



Vol. XXXVII No. 12  
December 2023

# HUMANIST Monthly

A Publication of the Capital District Humanist Society  
*Connecting the Secular Humanist Community of Upstate New York, Western Massachusetts, and Southern Vermont*

Sunday, December 10th, 2023

**In Person at 12:30 PM and Online at 1:00 PM**

## TALK: "AMERICA NEEDS ATHEISTS NOW, MORE THAN EVER"



Kate Cohen

Kate Cohen is the author of *We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (and Maybe You Should Too)*. The book chronicles Kate's journey from Reform Jew to outspoken atheist, her decision to raise her children as atheists, and her attempts to create for her own family the benefits that religion provides for others. It also argues that nonbelievers should be more vocal and more honest, for both personal and political reasons.

Kate Cohen is a Washington Post columnist who writes about the intersection of culture, family, and politics. Her columns have led to interviews on NBC Nightly News, Freethought Radio, and the BBC World Service.

She is also the author of two previous books. *The Neppi-Modona Diaries: Reading Jewish Survival through My Italian Family* (UPNE) tells the story of a Jewish family who went into hiding to survive the Nazi invasion, and explores Kate's own perspective as a post-Holocaust, non-believing Jew at the end of the twentieth century. *A Walk Down the Aisle: Notes on a Modern Wedding* examines through personal essays the hard-to-resist but functionally outdated American wedding ritual. She and her husband live on a farm in Albany, New York.

This program will take place both in-person (at 12:30 pm) and online via Zoom (at 1 pm). The in-person event will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, New York; it is free and open to the public. Light refreshments will be available at the in-person meeting before the speaker's presentation. Current paid CDHS members will automatically receive an invite to the on-line meeting via email.

**ANYONE WHO IS NOT A CURRENT PAID MEMBER of CDHS can attend.** Send an email request to: [CDHS.Albany@gmail.com](mailto:CDHS.Albany@gmail.com). Please send the request several days prior, or you may log onto our Meetup page: <https://www.meetup.com/Capital-District-Humanist-Society/>, then click on JOIN, then click on ATTEND, and use the RSVP function, and the link will be available.

The Capital District Humanist Society provides a supportive community for exchanging ideas, heightening our knowledge of the world and ourselves, fostering moral and ethical growth, and promoting the principles of secular humanism. CDHS is a member organization for people with humanist values. Our values include commitment to free inquiry, rational thought, lifelong education, democracy, social concern, and fellowship.

### Capital District Humanist Society, Inc.

Established 1986

Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/CapitalDistrictHumanistSociety>



CDHS is affiliated with:

The American Humanist Association (AHA)

Center for Inquiry (CSI)

Humanists International (HI)

The Secular Coalition for America (SCA)

On Sunday, January 14, 2024, 12:30 PM (In Person) and 1:00 PM ET (Online)

The Capital District Humanist Society Presents:

## Skepticism In The Age of Artificial Intelligence

Advancements in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) are undeniable. Arthur C. Clark said, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic", and while contemporary AI might not yet qualify as sufficiently advanced, it does seem to be converging in that direction. What should a non-expert know about the field to apply appropriate scientific skepticism? Let's cut through the hype and discuss how we evaluate the inevitable claims that machines can think.



**Kyle Polich**

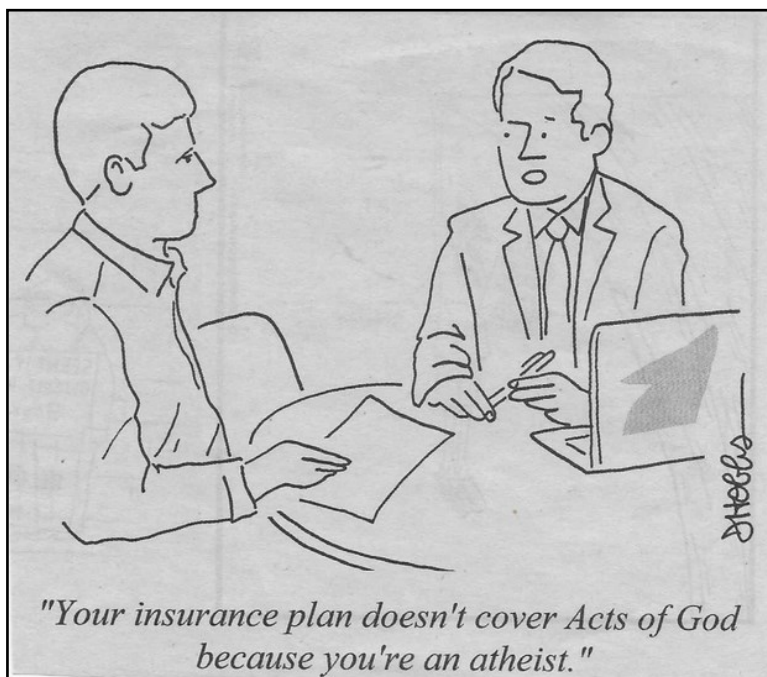
Kyle Polich hosts the popular Data Skeptic podcast, a show that makes statistics, machine learning, and AI accessible to anyone with an interest in data science. When not podcasting, Kyle runs Data Skeptic LLC, a data science consulting firm that helps companies turn data into a competitive advantage through machine learning and other technologies. He earned Bachelor & Master of Science degrees from the University of Illinois at Chicago, majoring in computer science with a focus on artificial intelligence.

This free and open to the public event will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, New York. If you are not a current paid CDHS member, please see page 1 to request an email invitation to attend.

### Community Service Opportunities

Groups that can always use the help of volunteers include the following secular organizations:

- Pride Center of the Capital Region (<https://capitalpridecenter.org/>)
- Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York (<https://regionalfoodbank.net/>)
- Grassroot Givers ([grassrootgivers.org](https://grassrootgivers.org))
- CAPTAIN Community Human Services (<https://captaincares.org/>)



### CDHS Executive Council

Executive Director	Don Porterfield
Secretary	Vacant
Treasurer	Roland Tozer
Programs, Publicity	Fred Levine
Publications	Frank H. Wind & Carol Quantock
Social Activities	Candace Fuller
Membership, Telephone	Judith Herbert
Meetup Coordinator	Fred Levine
Compliance	Kevin Smith
Member at Large	Sherry Levine

### Appointed Positions

Hospitality	Sue Parry
Room Arrangements	Frank Robinson
Caring Network	Rosina Ansaldo

# RECAP OF OUR NOVEMBER SPEAKER'S TALK

by Frank Robinson

Our November in-person meeting was very well attended, with great food! Plus a bunch more folks attended on Zoom.

The speaker was Joseph Simonetta on "How to Sustain Humanity, Advance Our Civilization, and Succeed as a Species."

Much of the talk explicated how small Earth is in relation to cosmic immensity. Then he detailed our species' evolutionary antecedents; then the development of religions; and the problems confronting us — climate change, species extinction, pollution, conflict, etc., all to make the point that religion and the behaviors it inspires are antiquated and ill-suited to confronting the challenges of modern life. Quoting Einstein, Simonetta said that we can't solve our problems with the same level of thinking from which they originated, which is absurd, fundamentally wrong, and needs to change, though Simonetta could suggest no path to such change. He did stress seven key words: be healthy; be kind; respect the environment.

A recording of this talk can be found on the CDHS YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/Tl4cF9vHVJY>

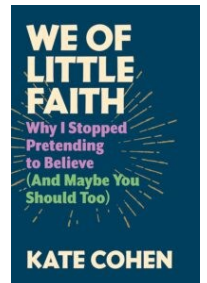
## More About Kate Cohen, CDHS's December Speaker

When Washington Post columnist and author Kate Cohen became a mother, more than twenty years ago, she decided she would not lie to her children. And her latest book is a reflection of that journey.

Kate recently took center stage to discuss her book, *We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too)* for the Central Florida Freethought Community on November 12th. Cohen's engaging presentation at the event left a lasting impact on the audience, encouraging everyone to consider how they, too, could be out and proud about being an atheist.

In her talk, Kate eloquently delved into the essence of her book, which is a celebration of life's meaning from an atheist perspective. Using the narrative of her own experiences, she dismantled the societal pressure to conform to religious norms and explored the freedom that comes with embracing a non-religious identity. And while she humorously shared her life experiences, she stressed the importance of separating state and church.

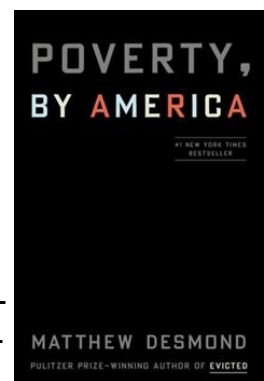
Kate confessed that her story does not portray "a very arduous journey" from Reformed Jew to atheist, "It's not the most dramatic story that a person could tell." She admitted that, "It was all about these tiny little moments in your head where you don't want to correct someone in a conversation because you want to have a pleasant interaction or you don't want people to think that they aren't smart or that they believe something that's incorrect."



Join the bunch for lunch at the 76 Diner in Latham. We gather at 11:30 on the 3rd Thursday of every month. Our next get-togethers will be on December 21st and January 18th. Please let Rosina Ansaldo know by Wednesday evening if you'll be joining them.

CDHS Book Group is reading *Poverty, by America* by Matthew Desmond. They meet on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays.

Contact Frank Robinson if you want to join the spirited and informative discussion.



## November 18, 2023 Social: Monet, The Immersive Experience

CDHS members were among a group of approximately 60 people (aka the "Meetup Group") who attended the Monet Immersive Experience held at the Schenectady Armory. Highlights included a typical museum room that held replicas of many of Monet's works and a huge room where animated versions of several paintings and sketches were projected on the walls, floor, and ceiling, accompanied by soft music. An amazing feature was the virtual reality section, where each viewer donned a headset and "walked" directly into Monet's home and paintings, all of which took on a life of their own as viewers "toured" through them. In yet another room, people could try their luck at creating a Monet masterpiece on the spot or choose coloring sheets to try at home. Artists' efforts were displayed on bulletin boards on the walls. After the tour, a small group had dinner at Cornell's, the historic Italian restaurant in Schenectady's Little Italy section.



*Photos courtesy of Olga Porterfield*

## December 9, 2023 Social: Pot Luck Lunch

Don't miss out on our fun-filled December social, brought back by popular demand. Come and unwind with an afternoon of giving, receiving, eating and laughing. Our December social will be a pirate auction following a pot luck lunch. The event will take place on December 9th from 12-4 and will be held at the Pinnacle Living Community Room, 45 Forts Ferry Road, Latham.

Bring a favorite dish (seasonal or otherwise) to share for the pot luck lunch. Mouths are starting to water already! A few beverages will be on hand, but if you have a favorite, bring it along.

After lunch we'll hold a Pirate auction - please use your imagination and bring a gently used item from your home or spend no more than \$15 on a new item if you're just unable to part with anything.

Because there is so much need this year, we're asking that everybody also bring a donation for Grassroot Givers (go to [grassrootgivers.org](https://grassrootgivers.org) for a list of items they could use). There will be a donation box to put your item in and Dee Fuller will deliver the items to Grassroot Givers after the party.

RSVP to Dee Fuller know by December 6th at [candacelf13@gmail.com](mailto:candacelf13@gmail.com).

## Refreshments Volunteers Still Needed for 2024

Due to Covid, for the past three years our Sunday speaker programs have been conducted via Zoom. Since September of this year, we have conducted hybrid meetings, offered both in person and via Zoom. As in the past, those who attend in person can enjoy light snacks and beverages, supplied by volunteers. Volunteers are already in place for the remainder of 2023, but are still needed for 2024. A list of meeting dates is below, in boldface type. Please note the following information:

- Venue: Pinnacle Living at Forts Ferry, 45 Forts Ferry Road, Latham, NY 12110 in the Library/Lounge.
- Bring a) food, or b) beverages, or c) both.
- Cost: CDHS will reimburse up to \$60 for food and up to \$20 for beverages, or you may make this a tax-deductible donation.
- Program times: socialize 12:30-1:00 pm; speaker 1:00-2:30 PM, including Q&A.
- Program dates: Second Sunday of each month.

**Volunteers are needed for the following 2024 meeting dates: 1/14, 2/11, 3/10, 4/14, 5/12, 6/9, 7/14, 8/11.**

**To volunteer or get more information, please contact Sue Parry: [sueparryharmony@gmail.com](mailto:sueparryharmony@gmail.com) or 518-577-7329.**



## WV prison finally releases atheist inmate denied parole for refusing to profess Christianity

from [friendlyatheist@substack.com](mailto:friendlyatheist@substack.com), November 15, 2023

It's a massive victory for an atheist prisoner taking on the West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

In an incredible victory for (non-)religious freedom, a prisoner who was forced to participate in religious activities in order to be eligible for parole has won his case and been released from jail. Even better, the prison has changed its policies, so no future inmate is placed in a similar situation.

This story goes back to April, when American Atheists filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of their client, Andrew T. Miller, against the West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Miller had requested secular accommodations, but the WVDCR wouldn't make them. That refusal had consequences. Miller entered prison in 2021 after being convicted of breaking and entering, and he was serving a sentence of 1-10 years with a projected release date of April 3, 2025. Being seen as a "good" inmate would have a direct impact on how soon he could regain his freedom. According to the lawsuit, the WVDCR operated a program called Residential Substance Abuse Treatment (RSAT), and inmates who were placed in that program were required to complete it if they wanted to be granted parole.

Not going through the 6- to 12-month program resulted in a penalty that deemed inmates more of a security threat. That, American Atheists claimed, was a problem because the RSAT handbook was chock full of Christianity. It included the Lord's Prayer, the Serenity Prayer, and the infamous "Twelve Steps"—all of which reference a "higher power" at minimum. Some of the required homework involved telling the course leader "what God means to me" and "what prayer means to me."

In a letter to then Commissioner Jividen, he objected to the religious nature of the RSAT program... As an accommodation, he suggested that he could receive substance abuse treatment through PSIMED and participate in the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Substance Abuse (CBISA) and Thinking for a Change classes (courses also provided through the RSAT program) without also being subjected to the religious elements found in the other parts of the RSAT Program... Unfortunately, his request was denied. So were his multiple grievance complaints challenging that denial. The people in charge said he had no choice but to go through the Christian program. As a result of his pushback, he was denied parole *three separate times*, with the board specifically citing the non-completion of the RSAT program as a significant reason he wasn't allowed to go free.

That's why American Atheists took up this case: American Atheists just announced that Miller is now a free man, which means the faith-based policy isn't being used to keep him incarcerated. Furthermore, the WVDCR is changing its policies so no one has to go through the same ordeal ever again; that includes using the (secular) SMART Recovery's InsideOut program as an acceptable substitute for RSAT.

"This is, of course, a tremendous victory for Andrew, who is finally free, but also a complete vindication of his and other nonreligious Americans' rights under the law," said Geoffrey T. Blackwell, Litigation Counsel for American Atheists. "And yet, if the WVDCR had acted properly, Andrew may well have been released much sooner. Rather than cave to West Virginia's unconstitutional religious coercion, he took a principled stand and fought to defend his First Amendment rights." It's a win for everyone involved. That includes Miller, even though he probably would have been released earlier if he didn't have to file this lawsuit.

Miller told me in an email statement last night that he hopes no one in his position ever has to profess a belief in the spiritual or supernatural in order to obtain their freedom: I am so happy that the judge ruled in our favor, but no one should have to compromise their beliefs just to be given a fair chance at release. I want people to understand their rights, and for government officials to understand that they can't force religious beliefs on people, no matter what their situation. American Atheists has done an amazing job with this lawsuit, and I am glad that the judge agreed with us!"

Thankfully, Miller's fight wasn't in vain. When it comes to freedom, no one's religious beliefs should play a role in the parole board's decisions. Now, at least in West Virginia, they won't.

**C**apital District Humanist Society, Inc. PO Box 11209, Loudonville, NY 12211-0209

(518) 533-2666 E-mail us at [cdhs.albany@gmail.com](mailto:cdhs.albany@gmail.com)

Visit us on the web at [humanistsociety.net](http://humanistsociety.net)

The Capital District Humanist Society (CDHS) is an independent, non-profit (and non-prophet), non-partisan and strictly non-religious educational and social organization for those who share humanist values: commitment to education, rational and free inquiry, democracy, social concerns and fellowship. CDHS is affiliated with the four major humanist organizations - the American Humanist Association (AHA), the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) and the Humanists International (HI).

There are five types of CDHS member support: Individual, \$50/yr.; Family, \$80/yr.; Sustaining, \$100/yr.; Patron, \$150/yr.; and Lifetime Member, one contribution of \$1000 or more.

**Members** receive our publication, *The Humanist Monthly*, and vote by mail each September on the make-up of the governing Executive Council. Members are eligible for election to the Executive Council and may also serve as appointed officials. Members are welcome to attend Executive Council meetings.

The IRS recognizes CDHS as a tax-exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Therefore, all donations, both cash and materials with established "fair market value", qualify as charitable contributions for income tax purposes.

**Donations** are gratefully accepted to help speed our growth. CDHS is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization under the IRS Code. Financial disclosure information and our annual report are available upon request.

**If you know** of someone who may be interested in CDHS, please pass this newsletter along or give us the name; we will send a sample copy or two with no obligation.

**We value your input.** In the best humanist tradition, CDHS has no rigid picture of itself. We ask you to join us, not follow us. What activities and services would you like CDHS to provide its members? Send us your suggestions, questions, and comments.



CDHS

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Loudonville, NY 12211-0209

**FIRST CLASS**

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**<https://www.humanistsociety.net>**

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**MEMBER SUPPORT FORM**

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City ++ State ++ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about the Humanist Society? \_\_\_\_\_

*All this information will be included in our Directory, which is distributed to members only, unless you request otherwise by checking and signing here:* ☐ I do not want to be listed in the CDHS Member Directory \_\_\_\_\_

**Levels of Member Support**

**Annual Payment**    **Date** \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership              | \$ 50                                   | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family Membership                  | \$ 80                                   | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Member                  | \$100                                   | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patron                             | \$150                                   | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Life Member                        | one-time contribution of \$1000 or more | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Additional tax-deductible donation | \$ _____                                | _____ |

***Please make checks payable to CDHS***

☐ Please send me additional information