
August 1982 "BASIS", newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet

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Editor: Bob Steiner Publisher: Dan Byrd

Bay Area Skeptics is the first local chapter of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)

AND JUST WHAT IS CSICOP?

"The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal attempts to encourage the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public."

CSICOP was founded in 1976 by a group of courageous people who were willing to seek truth in the face of a multitude who were seeking mystical answers to life, and in the face of many who "earn" their livings from preying upon the desperation of those who seek simple answers to life's problems.

Associated with CSICOP are scientists, writers, professors, magicians, doctors, and many others from various disciplines. Their common interest is in finding and disseminating the truth.

Since its founding, CSICOP has done much to alert the public to critically analyze the numerous unsubstantiated claims floating about in the world.

CSICOP publishes an excellent quarterly entitled the "Skeptical Inquirer". (\$16.50 per year to the "Skeptical Inquirer", Box 229, Central Park Station, Buffalo, NY 14215. Tell 'em you read about it in "BASIS".) For current news in the field of the paranormal, as well as for the starting point for further research, we heartily recommend the "Skeptical Inquirer".

"Clear thinking requires courage rather than intelligence."

-- Thomas Szasz.

TRACKING A "PSYCHIC"

by Dr. Kenneth D. Bomben

On Dec. 31, 1981, Channel 7 (KGO) had psychic Jeanne Borger on "AM

San Francisco" to make predictions of events for 1982. Among other predictions (which cannot be evaluated until the end of 1982), she made two predictions for times early in 1982: (1) there would be a Reagan assassination attempt in April, and (2) the stock market would hit 700 in April.

Neither of these occurred. The stock market went below 800 in March, but it did not "hit 700". If there was an assassination attempt, the media WEREN'T invited. Of particular interest, however, are the major events that were missed, namely (1) the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the role of the US as arms supplier, (2) the Falklands War and the US role in it, and (3) the resignation of Alexander Haig. These three events should have had a significant impact on any "view" of 1982.

For completeness, other predictions were (4) Reagan would have heart and kidney problems, (5) the government would force people to keep their money in the country; no foreign bank accounts, no ownership of foreign money, (6) two earthquakes would occur, with the one in Los Angeles being much, much worse than the one in San Francisco (no dates specified), (7) unemployment would get much worse, then level off by the end of the year, (8) Barbara Walters will have a dispute with and possibly leave ABC, and (9) Egypt and Libya will have a conflict and the United States will be implicated by foreign concerns.

While the final chapter has not been written on these predictions, it should be noted that the US dollar has strengthened against foreign currency, making (5) unlikely, and that the only earthquake reported so far this year in Los Angeles caused no damage.

MORE TRACKING

by Michael McCarthy

[Ed. Note: Both Ken Bomben and Mike McCarthy did excellent analyses of Jeanne Borger's predictions. Although J.B. is not strictly Bay Area, she is widely known enough that an analysis seems instructive. Since we published Ken on the specifics, let's see the fine job Mike did on the methods.]

It must be borne in mind that a large number of Ms. Borger's "predictions" are not easily checked, due to her careful phrasing, not to mention her choice of topics. One of her stylistic marks is the "either/or" prediction, of which this is an example: "The threat of a Soviet invasion of Poland still casts a somber shadow across the whole of Europe. **IF THAT HAPPENS, it is LIKELY TO OCCUR** in March or early April. **IF IT DOES NOT HAPPEN**, the Soviet Union will later in 1982 call in its loans to the Polish government" (emphasis added). In other contexts, this appears as "if the invasion has not occurred by (period), then it will not occur at all." Note her use of "likely to occur"; even if the Soviets invaded in July (now a moot issue), her "likely" is an out.

"Probably" and "likely" are commonly scattered in her predictions.

Secondly, many of her predictions are vague, or involve personal issues in the lives of pop figures, much of which cannot be confirmed or denied in any event. For example: "Jeanne Kirkpatrick (UN ambassador) is in serious danger from the middle of June through mid-July. During this period, diplomats around the world will be in danger and at least one will die, PROBABLY in July" (emphasis added). Even if Mrs. Kirkpatrick is not in the papers for a life threat, the nature of the serious danger and the likelihood that a threat might go unreported makes a denial of this prediction difficult. Added to this is the problem of defining a "diplomat".

This space is too small to say anything meaningful.

H.A.N.D.

THE SKEPTICS WHO DEBUNK PSEUDO-SCIENCE

by Michael Robertson

[from the "San Francisco Chronicle", Thursday, July 22, 1982]

"So this guy walks into his bedroom and there in his bed with his wife is his best friend. `OK,' his best friend says, `whom are you going to believe, me or your eyes?'" -- A joke with a message

No doubt about it, the founding party of the Bay Area Skeptics at Bob Steiner's El Cerrito apartment is a big success.

The Shroud of Turin, precognition, UFOs, psychic surgery, creationism, psycho-kinesis, laetrile, mental telepathy, palm reading, Kirlian auras, astrology, the Bermuda Triangle, and William Shatner's hairline -- the 35 people assembled here tonight are festooning these problematic notions with question marks the way some people put tinsel on a Christmas tree.

Though the talk is good, around 11 p.m. the card tricks and hand magic begin. Psychologist Terry Sandbek does a couple. UFO researcher Robert Sheaffer does a couple. Host Steiner does a couple dozen.

These are quick, clever deceptions, and the skeptics love them all. It is play with a purpose, catch-me-if-you-can. The skeptics don't know how it's done, but they know they're being tricked. And that, not ironically, is what they love most of all.

Bay Area Skeptics is an idea searching for a final shape. The

group is actually the local chapter of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. But the Bay Area Skeptics would like to take an even broader approach.

The question is, how broad?

Shall they simply "tell", providing volunteer teachers for schools and other interested groups? Or shall they also "show", tackling fake psychics one-on-one?

Dr. Wallace Sampson, one of the group's six directors, prefers they concentrate on teaching.

But, he says, "I am in favor of debunking newsworthy cases. There may be no other way except to investigate and expose. We hear a great deal about psychic healers and psychics finding missing persons. But we don't hear about skeptics challenging these claims. If people know an organization can dispel claims, they may be less likely to accept them.

("Have Doubts Will Travel", their cards might say. "Wire Skeptics, San Francisco.")

Board member Robert Sheaffer, author of "The UFO Verdict: Examining the Evidence", is particularly irritated by what he considers to be the media's ready acceptance of outrageous claims. He hopes the group will serve as a resource for confused newspeople -- if only they will ask.

"Look at all the positive stories about the Shroud of Turin", he says. "There is an irresponsible element in the press that reaches for sensationalism. A story on UFOs is treated as if it were filler."

When Sheaffer was young, he says he believed in flying saucers, encouraged by the popular press. But after doing serious reading and research, "I modified my views. I felt I had been had. Why isn't someone contradicting so much misinformation? It's like a natural force, like erosion. If no one opposes it, it'll win by default."

Though they enjoy an occasional card trick, the Bay Area Skeptics are serious people. Sampson is a hematologist and oncologist with a practice in Mountain View. He is on the clinical medical faculty of the Stanford University Medical Center, and teaches classes on medical fraud there and elsewhere.

His fellow board members are also respectably credentialed. Sandbek is a clinical psychologist in private practice near Sacramento, specializing in anorexia and bulimia. Sheaffer is a science writer and programmer of highly specialized computer software.

Lawrence Jerome is a writer, college instructor, and consultant,

trained as an engineer. Andy Fraknoi is executive officer of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific and former newspaper astronomy columnist.

Steiner, the catalyst for the group's formation, is a CPA and part-time professional psychic debunker.

Though a majority of the group's members are scientists of one sort or another, they insist their views are not monolithic. Sandbek, for example, is an evangelical Christian. Steiner is a militant atheist.

The group might legitimately criticize the teaching of creationism in public schools because, as Sampson puts it, in that situation, you have "religion claiming to be a science. But prayer in the schools -- I think that's out of bounds for the organization."

Sampson is personally uncomfortable with the word "skeptic" because it suggests that members of the group would prefer not to believe in anything.

Sandbek agrees that the "word is loaded.... I would love to see psychic phenomena proved true. Like Carl Sagan, I would like definite proof we've been visited (from outer space). My job is to prove such things do exist. But I haven't found that proof yet."

Sheaffer uses the UFO controversy to illustrate what he believes is the crucial difference between healthy skepticism and uncritical belief.

"We can be proved wrong, but they can't. One UFO in Golden Gate Park for one hour, and we're proved wrong before the whole world. But no matter how many cases skeptics refute, (believers) say they just weren't the right ones."

Members of the group agree there are real dangers in not demanding compelling proof for pseudo-scientific phenomena. Law enforcement officers can waste time and energy listening to psychic crime-solvers.

Passivity is encouraged when UFO believers wait for God-like aliens to intervene and clean up the world's mess. The seriously ill can be diverted from traditional medicine until it is too late by psychic healers and by medical "discoveries" like laetrile.

It is 1 in the morning, and almost everyone has left. Steiner's houseguest, Jack Patterson, professor of engineering at Iowa State University, rests in an armchair. He is a somber, impressively quiet man.

In an indirect way, he is responsible for the birth of the group. In the '70s, during a public debate with a fellow Iowa State faculty member who was offering academic courses in which all sorts

of psychic claims were treated as fact, he met Steiner. That was the real beginning of Steiner's career as a debunker.

Some of the skeptics are almost exuberant in their doubt. Patterson is not.

Humanity's problem is gullibility, not lack of intelligence, he thinks.

"The willingness to think critically is a matter of courage, which most people don't have. To have that courage..." Patterson pauses, "...sometimes I believe you almost have to betray your parents to learn how to think critically."

FOOLING THE BELIEVERS

by Michael Robertson

[from the "San Francisco Chronicle", Thursday, July 22, 1982.

Photographs omitted.]

Robert Sheaffer, member of the Bay Area Skeptics, is serious about debunking beliefs in UFOs. In fact, he put together his own photos of flying saucers.

The two UFOs shown above actually represent a single elliptical light source that was photographed twice in a darkened basement. The camera was then carried outdoors to record the background. The film was not advanced between the three exposures.

The flying saucer at right was fabricated from an aluminum plate, cottage cheese container, Ping-Pong balls, black tape, and some black dots to serve as portholes. Because no other object appears in the picture, it is impossible for the viewer to determine the size or distance of the UFO.

THE OTHER SIDE OF SKEPTICISM

by Michael Robertson

[from the "San Francisco Chronicle", Thursday, July 22, 1982]

Skepticism is a useful tool in evaluating virtually anything, including skepticism itself.

The Bay Area Skeptics do have a critic, or at least a friend who fears they may go too far.

Psychologist Ray Hyman was at the organization's founding party not as a member but as a guest, a highly respected one. He is about to begin his sabbatical from the University of Oregon, where he has taught since 1961.

During the next academic year, Hyman, a specialist in the science

of thinking, will be the Thomas Welton Stanford visiting professor at Stanford University.

Thomas Welton was Senator Leland Stanford's youngest brother, who went to Australia as a young man and never left it. A believer in spiritualism, in 1912 he gave \$50,000 to the university to establish a "psychical research fellowship".

Hyman, who has spent over 30 years testing psychic claims, is not in complete sympathy with the Bay Area Skeptics and their goals.

Long-term education of the public is a good idea, but he doubts the value of headline grabbing by confronting bogus psychics. "It's like chopping the head of a hydra. A thousand more grow."

He also fears a possible conflict of interest, because Bob Steiner makes part of his living as a professional debunker. (Steiner says he earns comparatively little in that capacity.)

Some skeptics, Hyman thinks, tend to "think they are holier than thou. They think (those who believe) are gullible or stupid."

"In one sense, (the skeptics) are dogmatic, just like the other side. They know science. They think they can't be fooled. I think they can be taken."

As a young man -- and before he began graduate study at Johns Hopkins University from which he received his Ph.D. in experimental psychology -- Hyman read palms. He was a professional entertainer, and it was part of his act. But he gradually became convinced he had a genuine gift. This self-deception frequently happens among would-be psychics.

He discovered the truth about his talents when a friend advised him he tell people the exact opposite of what their palms "said". To his surprise, his subjects still lavishly praised his accuracy.

Drawing on his own experience, Hyman sees certain hazards in hard-core skepticism. "I have a background in magic. I know I can be fooled, that (I may see a new trick), and have no answer whatsoever, at least for a while. I might be confronted by a legitimate psychic, and think that it was only a new trick.

Hyman agrees that abuses like medical fraud must be exposed. But a defense can be made, he thinks, of those psychics who confine their ministrations to the spirit.

Psychic readers, Hyman says, can do good. "People come away better able to deal with their problems. They become aware of new insights and new possibilities. The fallacy, of course, is that it's the psychic reader. A computer could do the job just as well. It all comes from within."

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE OTHER SIDE OF SKEPTICISM

Ray Hyman is a Fellow of CSICOP, is a respected psychologist and educator, and has spent over 30 years testing psychic claims. He takes some unusual positions, which should be addressed (see newspaper article elsewhere in this newsletter).

"Some skeptics... tend to `think they are holier than thou.'" In my considerable association with CSICOP and Bay Area Skeptics, I have found a "holier than thou" attitude to be almost as scarce as unicorns. We all seek to learn. Ray laid his "holier than thou" charge on the skeptics in conjunction with his explaining why HIS way is the ONLY way for EVERYONE to address the subject of "bogus psychics". (The redundancy in the last two words is Ray's, not your editor's.)

The skeptics "think they can't be fooled." On the contrary: the very fact that we realize that anyone can be fooled is one of the main driving forces for all of us to refine our scientific, logical, and investigative techniques, in order to detect the methods that might fool us.

Ray "fears a possible conflict of interest because Bob Steiner makes part of his living as a professional debunker." Were this simply a cheap shot, we would not address it at all. However, it goes against the fundamental concepts of human freedom, the workings of the marketplace, critical analysis, and the development of expertise.

To wit, if we were to accept Ray's curious logic, we would be led to the following absurd conclusions: Wallace I. Sampson, M.D., could not assess medical frauds, because he earns his living as a medical doctor; Robert Sheaffer would not be allowed to write about a scientific investigation, because he earns part of his living as a science writer; Terry Sandbek could not analyze the psychology of belief, because he earns his living as a psychologist; and Ray Hyman would be prohibited from "drumming up business for himself" by asserting that "long-term education of the public is a good idea," because he earns his living as an educator.

(I am paid for an occasional presentation at a university, hospital, or convention. Ray is paid as a full-time professor, and proudly states that he has spent over 30 years testing psychic claims. IF the receipt of money did indeed constitute a conflict of interest for one investigating psychic claims, why is not Ray's ethical conflict many times greater than mine?)

And lastly, we have this Fellow of CSICOP firmly and publicly defending the "good" that "psychics" do, and explaining how belief in a fallacy ("fallacy" is Ray's word) can help people to "come away better able to deal with their problems. They become aware of new insights and new possibilities."

Ray, since you sincerely believe that "psychics" purveying a fallacy are capable of such good, is that the message of the "long-term education of the public" you hope to disseminate by using your associations with CSICOP and BAS?

ANOTHER REPLY TO RAY

by Terry Sandbek

Since Ray Hyman has taken it upon himself to publicly criticize the PROPOSED methods of BAS, I would like to speak as a founding Board member to some of these comments.

I. It is ironic that Hyman, who implies that BAS is too dogmatic, is himself quite dogmatic about our intentions for directly confronting psychics on their turf. Hyman thinks the only way to confront paranormal phenomena is in polite debate and scholarly articles. Although these methods are of vital importance, it is somewhat presumptuous to assume his methods are the only appropriate ones. His hydra metaphor is apt -- we do feel as if a thousand psychics pop up for every one we confront. Yet, has anyone ever conquered a hydra thorough debate? Perhaps each method has its place. Since we do not wish to deny Hyman his methods for dealing with claimed paranormal experience, we would appreciate the same courtesy in return.

It is possible that the methods of BAS are an anathema to Hyman because they lack an ivory-tower sterility. However, social psychology research and the observations of political realities leave us little choice but to try to reach people as directly as possible. Since our goal is an educational one -- to teach people how to be less gullible and to evaluate unusual claims more realistically -- we must use methods that correspond to the daily life of the average person. This AVERAGE American does not read professional journals, nor is he or she interested in scholarly debate. (How many political candidates have won election for the scholarliness of their positions?)

Because of the media age in which we live, unless a group can grab the attention of the masses, they will languish in the dusty pages of library backrooms. It would be nice if we could present our views through the gentlemanly process of dialogue, but the real world does not run that way. Our potential audience is also considerably more than those few individuals who read intelligently written articles. Which has a wider circulation, the "Skeptical Inquirer" or the "National Enquirer"?

This is not to imply that we believe the average person to lack intelligence. As Patterson pointed out, the issue is gullibility, not intelligence. There are so many demands on people's time that very few have the interest or availability to look at paranormal experience in any depth. If we can awaken the public to the possibility that all claimed psychic phenomena should not be taken

for granted, then we will have done our job. For more detailed analyses of the issues, people can then go to more lengthy discussions in those journals that provide such information.

II. As a clinical psychologist, I am more personally concerned that Hyman should make statements completely out of touch with the psychology profession. He states that psychic readers are benign, maybe even helpful, because "people come away better able to deal with their problems." I would be interested in the study that even hints that this possibility exists. For people to deal with problems better, they need to learn a whole series of coping skills that seldom come to them through osmosis or out of the blue.

In other words, professional psychology is a learning process, but can the same be said of psychic readings? What type of learning takes place? It is questionable that the psychic reader (pseudo-therapist?) has any goals for the clients other than calming their minds and making them feel good. This anaesthetic approach, which masks problems, exists in the minds of science fiction writers and in hospitals that use the psychotropic medication as a last resort. No competent psychotherapist would accept this state of affairs as an acceptable criterion for personal change. After all, substance abuse is used specifically for feeling better and getting rid of stress.

Therapy is not an experience that helps people feel better, gives them insight, or calms them down. Not that there is anything wrong with these goals in and of themselves. The issue is how we go about arriving at these goals. Therapy is a process that attempts to show people HOW to gain more personal responsibility for their thoughts and actions. It teaches them to take risks and to accept the fact that life has no certainties.

In contrast, the psychic reader gives people the mind set that there are guarantees in life, and that all we have to do is to tap into some mysterious outside force to achieve happiness, to make correct decisions, and to minimize disruptions in our lives. This approach to life can be devastatingly harmful. Self-determination is one of the most important components of maturity. Yet the psychic reader allows one to give up personal responsibility. To give this up is to relinquish all that is truly human: dignity, self-respect, and autonomy.

WHO KNOWS?

The enclosed newspaper articles in the "San Francisco Chronicle" attracted several interested parties, some of whom will certainly add to our considerable listing of talented scientific consultants.

On Sunday, August 1, Bob Steiner was interviewed on Channel 7's "A.M. Weekend". Hostess Sylvia Ramirez probed in some depth into the nature and purpose of Bay Area Skeptics. Following that,

Steiner probed in some depth into the stomach of the poor guy on the table, in an expose of "psychic surgery".

SPACE ALIENS INFILTRATE BAY AREA

by Robert Sheaffer

"Psychic" Maria McKensie revealed in an interview with "The Examiner" (the national supermarket tabloid, not the local paper) that space aliens disguised as humans are roaming the streets of San Francisco! "I discovered them two years ago", she says, "but I didn't reveal their presence then because I was afraid it would start a panic." Looking out her office window in San Francisco's financial district, she reportedly became aware of people walking strangely -- as if they weren't fully adjusted to earth's gravity. (In some circles, people like that are known as junkies.) "And even more strange, they always stayed in the same small area."

It was two months before McKensie got up the courage to follow them. "They went into a Chinese restaurant, and disappeared into its back room." She somehow found the courage to barge into that room, and discovered to her horror that "they all had six fingers of exactly the same length, and their skin was shiny and moist." McKensie hit them "with a strong barrage of psychic energy", but they fought back with their tremendous will. Soon afterward, the aliens' skins "began to dissolve into powder", and in a few minutes, all that was left was their clothing. Ms. McKensie laments that "I haven't been able to locate them since."

ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY MEETS

by Andrew Fraknoi

As part of the 93rd Annual Scientific Meeting of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, we offered a two-day workshop for school teachers on incorporating more astronomy in the school curriculum. Included was about 45 minutes on debunking pseudo-science, which included distribution of an annotated bibliography on scientific views of fringe areas. (The "Skeptical Inquirer" appeared frequently among our recommendations.)

I am very pleased to report that in their evaluations, the approximately 100 teachers who attended uniformly singled out this portion of the workshop for praise and urged us to make more of such information available.

While you still occasionally hear a university or college professor exclaim that we should not dignify the pseudo-sciences by rebutting them, it seems that at the elementary and high-school levels, teachers are deluged with student questions in these areas. The teachers welcome the kind of objective, rational information CSICOP

can provide.

If we can continue to make every effort to bring this type of information to teachers at the lower levels, perhaps fewer and fewer students will grow up believing that the stars determine their love-lives, or that our ancestors were too dim-witted to start civilization without the help of extraterrestrial visitors.

"TRUISMS"

Andy set forth two of the relatively few generally accepted "truisms" that form the basis for much of the nonsense that passes for reality today. (If anyone has noted any other "truisms", please send them on to the editor. Ready?:

Our ancestors lacked the intelligence, the strength, the skill, and the tools required to do the things that they obviously did. (Therefore, there must have been outside help.)

Little children, especially little girls, are always honest, never lie, never use trickery, and it would be unthinkable for them to even entertain the thought of fooling the adult world by deception. After all, what joy could they derive from fooling their elders?

When someone claiming psychic ability has been caught cheating numerous times, that person is obviously NOT cheating on any of the experiments in which the investigating parapsychologist does not detect any cheating.

The purpose of every thing and event in the universe is to personally influence your life.

Children have a NEED to believe in irrational things.

Adults have a NEED to believe in irrational things.

\$5.00

A yearly subscription to "BASIS" can be obtained by sending a \$5 payment to Bay Area Skeptics, Box 659, El Cerrito, CA 94530.

If your label shows "I0882", that means that you made Inquiry, or that we Invited you to subscribe. In either event, your freebie will expire with this August 1982 issue.

If you have accepted the invitation to become a scientific consultant, and have not subscribed, there is a problem for which I do not have a ready solution... BUT YOU DO!

Tell your friends and associates about Bay Area Skeptics.

"It is a sobering thought to realize that not a single report of [a psychic happening] over a period of 125 years has managed to stand up to scientific scrutiny." -- Ray Hyman

Opinions expressed in "BASIS" are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of BAS, its board or its advisors.

The above are selected articles from the August, 1982 issue of "BASIS", the monthly publication of Bay Area Skeptics. You can obtain a free sample copy by sending your name and address to BAY AREA SKEPTICS, 4030 Moraga, San Francisco, CA 94122-3928 or by leaving a message on "The Skeptic's Board" BBS (415-648-8944) or on the 415-LA-TRUTH (voice) hotline.

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