



HUMANIST Monthly

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

Sunday, January 12th, 2025

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

MISINFORMATION, CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND EXTREMISM IN AN AGE OF POLITICAL MEGA-IDENTITIES



Dr. Yotam Ophir

Misinformation is nothing new. For as long as humans have communicated, they also manipulated information and deceived others to gain power. Nevertheless, scholars, journalists and pundits have expressed a concern about humanity entering a new “Post-Truth” era, one driven by the collapse of truth and political turmoil. In this talk, Dr. Ophir argues that humans have never been motivated by accuracy, and that the current moment could be better explained by considering unprecedented technological and political developments.

Yotam Ophir (PhD, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2018) is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University at Buffalo. He studies political and science communication (media effects, persuasion, misinformation, conspiracy theories and extremism). Dr. Ophir’s work was published in journals such as the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), American Journal of Public Health (AJPH), Journal of Communication (JOC), and Communication Methods and Measures (CMM). His book “Misinformation & Society” will be out in the fall of 2025. Dr. Ophir is the head of the Media Effects, Misinformation, and Extremism (MEME) lab, is a member of UB’s Center for Information Integrity, and is a distinguished fellow at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2023, he received the “Exceptional Scholar: Young Investigator Award” from the University at Buffalo.

The program will take place both in person (at 12:30 PM) and online (at 1:00 PM) via Zoom. The in-person event will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, NY. 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. If you are not a current paid CDHS member, please see page 1 to request an email invitation to attend.

This event is free and open to the public. It will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, New York and via Zoom. Light refreshments will be available before the talk, but **please bring your own beverage**. If you are not a current paid CDHS member, please follow the instructions below to request an email invitation to attend.

ANYONE WHO IS NOT A CURRENT PAID MEMBER of CDHS can attend. Send an email request to: 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, February 9th, 2025, 12:30 PM (In Person) and 1:00 PM (Online)

The Capital District Humanist Society Presents:

The Social Psychology of Group Delusions

How do people become entangled in conspiracy theories and other shared delusions? This question has long been the province of novelists, but recently psychologists and social scientists have applied the tools of their disciplines to shed light on this vexing question.

This talk will survey their findings so far about the psychological and social factors that lead people to embrace dogmatic delusions, and to double down on them in the face of contrary evidence. We will discuss the personality characteristics and life history that incline people to rigid beliefs. We'll consider the everyday personal delusions that most of us hold. We'll discuss the social process of converting and committing to a shared delusion. Finally we'll briefly consider the psychology of reasoning and what conditions make people more amenable to changing their minds.



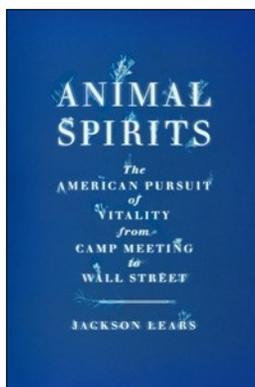
Mark Reimers

Dr. Mark Reimers is a quantitative neuroscientist, researching how dynamic brain activity gives rise to thoughts and feelings. Dr. Reimers has worked at the US National Institutes of Health, the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics and at Michigan State University. His broader aim is to ground our understanding of feeling and thought in brain dynamics and biology.

Dr. Reimers was the leader of the Richmond Humanists in Virginia for five years, and the leader of the UU Forum in Lansing, MI for six years; he speaks frequently at humanist and science outreach events in Michigan and online. He is trying to weave together brain science with humanist aspirations.

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CDHS Book Group is reading *Animal Spirits: The American Pursuit of Vitality from Camp Meeting to Wall Street* by Jackson Lears. The group meets on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays.



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

CDHS Executive Council

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Publications	Carol Quantock
Social Activities	Candace Fuller
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Appointed Positions

Hospitality	Sue Parry
Room Arrangements	Frank Robinson
Caring Network	Rosina Ansaldo

RECAP OF OUR DECEMBER SPEAKER'S TALK

by Don Porterfield

Dr. Mindy Townsend is the Dudley Astronomer with Siena College. She discussed the ways in which nighttime light pollution is impacting astronomy, nature, and humans.

Various types of light pollution, which include sky glow, glare, light trespass, and light clutter, are reducing the darkness of the night sky around the world. In the US, observations by citizen scientists have documented a 10.4% increase in light pollution per year on the Bortle scale, a ranking system for the darkness of a sky. This increase occurs primarily in urban areas, but has also been noted in rural areas.

Research has shown that sea turtles, particularly Green Sea Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) and Flatback Sea Turtles (*Natator depressus*), are attracted to artificial light. Artificial lights cause hatchlings to be vulnerable to predators and exhaustion because the young turtles don't head for the ocean quickly. Artificial light also can affect the behavior of bats, with different species responding differently to different wavelengths of light. Some species exhibit decreased activity under all lights, while others avoid orange, white, and green light, and yet other species showed more activity under artificial lights.

Artificial light can also alter the behavior of plants and trees. A 2016 study in the UK found the onset of budburst in various deciduous trees was affected by artificial light with early budding trees being less affected. The timing of budburst can have potential consequences on ecosystems. One example is the Winter Moth (*Operophtera brumata*) caterpillar's relationship with the Peninsular Oak (*Quercus peninsularis*). However, the effects of artificial light on plants and animals are not yet fully understood and require further research.

Preserving dark skies is important for both environmental and cultural reasons. Light pollution has negative impacts on wildlife, particularly nocturnal animals. There are many challenges facing efforts to reduce light pollution and it's not always easy or practical to make significant changes. Some simple actions that can reduce light pollution include turning off lights when not needed, directing lights to where they're needed, and using warmer colored lighting. Some cities, such as Tucson, and national parks are leading the way in reducing light pollution in order to preserve dark skies for future generations.

Light pollution is a significant issue that needs advocacy and understanding from the community. Ways in which light pollution could be reduced or controlled include changing zoning codes and highlighting economic arguments for reducing light pollution that show it could save money for businesses.

A recording of this presentation can be found on the CDHS YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/WPCAF9wU_Ck.



Join the bunch for lunch! We will gather at Jimmy's Egg, 1800 Western Ave., Albany, NY 12203 on January 16th at 12:00 Noon (please note new time!). January's date is the 16th, and February's is the 20th. Please let Rosina Ansaldo know by Wednesday evening if you'll be joining them.

NOTE: We're looking for more suggestions for restaurants for the Lunch Bunch. We'd like to give our local eateries a chance by rotating them every few months and returning to the ones that get enthusiastic thumbs up. Please send ideas to Rosina Ansaldo. Thanks!

CDHS Membership Renewals for 2025

It's time to renew your CDHS membership. Unless you are a lifetime member or became a new CDHS member between 1 August and 31 December 2024, please watch your email in mid-January for a notice about your membership renewal. If you took a new membership between 1 August and 31 December you will not be asked to renew until January 2026. Members will have 60 days from the date of the email notice to renew their memberships for 2025, allowing them to have voting privileges, access to our annual report, and receive email announcements and notifications of upcoming meetings and social events.

We are asking that members complete their renewals on our website at <https://www.humanistsociety.net/join-us/> by either:

- Using the "Sign Up Online" option and making your online payment
- Using the "Download Printable Application" option: print the application, fill it out, and mail it to CDHS, P. O. Box 11209, Loudonville, NY 12211 with your payment if you are unable to make an online payment.

Thank you for your continued support of CDHS. We value your participation and hope you choose to renew your membership.

"Gathering of the Clans" - January Social

Come and join the Gathering of the Clans!

Let's continue a beloved tradition: the annual party of the Capital District Non-believers!

Lunch time get-together of the CDHS, Capital Region Atheists and Agnostics and the Freethinkers Community.

When: January 25th, Saturday 12:00 Noon to 2:30 PM

Where: Dragon Buffet, 1881 Central Avenue, Albany, NY

What: All you can eat Chinese buffet with American dishes. Includes non-alcoholic drinks, desserts, ice cream.

Price: About \$12.99+ tax pp

RSVP: Dee Fuller at candacelf13@gmail.com by Thursday, January 23, 2025

Snack Volunteers Needed for March and Beyond

If you've attended in-person CDHS monthly meetings, then you know that light snacks are available before and during the meeting. So far, Dee Fuller will handle January and Roland Tozer and Donnette Paoletti will take care of February.

At the November EC meeting, the EC voted to order food from a local establishment at meetings only when no volunteers were signed up. Snacks should not be elaborate: cheese and crackers, chips/dips, a veggie tray, and cookies or other type of dessert are the usual "go-to" noshes. **Refreshments volunteers are not responsible for beverages, as members will bring their own. Please keep in mind that you can be reimbursed up to \$60** if you submit your receipt to Treasurer Roland Tozer or Don Porterfield. You can also opt to donate the food.

Unless otherwise announced, meetings are held on the second Sunday of each month at Pinnacle Living at Forts Ferry, 45 Forts Ferry Road, Latham, NY 12110 in the Library/Lounge. Setup time: arrive between 12:00 noon—12:15 PM to set up food table; plates, utensils, etc. are located in the on-site CDHS cart.

If bringing snacks, plan on 20-25 attendees, and choose food that you'd be willing to take home if there are leftovers or plan to share them with others who are interested in taking leftovers.

To volunteer or for more information, please contact Sue Parry at sueparryharmony@gmail.com.

Good Advice for Navigating the Next Four Years

(from Substack, December 13, 2024)

Yale historian and Holocaust expert Timothy Snyder wrote: "Americans are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism. Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience. Now is a good time to do so." Snyder's a member of the Council on Foreign Relations (which includes former Secretaries of State), and consults on political situations around the globe. He says, "Here are twenty lessons from the twentieth century, adapted to the circumstances of today.

1. Do not obey in advance. Much of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then start to do it without being asked. You've already done this, haven't you? Stop. Anticipatory obedience teaches authorities what is possible and accelerates unfreedom.
2. Defend an institution. Follow the courts or the media, or a court or a newspaper. Do not speak of "our institutions" unless you are making them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions don't protect themselves. They go down like dominoes unless each is defended from the beginning.
3. Recall professional ethics. When the leaders of state set a negative example, professional commitments to just practice become much more important. It is hard to break a rule-of-law state without lawyers, and it is hard to have show trials without judges.
4. When listening to politicians, distinguish certain words. Look out for the expansive use of "terrorism" and "extremism." Be alive to the fatal notions of "exception" and "emergency." Be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary.
5. Be calm when the unthinkable arrives. When the terrorist attack comes, remember that all authoritarians at all times either await or plan such events in order to consolidate power. Think of the Reichstag fire. The sudden disaster that requires the end of the balance of power, the end of opposition parties, and so on, is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book. Don't fall for it.
6. Be kind to our language. Avoid pronouncing the phrases everyone else does. Think up your own way of speaking, even if only to convey that thing you think everyone is saying. (Don't use the internet before bed. Charge your gadgets away from your bedroom, and read.) What to read? Perhaps *The Power of the Powerless* by Václav Havel, *1984* by George Orwell, *The Captive Mind* by Czesław Miłosz, *The Rebel* by Albert Camus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, or *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* by Peter Pomerantsev.
7. Stand out. Someone has to. It is easy, in words and deeds, to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. And the moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow.
8. Believe in truth. To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.
9. Investigate. Figure things out for yourself. Spend more time with long articles. Subsidize investigative journalism by subscribing to print media. Realize that some of what is on your screen is there to harm you. Bookmark PropOrNot or other sites that investigate foreign propaganda pushes.
10. Practice corporeal politics. Power wants your body softening in your chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen. Get outside. Put your body in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Make new friends and march with them.
11. Make eye contact and small talk. This is not just polite. It is a way to stay in touch with your surroundings, break down unnecessary social barriers, and come to understand whom you should and should not trust. If we enter a culture of denunciation, you will want to know the psychological landscape of your daily life.
12. Take responsibility for the face of the world. Notice the swastikas and the other signs of hate. Do not look away and do not get used to them. Remove them yourself and set an example for others to do so.
13. Hinder the one-party state. The parties that took over states were once something else. They exploited a historical moment to make political life impossible for their rivals. Vote in local and state elections while you can.
14. Give regularly to good causes, if you can. Pick a charity and set up autopay. Then you will know that you have made a free choice that is supporting civil society helping others doing something good.
15. Establish a private life. Nastier rulers will use what they know about you to push you around. Scrub your computer of malware. Remember that email is skywriting. Consider using alternative forms of the internet, or simply using it less. Have personal exchanges in person. For the same reason, resolve any legal trouble. Authoritarianism works as a blackmail state, looking for the hook on which to hang you. Try not to have too many hooks.
16. Learn from others in other countries. Keep up your friendships abroad, or make new friends abroad. The present difficulties here are an element of a general trend. And no country is going to find a solution by itself. Make sure you and your family have passports.
17. Watch out for the paramilitaries. When the men with guns who have always claimed to be against the system start wearing uniforms and marching around with torches and pictures of a Leader, the end is nigh. When the pro-Leader paramilitary and the official police and military intermingle, the game is over.
18. Be reflective if you must be armed. If you carry a weapon in public service, God bless you and keep you. But know that evils of the past involved policemen and soldiers finding themselves, one day, doing irregular things. Be ready to say no. (If you do not know what this means, contact the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and ask about training in professional ethics.)
19. Be as courageous as you can. If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die in unfreedom.
20. Be a patriot. The incoming president is not. Set a good example of what America means for the generations to come. They will need it."

Democrats, Don't Forget the Atheists

by Jessica Grose, Opinion Writer, New York Times, December 18, 2024

Sometimes it feels like white Christians are the only religious voting bloc with true sway in America. Conservative evangelicals in particular have a great deal of power in the Republican Party, thanks to their tight embrace of Donald Trump. I often hear people talk about how Democrats can win back some white Christian support, as if that should be the party's priority in the coming years.

But with Democrats searching for their future, they'd be foolish to ignore a large and growing religious group that is already in their corner: the Nones.

Now nearly 30 percent of the population, the Nones include atheists, agnostics and people who say they're no faith in particular. According to new data from the Public Religion Research Institute, a nonpartisan polling organization, 72 percent of the religiously unaffiliated voted for Kamala Harris. Melissa Deckman, the chief executive of P.R.R.I., shared a more granular breakdown of unaffiliated voters with me over email: 82 percent of atheists, 80 percent of agnostics and 64 percent of those who said they had no particular faith voted for Harris.

"When placed into context with our other findings from the 2024 post-election survey," Deckman wrote, "we can see how distinct the unaffiliated are. They are almost three times as likely to report voting for Harris than Trump, and only Black Protestants reported voting for Harris at higher rates."

Atheists and agnostics are not just Harris voters, they are also highly politically engaged. Last year, Ryan Burge, a political scientist and the author of the Graphs About Religion newsletter, put it plainly in a post called "Nobody Participates in Politics More Than Atheists":

Here's what I believe to be the emerging narrative of the next several decades: the rise of atheism and their unbelievably high level of political engagement in recent electoral politics. Let me put it plainly: Atheists are the most politically active group in American politics today and the Democrats (and some Republicans) ignore them at their own peril.

I think it would be pretty easy to galvanize these voters without alienating Democrats of faith: The party should focus on religious freedom as a bedrock of American society, and highlight the unpopular ways in which conservative Christians are trying to push their faith on everybody else, like bringing the Bible into public schools. Younger Americans are markedly less religious than older ones and it would be shortsighted for Democrats to dismiss that.

Jessica Grose is an Opinion writer for The Times, covering family, religion, education, culture and the way we live now.

Why I stood up to 200 priests

(by Laurie Woodward Garcia and People Power United, December 22, 2024)

Recently, a memory popped up on my Facebook feed, taking me back to the day I stood up to over 200 Catholic priests. It was a moment that shaped me, and one I feel compelled to share, especially now.

In 2018 and 2019, as an activist living in Florida, I witnessed firsthand the cruelty of policies under the Trump administration and DeSantis in Florida. Families were being ripped apart, with children detained at Homestead Air Force Base. At ICE Miramar, immigrants were forced to endure hours in the punishing Florida heat, denied food, water, and bathrooms, only to be turned away and told to return another day. At Krome Detention Center, elderly and sick immigrants—many who had lived here for decades—were detained and deported to countries they barely knew.

What struck me most during that time was the silence from my own Catholic Church. While faith leaders from other communities—Rabbis, Imams, preachers—showed up to advocate for refugees and asylum seekers, the Catholic Church, with over 100 parishes in the Archdiocese of Miami, was glaringly absent. How could a church rooted in the teachings of Christ, himself a refugee, remain so quiet?

During Holy Week, I decided to take action. Over 200 priests gather at the cathedral during this time, making it an ideal opportunity to catch their attention. Though I was nervous—this was my faith, my community—I stood alone with a sign that read, "Jesus was a refugee. ICE Miramar is harming refugees." As the priests passed by, some gave me a thumbs-up; others averted their eyes. I felt scared, but also resolute. Speaking out was my way of holding a mirror to my faith and asking it to live up to its values.

(Continued on Page 7)

Now, as the shadow of a second Trump presidency looms, I reflect on that day and know this: remaining silent is not an option.

We must raise our voices and challenge America and its leaders to reflect on and uphold our shared values of liberty and justice for all. Fascist regimes thrive on silence, fear, and complacency. They rely on people being too scared or too disillusioned to speak out, allowing oppressive systems to take root and dismantle rights, freedoms, and democracy piece by piece. Silence isn't neutral—it's complicity.

We've already seen what happens when authoritarian tendencies go unchecked. Children separated from their parents. Immigrants treated as less than human. The rule of law eroded in favor of personal vendettas and power grabs. Under a second Trump presidency, I fear the threats to our communities and our families will only grow, as will the assault on democracy itself. History has shown us time and again that silence in the face of oppression only emboldens it.

This is not the time to shrink back or hope someone else will step forward. Every voice, every act of courage matters. Whether it's attending a protest, signing a petition, having hard conversations, or simply showing up, we must all do something. Because if we don't, who will?

As dark as these times feel, there is hope in collective action. Together, we can stand against fascism, protect our rights and freedoms, and uphold the values of democracy. But it starts with courage—the courage to speak up, even when it's hard. I hope you will join me, now, more than ever, we must rise to the moment. Let's stand together and fight for a future we can all be proud of. Silence is not an option.

Change begins at the end of your comfort zone. - Roy T. Bennett

We cannot wait for someone else to save us. The stakes are too high. If we do nothing, we risk losing everything—our freedoms, our rights, and our ability to determine the future of this nation. But together, we can fight back. Together, we can:

1. Organize our communities.
2. Educate ourselves and others.
3. Mobilize to hold leaders accountable and demand change.

This is how we protect our families, our communities, and our democracy. We will not let fear win. We will not be ruled by hate or division. Now is the time to act. Join us to build a movement that ensures everyday Americans—not the wealthy elite—shape the future of our nation. Together, we can safeguard freedom, justice, and equality for future generations. The power is in your hands. Let's fight for freedom over fascism—because our future depends on it.

What You Can Do

[Click here](#) to take the Freedom Over Fascism pledge

[Click here](#) to take a grassroots survey to help our movement building efforts.

[Click here](#) to follow us on social media.

[Click here](#) to sign up for our next event: Building People Power in Remembrance of the Jan. 6 Capitol Insurrection. Details: Date: January 6th
Time: 8 PM Eastern Location: Via Zoom. RSVP today and bring your voice to the movement!

[Click here](#) to join the social media team.

BONUS: [Click here](#) to Tell Congressional Republicans: No One Voted for Elon Musk

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Visit us on the web at 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 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.



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MEMBER SUPPORT FORM

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