

First Coast

FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

February 2006

Volume 4, Issue 2

President's Message

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Carrie Renwick

This year has gotten off to an exciting start. The Annual Planning Meeting, held January 22, 2006, was a success, with a total attendance of 15, an all-time record for member participation at a board meeting. The student essay project is being revived, under the guidance of Joque Soskis, and the adult literacy project continues being investigated by June Applen and Wilhelmina Walton. In addition to routine business, many committees were established and chairpersons appointed. Due to the foresight of Curtis Wolf, a Long-

Range Planning Committee has been created for the purpose of developing and implementing a strategic plan which, it is hoped, will enable the FCFS to thrive and achieve its goals for years to come.

Many program ideas for 2006 have al-

ready been gathered, perhaps the most exciting of which is a science panel discussion coordinated by Wilhelmina Walton. She feels that since the science stan-



dards for the State of Florida are scheduled to be reviewed this year, now is the time for the FCFS to do something to help create some awareness regarding the importance of science in all facets of life. She plans to organize a panel of scientists to discuss the importance of teaching evolution and the various areas of science, biology, physics, chemistry, etc., as they relate to research, development of new drugs, and technology for ex-

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Yes, I think 2006 is going to be a very good year for the FCFS, thanks to its wonderful members.

"If humans accept that they too have evolved, whatever purposes they assign, they do so by their own choice.

This means humans are free of revealed knowledge from a non-existent creator; they are free to make choices; they are obliged to learn and to think. They are responsible for their actions and values."

Found at web site:
<http://www.darwinday.org/englishL/newsviews/darlin.html>

February 2006 Meeting

Charlene Taylor Hill, Executive Director, Jacksonville Human Rights Commission; and Bill David, Program Manager

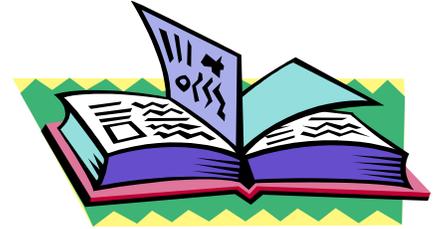
"The Study Circles Initiative and the Faith-Based Community"

Monday, February 20, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

(Upstairs in the Sanctuary - Doors open at 6:15)

Unitarian Universalist Church • 7405 Arlington Expressway • Jacksonville, FL

HUMANIST BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP



- When:** 2:00 p.m., the third Sunday of each month.
- Where:** Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd., 519-6500, books are usually in stock.
- What:** Books/magazines planned for discussion:
- February 19 — *The Crisis of Islam*, by Bernard Lewis
 - March 19 — *The Selfish Gene*, by Richard Dawkins

The *Selfish Gene* is Richard Dawkins' brilliant and somewhat controversial first book and still his most famous. It is an international best seller in 13 languages. The phrase "selfish gene" was coined by Dawkins as a provocative way of expressing the gene-centric view of evolution, which holds that evolution is best viewed as acting on genes, and that selection at the level of organisms or populations almost never overrides selection on genes. More precisely, an organism is expected to evolve to maximize its inclusive fitness—the number of copies of its genes passed on globally (rather than by a particular individual). As a result, populations will tend towards an evolutionarily stable strategy. The book also coins the term "meme," for a unit of human cultural evolution analogous to the gene, suggesting that such "selfish" replication may also model human culture, albeit in a different sense. Also, see *Rethinking Sex and the Selfish Gene*, by Niles Eldredge.

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at 904-608-7937
JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org.



The *First Coast FreeThinker* is published for members of the First Coast Freethought Society, other freethinkers, and potential freethinkers. We exchange newsletters with other freethought groups and obtain information from many diverse sources.

Readers are invited and encouraged to reprint our original materials provided they give credit to this publication.

The officials of the FCFS are not responsible for opinions or other statements expressed in this newsletter. It is intended to convey ideas to stimulate discussion on a variety of subjects.

Newsletter Staff

Editor:	Hugo Borresen	779-6883
	HBorresen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org	
Layout:	Curtis Wolf	573-3847
	CWolf@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org	
Staff writer:	Fred Hill	358-3610
	FHill@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org	
Proofreader:	Wilhelmina Walton	642-8798
	WWalton@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org	
Proofreader:	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
	CRenwick@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org	

We welcome submissions. Deadlines are the end of the **THIRD** week of the month for the following month. Submit contributions by e-mail to Hugo (see above), or mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222. Submit web site contributions by e-mail to Carrie Renwick at the address above.

It must have been a slow news day...

Curtis Wolf

Yes, Friday, January 27th must have been a slow news day for the *Florida Times-Union*.

What better way to fill those empty pages in the newspaper than pseudoscience. Not only pseudoscience but pseudoscience that pays!

On page A-12, there were advertisements for three books that could be ordered by mailing a coupon included on the page. One of them was an innocuous book about computing for senior citizens.

I have my doubts about the other two books mentioned in the advertisements. The books are *The Folk Remedy Encyclopedia: Olive Oil, Vinegar, Honey and 1001 Other Home Remedies*, and *Eat and Heal*. The emphasis of the books is on the natural way of healing your body. According to the books, nature provides many foods that magically assure you of good health and a firm tummy.

High blood pressure? Eat this vegetable!

Alzheimer's is a thing of the past if you consume this natural ingredient!

This fruit will unclog your arteries like Roto-Rooter through a drain pipe.

This is typical of alternative medicine. Who needs modern scientific medicine when you can use herbs and super antioxidants to bring your body into harmony so that its life energy can flow through you and keep

your body finely tuned.

Yes, throw enough of the word "natural" into any advertisements and you will harken back to a time when we were all in communion with nature. Drugs and surgery are unnatural and dangerous and foisted upon us by greedy doctors. Natural substances are good and could not possibly hurt you no matter how much you consume them (Hemlock, anybody?)

Despite many doctors' skepticism against the untested claims of alternative medicine, it has become a multi-million dollar business as people consume

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magical herbs and have their energy fields massaged by Therapeutic Touch adherents.

Let's look at some of the questionable claims included in the advertisements.

One supervitamin protects your vision, fights infections, keeps skin, bones, and cells healthy, plus fights heart disease, cancer, memory loss, arthritis, liver disease, Parkinson's and complications of diabetes.

Kill cancer cells dead in their tracks!

Foods that prevent wrinkles...

*Heal yourself with food!
How food is more powerful than pills when it comes to promoting a long healthy life.*



*You may not have to worry about being overweight again!
The "Nothing Forbidden" diet plan anybody can follow!*

Flatten your stomach without gut wrenching exercises!

I could go on and on. The last two claims are the most galling. As a long time advocate of exercise, it drives me crazy when slick salesmen promote easy weight loss as a panacea to the obese. There really is no way around the following advice as a way to stay healthy and keep the weight off.

Exercise. Do not consume more calories than your body burns off.

However, this advice requires discipline, commitment, and yes—a certain degree of pain. It's obvious why we travel the easier path.

As far as what to eat, we should consider the wise advice provided by food experts who say "Eat a balanced diet and don't get hung up on the particulars." (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10435032/>).

Despite the red flags noted above, I am willing to give these books a certain benefit of the doubt until I read evaluations of

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Enlightenment: In a Flash or a Slow Crawl ?

John Ruskuski

Now, it is natural for me to say, "I'm an atheist." But it wasn't always so.

When someone learns that I'm an atheist, and that someone is a believer, they usually ask, "What made you lose your faith?" They expect me to say something about a tragic incident that left loved ones dead, hurt, or maimed and left me with doubt in the existence of God. There is always the response, "God has his reasons," or, "We can't always know God's plan." It has been too many years since I began to see through these ploys to even begin to try to reason with such people. Truth is, I don't know when the thought of being an atheist settled into my little brain, or the inner being of my self-consciousness, or whatever you call it. But somewhere between that Catholic tradition called First Holy Communion and adulthood, infidelity sunk in and took hold.

I can't say for sure it was the experience of Satori, that Flash of Enlightenment, the instantaneous Awakening that those Zen Buddhists talk about. Ain't been

no bright flashes around me. Sure, in the days of my "Spiritual Quest" I explored the "Eastern" religions. The meditation stuff on its own seems to be beneficial to me. Scientific minds are still exploring meditation's possibilities. (See the atheist Sam Harris's work.) It would be nice if we could just say, "_____ " [you fill in the blank], and the True Believer of whatever religion would instantly see the light of reason, cast off the

The reality of this "coming to terms" with religion (for those of us who were raised steeped in the stuff) is a slow, slow process.

yoke of dogma and join the ranks of humanity concerned for our fellow humans with loving kindness, compassion and reason! Yeah! Wouldn't that be great? Perhaps there will come the day when a charismatic humanist leader brings the message of Enlightenment to the masses. Perhaps that person will start out under a tent, having Enlightenment revivals! Then, as the followers grow in number there

will be Enlightenment gatherings at municipal arenas, sports stadiums, and eventually Enlightenment meeting places will sprout up in every neighborhood all over the land. Well, let's get back to reality.

The reality of this "coming to terms" with religion (for those of us who were raised steeped in the stuff) is a slow, slow process. A little chink in the armor of dogma here (where did Cain's wife come from?) and another there (how did Noah get all those animals on the boat?) add up to our someday saying "What the heck did I believe in that stuff for?" And then one's life is free to experience new meaning.

Just because I've been able to cast off the burden of religion does not suggest that life has no meaning or mystery. Now, through reason I am free (Free at Last!) to find how I can be a better person, help others in need, learn more about the world I live in and look out into the universe and marvel at the stuff out there! And, to tell the truth, sometimes, when I think of the possibilities that await the human race when it comes to its senses, I almost say, "Amen." Old habits die hard, huh?



No Atheist Left Behind! (...or, are you going my way?)

People who are seeking rides to FCFS events (i.e., people who do not drive at night, for example), may contact Hugo Borresen

(779-6883 or e-mail, address on page 2; or Carrie Renwick (268-8826 or e-mail, address on page 2 (under Newsletter Staff). We

will locate ride-providers in your area and get back in touch with you. Our goal is to have: **No Atheist Left Behind!**

Divine Sons

Fred W. Hill

Two thousand years ago the son of god walked upon the Earth. Well, to be more accurate, he was the adopted son of a *god*. To be even more accurate, he was the son of a niece of that most notorious of Roman warrior-politicians, Julius Caesar. In July 44 BCE, during games held in the recently slain dictator's honor, during the month renamed for him, a meteor appeared in the sky and was popularly proclaimed as evidence that Caesar had become a god and was taking his place among the Roman pantheon. However much Caesar had been hated in the Senate, so much that several prominent Senators plunged daggers into the man, his memory remained popular among the Roman masses. And his 18-year-old grand-nephew, ne Gaius Octavius, now heir to the estate and very name of Caesar, would ensure official recognition of his "divine father."

By 6 CE, Augustus Caesar, the title and name bestowed on him by the Senate decades before, had ruthlessly avenged his adopted father's murder; had eliminated all rivals to his dominance over Rome and thereby brought an

end to decades of civil strife throughout the Roman domain; had been officially recognized as the son of a Roman deity; and effectively brought an end to nearly 500 years of Republican rule in Rome. The Roman Senate acquiesced to his absolute authority in 27 BCE by granting Augustus the title *Imperium proconsulare maius*, making him the first Emperor of the Roman Empire. His adopted surname would remain an Imperial title until the destruction of the German and Russian empires during World War I,

...there is no convincing evidence that Jesus ever did walk the Earth or that his divine father ever existed.

over 19 centuries after his living dominion over Rome ended in the year 14 CE, or 14 AD as others might put it, meaning "in the 14th year of our Lord," referring not to Augustus but rather to another supposed scion of divinity. This, of course, was Jesus, the as yet unknown Christ, reputedly born in an obscure town near the far eastern edge of Augustus' realm sometime during the last two decades of

Augustus' sovereignty.

(Personally, I find the designations AD and BC ridiculous as well as inaccurate and find CE and BCE – for Common Era and Before Common Era, respectively – convenient alternatives that have been used far longer than generally believed --see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Era)

Augustus Caesar almost certainly never heard of Jesus and, indeed, there is no valid historical evidence that anyone else did during Jesus' own estimated lifetime (see http://www.vexen.co.uk/religion/christianity_nojesus.html). Outside of one verse in the Book of Matthew, for example, there is no record that King Herod ever ordered the slaughter of every firstborn male child in Judah. Such an atrocity would have aroused great anger among the Judeans and much comment among writers who lived during the period, but not even the other gospels make any reference to the event. The historian Josephus, who listed many other horrors committed by Herod made no mention of the "murder of the innocents" referred to in Mat-



thew, which is estimated by objective biblical scholars to have been written no earlier than 60 CE and more probably a few decades later. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Matthew) which makes it highly improbable that the author had any first hand knowledge about any event that took place during the reign of King Herod, who died in 4 BCE. Josephus did write about a census ordered by the Roman Governor Cyrenius Quirinius, as mentioned in the Book of Luke; however direct Roman rule over Judah did not begin until 6 CE, a decade after Herod's death.

Given their significant contradictions, the accounts of Jesus's birth described in Matthew and Luke cannot both be right and it's far more likely that both are wrong as is the notion that Jesus was born in the year one, CE or BCE (there is no designated year 0). That misconception is due to an error made in 540 CE by a Scythian monk, Dionysius Exiguus, in calculating Jesus' birth, and gradually adopted by the Christian world over the next several centuries, replacing a variety of different year-designating schemes, including from the founding of Rome or the years of imperial reigns. Augustus himself called the years after

the number of times he held the office of consul, a variation on the previous common Roman Republic practice of labeling years after the two consuls who shared executive authority for one year and then were expected to resign. Augustus of course, never resigned his authority and died ignorant of any notion that he lived under the dominion of any lord save himself and the gods of Rome.

Still, the belief in the divinity of Julius Caesar and of Augustus, himself, provides an example of the common mindset of so many centuries ago. Kings throughout the ancient world were widely regarded as divine, and in some countries — Japan and China, for example — remained so even into the twentieth century. Julius Caesar never claimed divinity for himself, and attempted, with fatally limited success, to convince his fellow Romans that he had no intention of making himself their king. Many of the more educated Romans of Caesar's day would have considered the notion of any mortal being regarded as a god as sheer barbaric nonsense. Rationality, however, was in even shorter supply than in the present, and Augustus had little trouble convincing enough Romans that Julius was both in fact as well as law his father

and a god. And when Augustus died, his heir, Tiberius Caesar, in turn convinced the Senate to declare Augustus divine and so it went, at least with those successor Roman Emperors who remained popular when they died. The people of Rome and its vast empire were primed to believe that a man could be both mortal and a son of a god.

Further, many aspects of the story of Jesus Christ had been previously ascribed to other deities, as related by Dan Barker in his article "Jesus – History or Myth" (see http://www.sullivan-county.com/news/paul/j_myth.htm#h2_6). Dinoyesus was just one god among many who died a sacrificial death and was resurrected and the myth of Mithra, a Persian god widely worshipped by Roman soldiers, has many parallels to the myth of Christ, from his birth on December 25th to his "last supper" with 12 disciples. As the Mithra myths are dated as far back as 2800 years ago (see <http://www.vets-sweatshop.net/dogma.htm>), while the Christian myths are less than 2000 years old, it is obvious that the latter was fashioned with parts taken from the former, as well as from so many other myths, including that of Julius Caesar attaining godhood after

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President's Message

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ample, all of which impact the economy and our very existence as we know it, today.

Already scheduled programs include representatives of the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission, in February; Lon Beville who, as you may know, has a court case pending against the City of Starke concerning a large cross positioned upon publicly-owned property, in March; and David Schwam-Baird who will discuss the secular roots of our constitution, in April. Also being considered are moderated round table discussions; Bob Ste-

venson, of the SOS programs; friend, philosopher, and professor Ellen Wagner; Dr. Ruth Senftleber, Science Supervisor, Duval County Public schools; Jim Strayer, biology teacher from Ormond Beach; and friend and professor, Dr. Eric Freiberger. December will wind up the year with our annual Human Light Celebration.

New activities will include an atheist gathering to be held Sunday mornings, location to be announced. See further details elsewhere in this newsletter.

Also, we will encourage and facilitate informal fun and frolic with the institution of "Dinners for Atheists," also described else-

where in this issue.

We also plan to start a "caring tree" to support our members in need, and we would like to participate in the Beaches holiday display this December with a nonreligious display (why should believers have all the fun?!) See Curtis Wolf's article, "How should we respond to the crèche?" page 8, January 2006 *FreeThinker*.

Such great ideas flying around, excellent program suggestions, so many good people giving of their time, thoughts, and talents! Yes, I think 2006 is going to be a very good year for the FCFS, thanks to its wonderful members.



Atheist Sunday Morning

Are you yearning for more conversation and camaraderie with kindred spirits than is currently offered by the FCFS? Do you feel that monthly meetings are inadequate?

Long-time member John Ruskuski has seen a need and has stepped in to fill it. (Be sure to read his essay on enlightenment on page 4, in this issue.) Here is what John has to say:

At the last book discussion group, some people said the only thing they missed about being a member of a church was the fellowship. Being a recovering religious person myself, I've had the same feeling and have been thinking about a way to get FCFS members (and others) together in an informal setting on a more-often basis. Sunday morning in a park that has a

covered table area might work.

If you are interested, and/or have any ideas, feel free to contact me: **John Ruskuski**, ruskuski@ilnk.com or phone **904-260-0071**.

Your president likes parks – as well as pancakes at IHOP! But whatever the location, I think gathering on Sunday mornings is a great idea. Let's make it happen! --C.R.



It must have been a slow news day...

(Continued from page 3)

them by a doctor familiar with the latest medical research. However, I give no such benefit to the advertisement on A-19 in the same paper concerning a homeopathic cold remedy called *NO Time for Colds*. Homeopa-

thy is a discredited practice that is completely at odds with science. (<http://skeptdic.com/homeo.html>).

Does the *Florida Times-Union* have a responsibility to its readers to provide them with accurate information within their advertisements as well as their news stories? The editors

may see themselves as simply a conduit between the advertiser and the buyer.

Yes, that is the free market, and I believe in it. However, I would not sleep well at night knowing that I have provided questionable health information to readers of my newspaper.



First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 550591
Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591
(904) 288-6291
<http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org>

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the First Coast Freethought Society is to serve the needs of the nonreligious of Northeast Florida, to promote freethought and secular humanism, and to provide an opportunity for agnostics, atheists, skeptics and other free-thinkers to exchange ideas.

Meetings

The FCFS meets the third Monday of each month at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, 7405 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, Florida. 32211. (904) 725-8133. Doors open 6:15. Meeting time: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

COMMITTEES AND CHAIRS

Program Curtis Wolf 573-3847
CWolf@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Audit R. C. Pitts 996-0879
RPitts@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Newsletter Hugo Borresen 779-6883
HBorresen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Membership June Applen 762-0627
JApplen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Telephone Nita Pitts 996-0879
NPitts@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

FCFS OFFICERS

President Carrie Renwick 268-8826
CRenwick@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Vice President Curtis Wolf 573-3847
CWolf@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Secretary Wilhelmina Walton 642-8798
WWalton@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Treasurer Susan Allen, CPA 564-2255
SAllen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

At-Large Earl Coggins 519-1890
ECoggins@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

E-mail Secretary Carrie Renwick 268-8826
CRenwick@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Parliamentarian Herb Gerson 363-6446
HGerson@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Founder Earl Coggins 519-1890
ECoggins@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Finance Susan Allen 564-2255
SAllen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Publicity Jay Mooney 288-6291
JMooney@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Website Mark Renwick 268-8826
MRenwick@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Hospitality Alice Ricker 745-1840
ARicker@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

Long Range Planning Curtis Wolf 573-3847
CWolf@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org



February Social - All Welcome!

WHERE: STEAK & ALE at Baymeadows and I-95 South

WHEN: Tues., February 28, 2006. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by Mon., February 27, if you are attending!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 • (904) 288-6291

2006 Membership Application



Name		Date	
Home address		City	State
		Zip Code	
E-mail address		Home phone	Business phone
Occupation		Areas of interest and/or expertise	

How did you hear about us? _____

Membership level (please select one):

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular (\$30/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Carl Sagan (\$50/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Charles Darwin (\$200/yr.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (\$15/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Bertrand Russell (\$75/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Robert Ingersoll (\$500/yr.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior - 65+ (\$15/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Thomas Paine (\$100/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Lifetime (\$1,000) |

I'm interested in getting involved in the FCFS as a(n):

- General member Committee member Officer Financial supporter

Do you object to your name appearing on our membership list, which is only distributed to other members? YES

Comments: _____

Dinners For Atheists

Members have long indicated they want more social gatherings in which everyone can really get to know each other and become friends. To that end, we have borrowed an activity that the Unitarians have been enjoying for years, which they call "Dinners for Eight." We don't

see why people can't have dinners for 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, or for that matter, 15! Hence, we shall call it "Dinners for Atheists."

It is so easy! A Host or Hostess merely places contact information, date for the dinner, and number of guests invited, on a sign-up sheet. The sign-up sheet (sometimes there may be

more than one) is placed on the back table at a meeting. You sign up to participate in a dinner of your choice! The host(ess) then corresponds with his/her signed-up guests to finalize details, the menu, who will bring what, give directions, etc. And the way has been paved for a delightful evening!



Divine Sons

(Continued from page 6)

being so brutally murdered.

No one now believes that Julius Caesar or Augustus Caesar or any of the other Roman Emperors became genuine gods after their deaths. They were all mere mortals and many of them died vio-

lently. However, they unquestionably lived and successfully reigned over a vast empire for centuries. Millions of people today over a far greater portion of the globe than any emperor ever ruled do believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ and his dominion over the entire planet, but in contrast to those ancient

Romans there is no convincing evidence that Jesus ever did walk the Earth or that his divine father ever existed. And even the gospel writers make no claim that Jesus had dominion over anything during his mortal lifetime. Except perhaps for those 12 disciples he borrowed from Mithra.



First Coast Freethought Society 2006 Events

February	20 - Monthly meeting	19 - Book discussion group	28- Social at Steak and Ale
March	20 - Monthly meeting	19 - Book discussion group	28- Social at Steak and Ale
April	17 - Monthly meeting	16 - Book discussion group	25- Social at Steak and Ale

Return service requested

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Jacksonville, Florida 32222