support New York's Governor Cuomo and hope that he soon proposes an amendment to our state constitution granting women access to late-term abortions. When asked, “Why late-term abortions?”, I recall a story of a woman I once knew who was unfortunately faced with news from her obstetrician—not once, but twice—that her fetuses had genetic, life-threatening heart anomalies and would likely not survive as her pregnancy progressed. She had to decide to continue with the at-risk pregnancies or terminate them, regardless of whether or not names had been chosen, nursery colors picked, or calendars marked with due dates. Because of situations like this, I want to see our state strengthen and codify women's abortion rights in our constitution or state laws.

Discrimination and criticism should never be imposed upon women when it comes to their right to choose. I am thankful to have this right. My own grandmother, who gave birth to eight girls prior to *Roe v. Wade*, did not. Did she want to be pregnant and give birth over and over for ten straight years? I don't know. A Catholic, she likely rendered both birth control and abortion sinful. How unfortunate that most religious denominations denounce the legal practice of abortion, intensifying the debate over the meaning of doing what's right.

#### **Action Item:**

Because Planned Parenthood is the target of organized political attacks, this month's action item is to make a donation of money or time to that organization (<https://www.plannedparenthood.org>) ... but NARAL Pro-Choice America ([www.naral.org/](http://www.naral.org/)) is also worthy of your support.

#### **Notes:**

1 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162548/americans-misjudge-abortion-views.aspx>

2 <http://states.secular.org/states/new-york>

3 <https://americanhumanist.org/news/2013-01-resolution-on-a-womans-right-to-abortion/>

4 <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade>

### **Why We Live In New York #213**

#### **FUNERALS FOR EMBRYOS IN TEXAS**

(Based on “Texas will now require funeral services whenever a woman has an abortion”, by Amanda Marcotte, on *salon.com*, 11/30/2016)

**O**utraged that the Supreme Court last June struck down laws requiring medically unnecessary regulations designed to make access to safe abortion in Texas almost impossibly difficult, anti-choice lawmakers and health officials quietly proposed new rules requiring funeral arrangements whenever a woman loses or terminates a pregnancy outside of her home.

Even when “the embryo is so small as to be invisible”, said David Brown of the Center for Reproductive Rights, the doctor or health care provider will still have to treat it like a dead person, and hold some kind of burial or cremation for it.



## NUTTY POLITICS, IT SEEMS, IS NOT CONFINED TO THE U.S.

John Adams

*(The following was received from Professor John Adams, of the North Yorkshire Humanists, our hands-across-the-pond cousins in the UK, on February 15.)*

Hello John, I trust all is well with you. It is good to see that your new President's administration is settling in so nicely. Personally I think it is a good idea to sack members of your Cabinet before you have actually formed one ... it stops people getting stale. If you haven't made your mark as an international politician within 72 hours surely it's time to move on and make way for a younger man or woman. At this rate of attrition, after 8 years, almost anyone could have a go. I think, John, that you might dust off your C.V. and present your credentials ... you might be in the frame for high office in a year or two.

In case you think this is all a little smug from the "old world", I think it fair to say that politics is in turmoil the world over. Take for example the Labour Party in the UK. I am a life-long member of the Labour Party, as was my father, and my grandfather was a Labour Member of Parliament. At present our Party is being ripped to shreds on the issue of Europe. Almost all the Labour Party are in favour of continued EU membership, but the Country voted to leave. We thus have Labour party MPs who campaigned against leaving, and whose constituents voted against leaving, being told by the Party leadership that they must vote, in the House of Commons, to leave.

Some refuse. Actually, quite a lot refuse.

The people who are tasked, in each political party, with ensuring that MPs vote as the leadership wishes are called "Whips". The Whips enforce party discipline. The problem with this issue is that three of the Labour Whips voted against the leadership's instructions. In normal circumstances such defiance would result in the individual being dropped from the "shadow" Cabinet team. The problem for Labour (that is, for my Party) is that there has been such a level of transgression and sackings that we are running out of possible candidates. So ... the decision was taken not to demote the "rebels" but to write to all those who did not vote with the leadership to warn them about their future conduct.

Who would write these letters? Why the Whips, of course: they are in charge of Party discipline.

But three of the Whips voted against. So we now have the prospect of the Whips writing to themselves to warn themselves of their own future conduct.

*"Dear Me,*

*I hope I realise how damaging it is for me to vote against the Party, etc., etc."*

As I say, the world of politics is in a very strange place at present. Happily the voice of pure reason that is humanism shines through the penumbra ... let's hope someone is looking.

Regards to you both, John

## RICKY GERVAIS EXPLAINS "AGNOSTIC ATHEISM" (AND WHY HE IS A GOOD BOY) TO CATHOLIC STEPHEN COLBERT

*(From "Late Night with Stephen Colbert", 2/1/17)*

**Colbert:** Okay, Ricky Gervais, why is there something rather than nothing? Why does the universe exist at all?

**Gervais:** That makes no sense, that's not the two choices.

**Colbert:** Those are the choices I'm giving you, I'm the host.

**Gervais:** Well, surely, the bigger question is not why but how. Why is irrelevant, isn't it?

**Colbert:** Okay, then *how* is there something rather than nothing? If you think of God as the Prime Mover ... is there a Prime Mover? A Demiurge that started everything?

**Gervais:** Well, outside science and nature, I don't believe so. I'm an agnostic atheist, technically. Agnostic means no one knows if there is a god. So technically, everyone's an agnostic. An agnostic atheist is someone who doesn't know if there's a god, or not.

**Colbert:** So you're not convicted of your atheism, not sure.

**Gervais:** Yes, I am. Because atheism is only rejecting the claim that there is a god. Atheism isn't a belief system.

This is atheism in a nutshell: You say there's a god. I say "Can you prove that?" You say "No." I say "I don't believe you then." So, you believe in one god, I assume.

**Colbert:** Um ... in three persons, but go ahead.

**Gervais:** Okay. But there are about 3,000 to choose from. You deny one less God than I do. You don't believe in 2,999 gods. And I don't believe in just one more. *(Laughter and applause)*.

**Colbert:** Do you ever feel gratitude for existence?

**Gervais:** Of course. I know the chances are billions to one that I am on this planet, as me, and will never be again.

**Colbert:** I know I can't convince you there is a God, nor do I want to, but I can only explain my experience, which is that I have a strong desire to direct that gratitude to something or someone. And that thing is God.

**Gervais:** Of course. We want to make sense of nature, of science. It is unfathomable that everything in the universe was once crunched into something smaller than an atom.

**Colbert:** But you don't *know* that. You just believe Stephen Hawking. And that's a matter of faith in his abilities. You don't know it yourself, you're accepting that because someone told you.

**Gervais:** Well, yes, but science is constantly proved all the time. If we take something like any fiction, any holy book, and destroyed it, in a thousand years time that wouldn't come back just as it was. Whereas if we took every science book and every fact and destroyed them all, in a thousand years they'd all be back, because all the same tests would be the same result. *(Applause)*

**Colbert:** That's good, that's really good.

**Gervais:** So, I don't need faith in science. I don't need faith to know that, probably, if I jump out the window ... because every time someone else jumped out the window they smashed to the ground, because of this thing called gravity.

**Colbert:** And then Satan would be raping you.

**Gervais:** That is why I'm a good boy.

## WE CELEBRATED DARWIN DAY IN STYLE

Fifty-five of us gathered in the back room of Third Avenue's Whitman & Bloom pub on February 11 for SHSNY's Ninth Annual Celebration of Darwin Day (February 12, Chuck's 208th birthday) & SHSNY's Anniversary (our 29th).



We enjoyed the buffet (excellent pub grub), we drank (some of us never left the bar), we mingled and schmoozed, connected with old friends and made new ones.



And listened, fascinated, as Professor Abby Hafer delivered her excellent lecture on *Not-So-Intelligent Design*, followed by a spirited Q&A session that would easily have gone on for another hour if our time at W&B had not run out.



### **And a good time was had by all ...**

Cy Adler  
Giddian Beer  
Kiwi Callahan  
Matt Callahan  
Deborah Cardile  
Karen Chamberlain  
Miron Dion-Arivas  
Mark Esposito  
Edith Finell  
Ron Finell  
Ken Gale  
Joel Galker

Harry Graber  
Maria Graber  
Lenore Green  
Steven Green  
Lorraine Gudas  
Jay Gumbiner  
Abby Hafer  
Eliane Hahn  
Max Hahn  
Elaine Heller  
Richard Heller  
Randy Hutt  
Dorothy Kahn  
Karen Larsen

Larry Manzino  
Carl Marxer  
Donna Marxer  
Scott Meyer  
Claire Miller  
Richard Milner  
Bob Mundy  
Bob Murtha  
Dawn Murtha  
Matthew Murtha  
Margo Myer  
Justine Ondricek  
Robert Ondricek  
David Orenstein

Kathleen Walsh Penn  
Charlotte Pomerantz  
John Rafferty  
Sharif Rahman  
Caroline Rubinstein  
Leslie Seldin  
Larry Shaw  
Nelly Sidoti  
Marjorie Vai  
Harvey Wachtel  
John Wagner  
Mike Weiss  
Liza Wherry  
Phil Winegar

## **2016 DUMBTH-OF-THE YEAR BY ACCLAMATION! DO WE EVEN HAVE TO SAY HIS NAME?**

Because the Editor of PIQUE spent December in hospital and rehab, our usual January-issue-based poll of the Dumbth-of-the-Year candidates was missing from the evening's festivities.

"But can we agree," Editor John Rafferty asked the room, "that the tiny-hands-down winner of the horse's-ass trophy for Dumbth of the Year 2016, is ~~ODIOUS NAME-REDACTED~~?"

"YES!" the room shouted back.

And here he is ...



# SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH – MAY

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**THURS, MARCH 2, 7-8:30 pm**  
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
**OF NEW YORK**

**28 East 35 St. (front lounge)**

We'll discuss

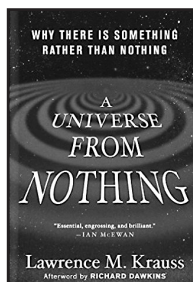
**A UNIVERSE**

**FROM NOTHING:**

**Why There is Something**  
**Rather Than Nothing**

**Lawrence Krauss**

Where did the universe come from? What was there before it? What will the future bring? And finally, why is there something rather than nothing?



One of the few prominent scientists today to have crossed the chasm between science and popular culture, Krauss describes the staggeringly beautiful experimental observations and mind-bending new theories that demonstrate not only can something arise from nothing, something will *always* arise from nothing.

*A Universe from Nothing* uses Krauss's characteristic wry humor and clear explanations to take us back to the beginning of the beginning, presenting the most recent evidence for how our universe evolved – and the implications for how it's going to end.

Provocative, challenging, and delightfully readable, this is a game-changing look at the most basic underpinning of existence and a powerful antidote to outmoded philosophical, religious, and scientific thinking.

– Paperback & Kindle available

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

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**THURS, APRIL 6, 7-8:30 pm**  
**Community Church of New York**  
**MIND & COSMOS: Why the**

**Materialist Neo-Darwinian**

**Conception of Nature is**

**Almost Certainly False**

**Thomas Nagel**

The modern materialist approach to life has conspicuously failed to explain such central mind-related features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, and value.

This failure to account for something so integral to nature as mind, argues philosopher Nagel, is a major problem, threatening to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture, extending to biology, evolutionary theory, and cosmology.

– Kindle & Audio editions available

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**THURS, MAY 4, 7-8:30 pm**  
**Community Church of New York**  
**THREE ESSAYS FROM "THE**

**STONE", THE NYTIMES'S ON-**  
**LINE PHILOSOPHY FORUM**

- *Who Is 'Evil', and Who is the Victim?*

**Brad Evans and Simona Forti**  
 The Stone, Sep 16, 2016

- *Is Humanism Really Humane?*  
**Natasha Lennard and Cary Wolfe**  
 The Stone, Jan 9, 2017

- *The Intellectual Life of Violence*  
**Brad Evans and**  
**Richard J. Bernstein**  
 The Stone, Jan 26, 2017

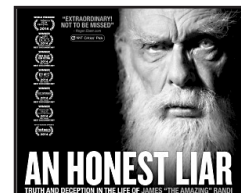
To read an essay, go to [www.nytimes.com/column/the-stone](http://www.nytimes.com/column/the-stone) and simply type its title into the "Search" box.

## SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

**MON, MARCH 13, 6:30 pm**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)**

**AN HONEST LIAR**

This 2015 documentary brings to life James "The Amazing" Randi's investigations that publicly exposed psychics, faith healers, and con artists. A master deceiver, Randi created fictional characters, fake psychics, and even turned his partner of 25 years, the artist Jose Alvarez, into a sham guru named Carlos. But when a revelation in his personal life is discovered, it isn't clear whether Randi is still the deceiver – or the deceived.



**After-Film Discussion:**

*How do we know whom to trust?*

**SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.**

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

## BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

**SUN, MARCH 19, 11:30 am**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-



grub menu includes a \$12 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and

conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

**After-Brunch Discussion:**

*Should humanists start our own freethought charter schools?*

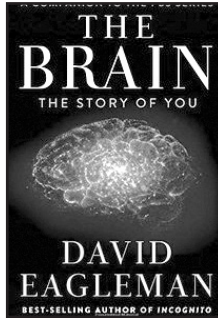


# SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH – MAY

**GREAT LECTURES ON DVD**  
**WED, MARCH 22, 7 pm**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)**

**THE BRAIN - Part 3:**  
**Who Is In Control?**  
**Dr. David Eagleman**

"Who Is in Control?", the third episode of this acclaimed PBS series, explores the great deception that greets us each morning when we awake:



it feels as though we are in conscious control of our lives but the truth is that we are not. Instead almost every action, every decision, every belief that we hold is driven by parts of the brain that we have no access to.

Why are we conscious if so much of who we are and what we do is dependent on areas of our brain that we have no control over – aren't we mindless zombies? Consciousness is the arbiter of millions of interacting elements and sub-systems, a totally unique vantage point, a way for trillions of cells to see themselves as a whole.

Dr. Eagleman ends with a brief journey through free will, and the deep question of whether we have any conscious control over our lives. Although there is tantalizing evidence that we can feel as though we are consciously in control when we are not, the experimental jury is still out on whether or not free will is an illusion.

However, free will or no, the brain's complexity guarantees that life will never feel predictable.

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

**STUDYING HUMANISM**  
**MON, MAR 27, 6:30-8:30 pm**  
**Community Church of New York**  
**28 East 35 St. (Gallery)**  
**ON WHAT DO HUMANISTS**  
**BASE THEIR VALUES,**  
**ETHICS, MORALS? - Part 2**

Theists cannot imagine an ethical system that is not based on a supernatural lawgiver and judge. "If God does not exist," Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov famously says, "then everything is permitted." If all moral and ethical choices are relative, then there is no "right", no "wrong".

Humanists, on the other hand, believe that human morals are derived from human evolution and social experience (we don't do slavery or bear-baiting anymore), and have nothing to do with any Hall Monitor in the Sky.

We will continue our discussion begun at our February meeting. New "humanist scholars" are welcome, and can catch up by doing the required reading\*:

**Online:** Google "Fred Edwords: The Human Basis of Law and Ethics". (20 minutes to read).

**Online:** Google "Humanism and its Aspirations" (10 minutes).

**Book:** Greg Epstein: *Good Without God*. (Kindle and inexpensive paperback editions available). We will focus on Chapter 1: "Can We Be Good Without God?"

Please check the website (shsny.org), and our Facebook and Meetup sites for possible further short readings.

\*Yes, *required*. Studying Humanism is a *study* group. If you have *not* done the reading (at least the online materials), you may audit the discussion only.

We welcome *all* readers, so please come.

**LIKE SHSNY ON FACEBOOK**  
<https://www.facebook.com/SHSofNY>  
**MEET US ON MEETUP**  
[www.meetup.com/shsny-org/](http://www.meetup.com/shsny-org/)  
**TEXT US ON TWITTER**  
 @SHS\_NewYork

## 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 on DVD:**

**4th Wednesday**

at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Studying Humanism: Last Monday**

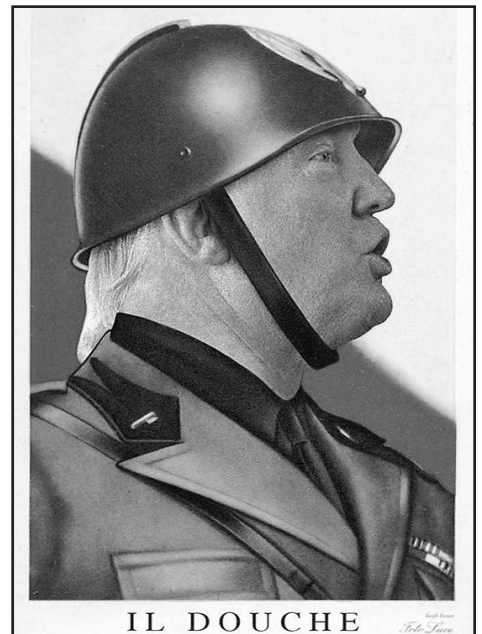
at the Community Church of NY

**More info:** [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org)

and/or 646-922-7389

(leave a call-back number)

*"I am your voice. I alone can fix America."*  
 – Donald Trump



*"I look at myself in the first grade and I look at myself now, I'm basically the same. The temperament is not that different."*  
 – Donald Trump

**The Candidates for the Board Speak for Themselves:**  
**DONNA MARXER**

I have been a professional painter and arts activist in New York City for 62 years. I have always been an environmentalist as well and 16 years ago founded an artists' residency in my native Florida's endangered Everglades National Park—from which I am now retired as chairman emeritus.



As the arts are my home ground, I am deeply disturbed by them being so far in the background of the current administration's disastrous budget cut promises. It pledges to end both the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Humanities (NEH) even though their combined budgets are a mere \$300 million. As a secular humanist, I understand the importance of the arts that—even though they are not at the forefront of our attention—are nevertheless essential to the richness of our civilization. They are certainly a measurement of our humanity.

Because of the importance of ecological issues and our threatened national parks, I hope to continue on the SHSNY Board as an advocate for both the arts and the environment.

I also proudly serve on the Board of Directors of the Rebecca Kelly Ballet Company, an SHSNY member.

**DR. DAVID I. ORENSTEIN**

Over the last two years much has changed regarding our secular world and our individual and collective responsibility to each other to maintain our humanist way of life in the United States and around the globe. Nationalism has spread across Europe, and our November election has brought to the nation an administration that seeks to remake America in the image of less open and much more controlled societies where dictators reign supreme and checks and balances on power are diminished. Where "making America great again" is synonymous with defunding public education, eliminating or disregarding climate science. Where the removal of funding for Planned Parenthood and the subsequent removal of women's reproductive freedom is challenged. Where the teaching of evolution is suspect and alien for those in power who hold their faith above science, reason and evidenced truth.



This is a sad vision of America, where immigrants are blamed for the ills of the nation and unchecked and deregulated capitalism will only line the pockets of the rich, while the poor remain poorer. That is not humanism.

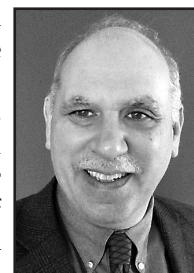
It is incumbent on all of us to place significant pressure on our elected officials, regardless of party, to ensure that the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, our Constitution, and the Humanist Manifesto III remain our three guiding principles for clarity, and honesty and hope for the future.

I have served on the Board of the Secular Humanist Society of New York with pride. Not pride which is based in hubris, but a pride in knowing that I am working with good people who want to make a better world. A pride in knowing that leading in this organization can and does set the tone for programming, events and other activities of the association.

I hope to be re-elected to the Board with your support. Not for any self-aggrandizement but because there is still so much more to do: to train others, to build bridges, to know more and to share. These are my goals and with your help, I hope to again serve you and my colleagues with honesty and for the sake of our collective humanity.

**JONATHAN ENGEL**

I am honored to be considered for a place on the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. I believe strongly that, now more than ever, our community, our country and the world all need secular humanism as a voice for reason and decency for all people. One of the great things about secular humanism is that it is open to all: your age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, place of birth, etc., are no bar to joining the community of secular humanists. All you need to bring with you is your open mind, capacity to reason, and a commitment to treating all fellow inhabitants of planet Earth with kindness and respect. I therefore respect a person's right to base their worldview on ancient supernatural beliefs, but I do not necessarily respect those beliefs in and of themselves. While I do not believe that people can or should be pushed into adopting a rational point of view, I do think they can be educated and persuaded, and the furtherance of such education and persuasion is one of the reasons that I belong to and support the SHSNY.



I have had a broad range of educational, employment and personal experiences in my life, which I think will render me a valuable resource for the SHSNY. I have a B.A. degree in History and a Juris Doctor degree. I practiced law in New York for twenty years, after which I decided to try my hand in other areas, although I do retain my law license. I worked for over three years in various capacities for the New York State Office of Mental Health, including counseling parents of kids living with mental health diagnoses and acting as co-coordinator in New York City of the agency's suicide prevention initiative. I then took a position with a non-profit organization that provides health care and housing for people with a history of homelessness, many of whom also have health and behavioral health challenges.

I now provide grant proposal writing and regulatory consultation to small non-profits that work in the areas of health care, housing, and social services. I also give presentations on the *Engel v. Vitale* Regents' prayer case and the separation of church and state. My interest in this case is partly a legacy from my father. He was one of the plaintiffs



in the Engel case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court held that organized prayers in public schools were a violation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. I also do quite a bit of writing, primarily on the issue of separation of church and state, but also on other topics. I have had essays published in *Church & State* magazine, and I am a frequent contributor to *PIQUE*.

#### KIWI CALLAHAN

The political climate in our country has been tilting disturbingly towards superstition and fear for years, but as we all know, recent events have pushed the assault on our intellects to an alarming level. It is more important than ever for like-minded, reasonable people to band together and take action as a collective. We have never before been faced with such utter disregard for reason from our government and from political groups, and we must not stand idly by while it continues to permeate our society.

Last year, I joined the SHSNY and created 14 episodes of a web series called "The Chronicles of Humanism", each examining a different historical event through the lens of humanism. Partway through the year I was asked to join the board, a responsibility that I was delighted to accept.

I am committed to advancing the SHSNY agenda of humanity and reason through film and digital media. I am committed to engaging and enlisting potential new members through my roles on the Events Planning Committee and the Political Action Committee, so that the SHSNY can continue to grow and fight for a safer, smarter, and more humane country. I have thoroughly enjoyed serving on the board of the SHSNY this past year, and with your support and your vote, I'd love to continue doing so.



#### CARLOS MARTIN MORA

It seems that the gods want me to renew my participation on the board of the secular humanist society of New York. Suddenly the security of free thinkers is threatened by the demigod who now inhabits the White House. The formerly I-thought-solid, impenetrable Wall that separates Church and State is under assault and I want to personally be involved in strengthening it!

My outlook has always been at times a guide, subtle but there, and I'd like to continue it.

*Note: More candidate statements will appear in the April and May issues of PIQUE. – JR*

Being an atheist is like being the only kid in class who knows there's no Santa Claus, and waiting for everyone else to grow the fuck up. – Forwarded by Gretchen Robinson



#### TORPEDOING MY RELIGION

John A Wagner

Even as a five-year old, I was very serious about religion. I took my lead from my parents, priests and teachers as the truth, and quickly realized that religion was the most important subject in school. How could it be otherwise when my immortal soul was at stake? As a young dyslectic, I did poorly in most subjects, but I was at the top of the class in religion. I was rewarded by being singled out to take my first communion in the first grade, a year younger than my peers. I loved discussing and debating religious and moral issues with priests and nuns and was a master of the Baltimore Catechism.

The first leak in my religious footing sprung in the sixth grade. To the delight of my parents, I had finally made that transition that allows dyslexics to read, and I had found books that I loved. I avidly read Comic books and the lives of the saints. I discovered adventure books. My favorite books were about submarine warfare in WWII. *Run Silent, Run Deep* hooked me on the genre, and I found many others that followed a similar pattern. Young men and senior sailors left mothers, girlfriends and wives to fight the war in the Pacific. They would go on patrol, find a Japanese convoy, maneuver to torpedo freighters or tankers, and then try to escape. Inevitably, they were chased by Japanese destroyers that dropped depth charges, trying to send them to the bottom of the sea. The explosions compressed the hulls, leaks developed, and were sealed. The submarine dove to fool the destroyers, but the added pressure compounded the hazard. Sometimes the sub would maneuver and try to attack the destroyer and even sink it! How my heart would pound. The crews lived or died together, but in my books, they always lived. The submarine would return to port to reunite with mothers, girlfriends and wives, but with the knowledge that the scenario would be repeated. I reveled in identifying with the torpedo men, the sonar operators, the navigators, and the captains who would make sacrifices for a noble cause. They saved their loved ones. They preserved our American way of life.

Everything changed with a book I read that spring. The book described a great strategic battle of wits between a destroyer and the captain of a submarine that had torpedoed several freighters, but was now trapped at great depth, the hull creaking and groaning, the depth charges exploding. I feared for the safety of the crew and my heart was pounding. I was hoping they escaped and triumphed, but then I had a realization: this book was set in WWII, but in the Atlantic theater, not the Pacific. The destroyer captain was an American trying to protect commerce along the East coast of the United States, the sailors that he had trapped at the bottom of the ocean were Nazis! Why was I rooting for them? (In retrospect, this was my first realization that 'point of view' is important.) This was horrible, but then it got worse. Not only had I identified with the 'bad guys', but I also remembered that I was of German heritage. If my ancestors had not immigrated to the USA a couple of

generations before, I might have been trapped in that submarine. I might have been fighting the forces of freedom and democracy. It took me a while to work through that internal conflict, but the next was even more difficult.

A couple of weeks later, I was thinking about how lucky I was to have been born in in the US and not Nazi Germany. Luckily, I had been educated about the virtues of democracy and freedom rather than Nazism. How fortunate to have been born in America to such great parents. I could have been born in a different society. I could have been born in India, where my parents would have taught me a pagan religion. (I do not think that I had even heard of Hinduism or Jainism at that time, although I deeply appreciated the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism and the errors of the non-Catholic Protestant religions.) Then it hit me: what if my parents had been non-Catholics? What if my parents were Jewish or lived in India? At first I had a tremendous sense of gratitude. I was so fortunate. Only slowly did it come to me that my embrace of the Catholic faith was really an accident of birth. If I had been born in India, I would have been a "pagan".

The next question was the one that plagued me for many years: Was an accident of birth sufficient to embrace the truth of the Catholic Faith? There was a dangerous leak in the hull that protected and preserved my Catholic faith. Could I repair it? Should I? Might I escape back to the security provided by the theology that I had studied so intensely for many years? The mental voyage initiated by that submarine adventure story had many segments, too many for this essay, but I eventually landed at the port of Evolutionary Humanism, a place where I must depend on myself and my fellow sailors to navigate life's problems and opportunities.

## THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN MEDICINE AND RELIGION

Peter Rogatz, M.D.

**T**he absurd position of some religions, rejecting key aspects of modern medicine, is well-known. A salient example is the almost fanatical resistance of many Jehovah's Witnesses to blood transfusions, denying this life-saving measure not only to themselves, but to their children.

This closed-minded approach can be traced back over millennia. Several hundred years before Jesus and St. Paul and the birth of Christianity, medical science was beginning to take shape in classical Greece through the efforts of Hippocrates. Centuries later, when the Romans conquered Greece, they absorbed much of Greek medical science, and Galen of Pergamon, Greece's great physician, eventually went to live and work in Rome. The beginnings of medical science were evident.

However, as Christianity took hold throughout the Roman Empire (after 325 CE), religious leaders suppressed efforts to understand the body and treat illness, insisting instead that disease is a punishment inflicted by God or is the work of demons. It is painful to read the primitive,

fantasy-based notions of a major thinker like Augustine, who wrote: "All diseases of Christians are to be ascribed to these demons; chiefly they torment newly baptized Christians, and even guiltless newborn infants."

Medical progress was openly opposed by the Church throughout the Middle Ages. Dissection of corpses in order to study the human body was considered sinful. People were urged to cope with disease by prayer and by contributing money to the Church. Not only Catholic leaders, but also Protestant reformers of the 16th Century—Luther, Calvin and others—opposed medical interventions as attempts to circumvent the will of God. Punishments were extreme and "sinners" were sometimes burned alive.

In the late 19th Century smallpox spread through Montreal, and Catholic priests opposed vaccination as interference with the will of God. Protestants were more likely to be vaccinated and, as a result, most escaped the epidemic while Catholics suffered high mortality rates. Even today, in our (relatively) enlightened country, there is a benighted minority who fear and reject vaccination, rather than welcoming its use to prevent or attenuate serious illness.

In recent years the know-nothing stubbornness of some religionists has found its way into U.S. politics. President George W. Bush, throughout his eight-year administration, insisted on anti-scientific policies that stymied stem cell research, birth control measures, and efforts to cope with climate change. President Obama made noteworthy progress toward restoring rational science to federal policy-making, but the victory of science over religion (in medicine and many other fields) is not yet at hand. Sadly, in 2017, President Trump, seems unwilling to shake the know-nothing views of the past. A Trump presidency is likely to involve a rolling back of progress in birth control and other science-based fields. The struggle continues.

## HISTORIAN SAYS HUMANISTS "WORSHIP" HUMANITY

Walter Balcerak

*(Note: This is Walter's third and final essay evaluating Yuval Harari's book, Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind. The first two essays appeared in July and October, 2016. – JR)*

*"Theist religions focus on the worship of gods.*

*Humanist religions worship humanity."*

**W**orship? I was thunderstruck when I read that passage in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, by Yuval Noah Harari.

It gets worse: "Humanism is a belief that *Homo sapiens* has a unique and sacred nature ... ." Sacred? "Humanists believe that the unique nature of *Homo sapiens* is the most important thing in the world, and it determines the meaning of everything that happens in the universe." Really, the entire universe?

Wait, it gets *much* worse: "The only humanist sect that has actually broken loose from traditional monotheism is evolutionary humanism, whose most famous representatives are the Nazis." Good grief!

Please don't conclude from these quotes that Harari is a gibbering idiot. I assure you he is not. The rest of his bestselling book is an intelligent and stimulating overview of human history from prehistoric times to the modern day. His view of humanism is distorted because he conflates it with ideologies he calls "natural-law religions", such as liberalism, Communism, and nationalism. For Harari, they are religions even though they lack belief in a deity.

Why? Because, he contends, although they are not founded on a "supernatural" law, they *are* based on a "superhuman" one. "If a religion is a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order, then Soviet Communism was no less a religion than Islam," Harari asserts. He says socialism's superhuman order is based on Marx's laws of history, which is true. But that in no way makes godless Soviet Communism a religion. In fact, Harari's viewpoint renders the entire concept of religion meaningless.

Liberalism, Communism and nationalism are ideologies, not religions, because by definition religions are founded on belief in a supernatural order. Furthermore, Harari recognizes only three forms of humanism: liberal humanism, socialist humanism, and evolutionary humanism. But what about secular humanism? By its very name, this movement asserts that it rejects religion.

At its core, secular humanism is more methodology than ideology. It is premised on the indisputable fact that we best understand ourselves and the universe if we replace supernatural explanations with conclusions based on the human faculty of reason and its greatest intellectual achievement, science.

Of course, secular humanism is not mere methodology. Here's how Steven Schafersman—a geologist and current president of Texas Citizens for Science—describes humanism on the website of the American Humanist Association:

"Humanists affirm that humans have the freedom to give meaning, value, and purpose to their lives by their own independent thought, free inquiry, and responsible, creative activity. Humanists stand for the building of a more humane, just, compassionate, and democratic society using a pragmatic ethics based on human reason, experience, and reliable knowledge – an ethics that judges the consequences of human actions by the well-being of all life on the planet."

*Amen.*

### A PARABLE FOR OUR TIMES

A billionaire Hedge Fund Manager, a Fox News Viewer and a Refugee are survivors of a shipwreck who find themselves together on a raft with only a 10-pack of Mars Bars for food.

"I'm an expert on resources management," the Hedge Fund Manager says, "so I'll take charge of the food."

With that, he tears open the 10-pack and immediately stuffs nine of the candy bars into his mouth.

As he finishes swallowing, he gives the tenth to the Fox News Viewer, and whispers to him, "I'd watch out for the Refugee if I were you – he'll try to steal your chocolate."

### MIKE ORZECZOWSKI 1933-2017

Teacher, musician, computer expert and scholar of classical languages, Mike Orzechowski was a member of SHSNY for only a short time, but made an outsized impression on all those he met in the Studying Humanism group, and died peacefully in his sleep at home in January.

A teacher of computer skills at the 1199 SEIU Service Workers Union and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Community Church of New York, Mike joined our Studying Humanism group three years ago, and within a year began planning and leading some of the best discussions, the best evenings, we've ever enjoyed.

Mike will be missed.



### MORE ON ACTIVISM – THE EASY WAY Joel Galker

So far we've mainly heard kvetching from humanists, ("What Should Humanists *Do* in the Age of Trump?", PIQUE, February) not the kind of response I was hoping for. I'm thinking that the most likely way to get humanists involved politically, maybe the only way, is to post clear and concise directions about political clubs or groups or demonstrations to join.

Maybe small-space "fillers" in PIQUE would work, and we could call them *Easy Activism*. I'd be willing to write fillers about what crosses my path in my hood and elsewhere.

*Response: Sounds good, Joel – you're on. And let's start with your first couple of suggestions. – JR*

**Easy Activism:** *Grab Your Wallet* tells you which businesses are happy to take your shopping dollars—while outright supporting Trump or selling Trump-family merchandise—and tells you what you can do about it, i.e., boycott and tell them why. GYW lists phone numbers and a long list of alternatives of where to spend your money. My preference is to look-up the email addresses, reasoning that emails live longer than phone calls. Go to: [www.grabyourwallet.org](http://www.grabyourwallet.org)

**Easy Activism:** *Color of Change* is about fighting racism against African-Americans but they don't neglect Trump, his supporters and collaborators. Click on the navigation icon (3 horizontal lines) then "Our Campaigns" for a list of petitions with links. Go to: [www.colorofchange.org](http://www.colorofchange.org)

### CATHOLICISM: ITALIAN STYLE

(From *Harper's Weekly Review*, 1/11/2017)

In Padua, Father Andrea Contin, a 48-year-old parish priest, is accused of advertising 15 of his lovers on a wife-swapping site, organizing orgies in his home and on the San Lazzaro church premises, and concealing pornographic home videos in cases labeled with the names of popes.



**NEIL deGRASSE TYSON:  
SCIENTIFIC ILLITERACY THREATENS US ALL**

**Michael Stone**

**S**peaking to a nearly sold-out crowd at the Greensboro Coliseum in Greensboro, North Carolina, popular astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson addressed the current crisis in scientific literacy that plagues the U.S.

Tyson told the audience that ....

"Americans overall are bad at science. Scared of math. Poor at physics and engineering. Resistant to evolution. This science illiteracy is a threat to the nation.

"The consequence of that is that you breed a generation of people who do not know what science is nor how and why it works. You have mortgaged the future financial security of your nation. Innovations in science and technology are the (basis) of tomorrow's economy." ...

"Just look back 1,000 years ago at the Middle East, where math and science flourished in Baghdad. Algebra and algorithms were invented in the Middle East. So were Arabic numerals, the numbers we still use today."

But when a new cleric emerged during the 12th century, he declared math and science to be earthly pursuits, and good Muslims should be concerned about spiritual affairs. The scientists drifted away, and scientific literacy faded.

Of 655 Nobel Prizes awarded in the sciences since 1900,

only three have been awarded to Muslims.

Tyson warned: "Things that seem harmless can have devastating effects. ... Today too many Americans mistake clouds for UFOs, believe in alien abductions, reject evolution, fear the number 13 and negative numbers, and freak out about supermoons that really aren't any bigger than regular old full moons."

**SAGAN SAW THE THREAT 22 YEARS AGO**

**Carl Sagan**

*(Excerpted from The Demon-Haunted World, 1995)*

**S**cience is more than a body of knowledge; it is a way of thinking. I have a foreboding of an America in my children's or grandchildren's time—when the United States is a service and information economy; when nearly all the key manufacturing industries have slipped away to other countries; when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably question those in authority; when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness.

**Plus: Rickey Gervais & Stephen  
Colbert ... Neil deGrasse Tyson  
& Carl Sagan ... and lots more.**

**Darwin Day was a Big night  
Page 5**

**The Right to Choose:  
A (Woman's) Humanist  
Perspective  
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**SHSNY Board Election  
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**Getting active politically  
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