



# The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

October 2010

## Amanda Metskas and August Brunzman Camp Quest and Secular Student Alliance

Sunday, October 17, 2010, 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston, SC

We are fortunate to have two guests for our October meeting who will speak about their respective secular youth organizations.

Amanda Metskas will talk to us about Camp Quest, the first residential summer camp in the history of the United States for the children of Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists, Brights and others who hold to a naturalistic, non-supernatural world view.

Amanda has been involved with Camp Quest since 2003. She has served as President of the Board since June 2005, and as Board Secretary for a year prior to that. Amanda is also a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Ohio State University. While at camp, Amanda leads educational activities on critical thinking, debate, and international relations.

The purpose of Camp Quest is to provide children of freethinking parents a residential summer camp dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy, free speech, and the separation of religion and government guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States.

Camp Quest was first held in 1996 and until 2002 was operated by the Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. The idea for the project originated with Edwin Kagin. He and his wife Helen served as Camp Directors for the

first ten years of the original Camp Quest, retiring at the end of the 2005 camp session.

August Brunzman, the executive director of the Secular Student Alliance (SSA), will discuss SSA's ongoing efforts to build a strong youth and student movement by developing programs to maintain involvement, communication and community.

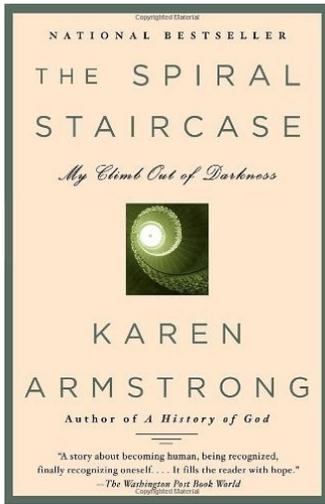
SSA is an educational nonprofit based in Columbus, Ohio. The organization's purpose is to educate high school and college students around the country about the value of scientific reason and the intellectual basis of secularism in its atheistic and humanistic manifestations.

The SSA offers students and their organizations a variety of resources, including leadership training and support, guest speakers, discounted literature and conference tickets, and thought-provoking online articles and opinions. The SSA also offers major long-term benefits both to the major secular national organizations and their local affiliates.

August has served as SSA's executive director since 2001. He also worked as a programmer for the Institute for Humanist Studies from 2001 to 2004. In 1997 he co-founded Students for Freethought at the Ohio State University where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 2001 with a major in psychology and minors in mathematics and cognitive science.

## SHL Book Group

by Matt Dean



The SHL Book Group will meet on October 24th to discuss "The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness" by Karen Armstrong.

In 1962, British writer Armstrong entered a Roman Catholic convent, smitten by the desire to "find God." She was 17 years old at the time — too young, she recognizes now, to have made such a momentous decision. Armstrong's 1981 memoir

Through the Narrow Gate described her frustrating, lonely experience of cloistered life and her decision, at 24, to renounce her vows. Her departure from the convent, she writes, actually made her quite sad; she was "constantly wracked by a very great regret" and suffering on top of it with the symptoms of undiagnosed temporal lobe epilepsy. How she emerged from such darkness to make a career as a writer whose books honor spiritual concerns while maintaining intellectual freedom and rigor—this is Armstrong's real concern, and the one that will be of most interest to the fans of her many acclaimed works.

The New York Times Book Review says that "In . . . Armstrong's memoir there lurks wisdom about the making and remaking of a life . . . from which all of us could learn."

There are six copies of the book in the Charleston county library system, one copy in the Dorchester county library system, and one copy in the Berkeley county library system. New and used copies are also available through Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

## *The Separationist*

Newsletter of the  
Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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## From the President

Last month I put a few extra miles on my car, but I have no complaints; I met a lot of friendly freethinkers and godless heathens.

On September 5th, the Myrtle Beach Humanists and Free Thinkers celebrated the first anniversary of their formal meetings in the Chapin Memorial Library. The speaker, Reid Johnson, discussed naturalistic explanations for supposedly supernatural experiences. The talk was fascinating, and it was a great pleasure to meet everyone.

The following weekend, I traveled to Wilmington to hear Margaret Downey address the Humanists and Freethinkers of Cape Fear. Margaret, past president of Atheist Alliance International and founder of the Anti-Discrimination Support Network, told the story of her journey to freedom of thought. One goal of her presentation was to urge us to tell our stories as well. Our September 19th meeting drew far more people than I had dared dream. About 60 of us gathered to hear Jeremy Hall's story. The questions and answers after his talk were lively and engaging. And at dinner, we just about filled the back room at Old Towne. All in all, it was a great way to kick off the fall!

Some comments from our Meetup page:

"Loved the speaker's relaxed style and his story tore my heart out."

"The talk given by Jeremy Hall was interesting to hear since so often the soldiers side of the story is lost in the media hubbub. I only hope that more freethinkers like Jeremy can stand up and voice themselves so that the nation, and world, can get a clear message."

Thanks to everyone who made it such a companionable, memorable evening!

Matt

## Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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### Officers

President: Matt Dean

Vice President: Herb Silverman

Treasurer: Jonathan Lamb

Secretary: Laura Kasman

## Family Corner: An A-mazing Fall Picnic

by Amy Monsky

Our second annual Fall Picnic will be Saturday, Oct. 16 from 4-8 pm. Last year's was so successful that it will once again be held at the West Farm Corn Maze. The 6-acre corn maze features three miles of trails and has a couple of new additions this year - a mini maze for small children and a mystery to solve by collecting clues within the maze. Other attractions include a children's play area, small petting zoo, and hay rides. There is something for everyone, so come on out and join us!



We will have a potluck dinner in the party shed, so please bring a dish to share. Admission to the farm includes the corn maze and is \$6 for ages 12 and up, \$2 for kids 3-12 and free for those 2 years and under.

If you'd like to come, but don't want to do the maze, a reduced admission-only rate of \$3 is available. These admission prices reflect a group discount, so please tell the cashier that you are with SHL to ensure you receive the discounted rate. And please note that West Farm accepts cash and checks only—no debit or credit cards. For directions and more information, you can visit their website at:

[www.westfarmcornmaze.com](http://www.westfarmcornmaze.com).

RSVPs are not necessary, but are helpful. To RSVP, or if you have any questions, please email me at:

[SecularCharlestonMom@gmail.com](mailto:SecularCharlestonMom@gmail.com).

## Volunteer Corner

by Nancy Worley

Eleven SHLers volunteered at the Charleston Animal Center on September 25<sup>th</sup>. A busy time was had by all visiting, walking and bathing dogs, brushing and visiting with cats. The volunteer coordinator at CAS said we were "awesome". Plans are to repeat this volunteer opportunity again on Saturday, October 23 from 10AM -12 noon. If you would like to join us, please let me know by phone at 763-4044 or e-mail at [worleyn@bellsouth.net](mailto:worleyn@bellsouth.net). There is a need at the shelter for towels, washable throw rugs (dogs are given a rug to lie on rather than a dog bed which is hard to keep clean) toys and empty pill bottles which are used to send medicine home with animals being adopted or fostered. There will be a collection box for the items at the front entrance of Gage Hall at all of our monthly meetings. If you are going to volunteer with us on October 23, bring any of these items you would like to donate with you. We are continuing to collect school supplies for the Teachers Supply Closet. Pencils, crayons, glue sticks, notebooks, crafts supplies, and slightly used toys are always welcome. A collection box for these items will also be located at the front of Gage Hall during our monthly meetings.

## SHL Charity of the Quarter

by Jonathan Lamb



Help Us Raise \$400 for The Sustainability Institute!

The Board has selected The Sustainability Institute of Charleston as the charity for September and October. This organization is based in North Charleston and focuses on helping low-income households weatherize their homes to cut down on heating and cooling costs. They have a small staff and numerous volunteers who help them accomplish this mission. The S.I. also conducts community workshops on a wide range of sustainability topics such as composting and water conservation. As of late September we have collected \$180. Please contribute by bringing a check to the meeting (made out to "SHL" with "Sep-Oct charity" on the memo line) or donate quickly and easily on our website. See the link under the Top News Stories.

# Camp Quest: A Summer Camp Experience Beyond Belief

by Amy Monsky

This past summer, my son, Jake, and I had the pleasure of attending Camp Quest. Since its inception in 1996, Camp Quest has been providing a week-long residential summer camp with a focus on “fun, friendship, and freethought” for children of non-religious parents. Of course, Camp Quest is open to all children ages 8-17, regardless of religious background. Originally held in northern Kentucky, Camp Quest Ohio is the oldest and largest of the 10-and-counting Camp Quest locations spanning the United States, Canada, the UK and Ireland. This year 78 campers and almost 30 staff members from as far away as Colorado and even Ireland found their way to Clarksville, Ohio. There were many new faces, but the majority were returning campers. In fact, many of the staff members were previous campers themselves and only one other counselor and I were new to Camp Quest. The high number of returning campers and staff was the first sign that this was going to be a great week.

Camp began Saturday morning amid a bustle of arriving campers eagerly greeting old friends, meeting new ones, and finding their cabins. After getting their children unpacked, the parents gathered to discuss camp and parenting without religion. As a parent, I was eager to talk to and hear the stories of other like-minded parents. Amanda Metskas, the Executive Director of Camp Quest, Inc, had several copies of “Parenting Beyond Belief” on hand for parents to peruse. NBC Nightline was also present to conduct interviews and film some activities at camp for a documentary about Edwin Kagin, one of the founders of Camp Quest.

Saturday night's opening camp fire set the tone for the rest of the week. Edwin talked to the kids about camp and told the story of how each year everyone is asked to fill out a survey form. One of the questions asks what the child learned at camp, and one girl had answered that “it is okay to be an atheist.” Edwin now prominently displays a banner with these words at camp. He also told the children the traditional Camp Quest tale of the invisible unicorns at camp. Anyone who could prove that they were not there would win \$100. And it's not just any \$100 bill, but a pre-“In God We Trust” one. The kids had an opportunity to ask questions and pose their opinions regarding these unicorns at each nightly camp fire. Needless to say, the \$100 is still up for grabs.

In many ways, Camp Quest is like other summer camps. We went canoeing. The older kids went on a high ropes course. We played traditional field games

like tug-of-war and relay races. The cabins competed in a daily clean cabin contest. There were nature walks, an archery field, arts and crafts, and daily swimming sessions. We roasted marshmallows – both the regular and the vegan kind – for s'mores. Each night featured a special activity. One night was a movie night and the campers had the option of sleeping under the stars. Another night was a talent show and dance. During the carnival night, campers could earn tickets which they redeemed for various prizes. Jake and one of his friends traded their tickets in for a chance to pie one of the counselors in the face!

In other ways, Camp Quest was most definitely not like other summer camps. While announcing the cleanest cabin winners, August Brunsman, the Camp Director, would remind campers that “cleanliness was next to godlessness.” Cabins took turns presenting a famous freethinker. Some cabins chose people such as Abraham Lincoln or Mark Twain. I was amused to learn that the older girls chose George Clooney and Daniel Radcliffe. At mealtime, campers learned about various religions and their beliefs and had a chance to discuss some of the current controversies, such as the banning of the burqa in France. Students also gathered to discuss questions like “What is a soul?” at Socrates Cafe, an activity designed to foster critical thinking. Stan Mills, a teacher from Nebraska, put on a magic show of sorts. By performing various magic tricks and sleights of hand, he demonstrated that there could be a logical cause for something even if that cause is not immediately apparent. And in addition to all of these activities, Camp Quest offered campers the opportunity to be around other kids who thought like they did and a place where they can be comfortable being themselves.

While the campers were in no way indoctrinated against religion, they were not discouraged from having fun with religion either. Everyone was divided into teams that worked together throughout the whole week. Each team had to pick a name and a cheer. Many of the team names had nothing to do with religion, but one team named themselves the Flaming Messiahs after the nearby “Touchdown Jesus” that had been struck by lightning and burned down. Another team's name was the Dinosaur Jesus Riders, and their cheer was “Yeehaw! Ride that Jesus!” That one got some giggles.

By the time the following Saturday came, everyone

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was exhausted and most of us were stinky. Thank goodness for the swimming pool, because I'm pretty sure my child didn't shower all week long! Jake and I enjoyed recounting the events of the week on that very long drive home. He was already talking about camp next year, and I think my friends list doubled on Facebook. And Jake and I have both sported our very cool Camp Quest t-shirts that say "Good for Goodness' Sake Since 1996" several times since returning home.

This was Jake's first summer camp and it was awesome to be there to see my child experience it. Many times I have been frustrated as a parent to see opportunities closed to my child because we are non-religious. Boy Scouts is not an option for us. Vacation Bible School is not in our future. Even many otherwise secular activities have religious undertones. I was thrilled to find out about the existence of Camp Quest. It was everything I had hoped for.

Amy is SHL Family Activities Coordinator.

## Hawking and the Pope

by Herb Silverman

New theories make a creator of the universe unnecessary, says Stephen Hawking in his latest book *The Grand Design*, co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow. Despite Hawking's renowned brilliance, I'm sure this won't end discussions about God's existence. Even if the theory is proved beyond reasonable doubt, most believers will either ignore the evidence or create arguments to make the findings consistent with their god beliefs.

M-theory predicts that the universe in which we live is just one of countless universes, with different physical laws. Most universes wouldn't sustain life, but Hawking believes that many would. M-theory could answer scientifically the question about why there is something instead of nothing. Hawking argues that such a law of gravity would show that the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Where does that place us?

The more we learn scientifically, the less significant humans seem in our natural world. Darwin showed that humans are simply animals, and Copernicus displaced humanity from the center of the universe. If M-theory turns out to be correct, we might be an unremarkable species living in an unremarkable part of an unremarkable universe.

Hawking has not ended the God debate. All he's said is that God is not necessary to explain a spontaneous creation of our universe, humans, or anything else. As accomplished a cosmologist as Hawking is, no scientist would ever declare, "Steven Hawking said it, I believe it, and that settles it." Scientists require evidence, not an appeal to authority. We will likely need decades of investigation and experimentation before cosmologists reach consensus on the origin of the universe. Then again, a scientific consensus may never be reached.

What is important is that we test our ideas, improve

our methods of observation, and accurately predict physical phenomena until we reach a scientific consensus. While there is some evidence for M-theory, it sounds incredible to me. But here's a more incredible hypothesis, devoid of any evidence, that many believe: A benevolent deity always existed in nothingness, and then created a universe. Billions of years later, he decided he was lonely and created human beings. His only interest in humans is in how much they love him and how they worship him. When humans die, they will either be rewarded or punished for eternity based solely on whether they believed this to be true.

Even more incredible to me is the belief of millions of Catholics each Sunday that they are literally eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ, despite chemical or DNA evidence that wafers and wine remain wafers and wine. We can choose to follow evidence wherever it leads, follow only the evidence that confirms our prejudices, or make decisions based solely on faith.

Stephen Hawking once met with Pope John Paul II at a cosmology conference at the Vatican. Hawking quoted the pope as saying, "It's OK to study the universe and where it began. But we should not inquire into the beginning itself because that was the moment of creation and the work of God." Pope Benedict, who also briefly met with Hawking at an event hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, described science as the pursuit of knowledge about God's creation.

Such popes fail to grasp the rudiments of scientific inquiry. Science is about asking and trying to solve interesting questions, not limiting or discouraging them. This is quite a contrast to St. Augustine. When asked what God did before making the world, Augustine replied, "He was creating a Hell for people who ask questions like that."

Check out Herb's other commentaries at: [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb\\_silverman](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb_silverman)

# Rebooting Humanism

Modern Humanism Has Become Outdated; Humanists Need a New Humanism Today

by Barry F. Seidman

In various magazines and websites dedicated to philosophical humanism, there has been an important, if outdated debate on the core nature of humanism. I say outdated because, although humanism has been (and should always be) a philosophy in flux—being that it is an “ism” which depends on our ever evolving understanding of the human experience—a clear understanding of the core of humanism ought not be up for debate so late in the game.

Modern humanism, though reconceived many times over, can be said to have been crystallized in 1933 with the Humanist Manifesto I. When we talk today about humanism—at least in the United States—we are more than likely referring to that which has resulted from that radical document drafted over 70 years ago. We can also refer back to the work of Corliss Lamont (*The Philosophy of Humanism*), Paul Kurtz, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, Felix Adler, as well as those organizations which they helped bring into existence – The American Humanist Association, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Ethical Culture Society respectfully.

Though it is clear to me that all participants in this debate have legitimately argued their concerns regarding the state humanism finds itself in today – internally fractured and ineffective in changing minds – I feel that before we can talk about how to make humanism more appealing to “moderate” religious folks (the majority of our fellow citizens), we must first decide what the heck humanism means to those of us who claim the word as our own.

The word is out, “atheistic” humanism has failed. This is most evident in the United States as we witness via organized humanism’s ineffectual response to the religious Right’s worldview, and via the general attitude of Americans toward religion, superstition and science. Why has this happened to humanism when other “movements,” such as those championing African-Americans or Jews or Gays, have made significant progress, and have done so despite the secular and religious Right’s thirty-year affront to progressive ideals? Could humanism’s failure as a worldview, to some extent, be because so many humanists see their worldview as an alternative to religion rather than a self-contained one of its own? How many times do we humanists find ourselves describing our beliefs by calling out a litany of ideas

and faiths we don’t happen to subscribe to? It is at times as if humanism would not exist if it were not for religion. It is no wonder that organized humanism, cautious about becoming a religious alternative tend to follow a big tent model, wrapping as much as they can into their message – secularism, science advocacy, atheism, skepticism, and somewhere in the mess, humanism – while boosting their revenues even if that means diluting their original message.

There may be another reason as well; one which may explain why humanism has been promoted as an alternative to religion. The term “atheistic humanism” was chosen for a reason. Humanism, as will be described more later on, is a sociopolitical philosophy “informed” by scientific naturalism (which includes atheism), but has been promoted as a “philosophy for non-believers or atheists.” Thus the emphasis has not been on the full picture, but on one part of the whole. Humanism, as a vibrant and widespread ideology (one protected from dogmatism by its reliance on naturalism, by the way), has failed because it has been promoted not as naturalistic humanism – or just plain humanism – but as “atheistic” humanism. In other words, humanism (as a movement or re individuals), has pushed ‘atheism as philosophy’ (which it is not), rather than ‘humanism as sociopolitical philosophy’ (which it is). In this way, humanism has failed.

Individual humanists, or even big tent humanist organizations, struggle to describe what there is unique to their message. Science advocacy, skepticism and secularism are not unique to humanism, that much is clear. And without a concrete understanding of what humanism actually means to our lives, atheism begins to take on that roll of unique difference. This is not very surprising in a country such as America where religion is so much a part of the fabric of what it means to be American. But atheism is not a worldview.

That deserves repeating. Atheism is not a worldview. When we decide to focus on atheism to express what it is about our worldview which we feel has the best chance of creating a better society, we are missing the point (of humanism).

Even in times such as these, where religious fundamentalists are waging war on each other, we mustn’t take the easy route and merely bash religion.

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But this is what today's spokespersons for atheism, from Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins to Christopher Hitchens and Ibn Warraq are doing. The problem with this is not that there are people willing to do battle with the irrationality of supernaturalism; there should always be such warriors on "our" side willing to take on what is the most dangerous aspect of religion. The problem instead is that these same people often either self-identify as humanists, or are identified as such by organized humanism.

Once humanism is tainted with the "us vs. them" mentality, which characterizes the battle between theism and atheism, it has forfeited its ability to bring naturalism into the marketplace of ideas... Where all folks, religious or not, can partake in the human endeavor toward better means and ends.

So therefore, as I want to argue, humanism needs a re-boot. Its not that a key element of humanism isn't atheism (or agnosticism), it's just that the negative and combative stance of humanism-as-atheism (or secularism) wins us no friends, and even more enemies. And as for the perhaps arrogant notion that all humanists need to do is educate the masses and they will leave their silly beliefs behind, science has shown us that religion is an evolutionary part of who we are, and much of what it offers folks will not go away even if people become experts in the arguments against God or in science.

Humanism needs to rediscover its ethical and naturalistic foundations, and allow the metaphysics to become part of the overall movement, and not its core and face. By ethical, I am referring to the egalitarianism of humanism which has been one of its defining characteristics long before the scientific revolution replaced religion as the best way to understand reality. These can be found, in part, in the Humanist Manifestos I and II. Where there are atheists or other "freethinkers" who defend the politics or economics of oppression and regression - from war to capitalism to neo-liberalism to neo-conservatism - there must be humanists to point out that atheism is not the same thing as humanism.

Humanism is wholly and unabashedly progressive in its understanding of the human condition and what sort of society best allows our species to be mentally, emotionally and spiritually healthy. What this means in detail will require a longer essay - and such may be forthcoming - but for starters, authors from Alfie Kohn and Franz De Waal to Doug Fry and Ashley Montagu would be good to read.

Much of Western religion (Christianity, Judaism & Islam) has failed to lead the way because they

promote authoritarian, Hobbesian, and highly hierarchal societal systems. To the extent that "liberal" religionists interpret these as otherwise, is the extent that they wish to unify their progressive ideals with their particular mythistory ... and though perhaps as intellectually problematic as this might be, at least they understand the problems with such religion. Why then should it be that atheists, having broken free from the need to believe in supernatural entities, realms or ideas, should otherwise subscribe to the same authoritarian, Hobbesian, and hierarchal societal systems most religions teach?

By naturalistic, I do not mean the mere defense of the hard sciences or the methodology of science, but a fully integrated naturalism obtained by us from all the sciences (natural and social), a naturalistic understanding of the origins and evolutionary reasons for religion (which needs to be understood if we wish to address supernaturalism and how to separate spirituality from supernaturalism), and from an understanding of philosophical determinism which would allow us to exorcise the most dangerous element of religion, the belief in counter-causal free will. This too needs more explanation. For starters, visit the Center for Naturalism ([www.naturalism.org](http://www.naturalism.org)).

In short, a re-booted humanism would recognize ethics and naturalism as its core. It would then be best defined as a sociopolitical philosophy, both democratic and non-hierarchal, which is informed by scientific naturalism, and promotes individual freedom, economic and social equality, human cooperation and planetary peace. It is time for humanists to, as Dr. King said more than forty years ago, take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion (opinions from within as well as from without humanist circles). Humanism is a positive, politically progressive, socially cooperative, scientifically sound worldview. It's time to define humanism as such.

**Barry F. Seidman** is Executive Producer of the NYC based radio program, Equal Time for Freethought (2002—present) on WBAI-NY, and has worked as a humanist/freethought community leader and events coordinator for the Council for Secular Humanism and the Center for Inquiry (2000-2006). Barry's writing has been published in Free Inquiry, Philosophy Now, The Skeptic UK, The New Humanist, the Daily Record of New Jersey, Biotechnology News, Oncology.com, The Sciences, Skeptical Inquirer and EXIT, and he is coeditor of the anthology, "Toward a New Political Humanism."

## **Join the SHL**

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of freethinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the greater Charleston, SC area. The SHL is affiliated with American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Atheist Alliance International, Council for Secular Humanism, and the SC Progressive Network.

Annual tax-exempt membership fees are \$24 (individual) or \$36 (couple or family). Additional donations are always welcome. Members receive an electronic copy of this newsletter. For more information on SHL membership and activities, consult our website at: <http://lowcountryhumanists.org>.

## **Contribute to *The Separationist***

Please contact the editor with any questions or comments about this publication. Contributions of short articles, news items, letters to the editor or other information of interest to SHL members are always welcome. You can contact the editor at: [newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org](mailto:newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org).

<http://lowcountryhumanists.org>

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