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

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet

Vol. 1, No. 5

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)

OVERVIEW

There is a great deal to cover. It is late in the month, and there is some backlog. We'll cover what we can now, and pick up the rest in the next issue. We'll concentrate on the Calendar, Time, Money, and Media Coverage.

CALENDAR

Every Sunday, 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM: "Exploring the Universe with Andrew Fraknoi" will be on KGO-FM, 104 on your FM dial.
Nov. 14 through 19, KGO-TV, Channel 7, on the 6:00 PM news, there is to be a mini-documentary investigating "psychics".
Nov. 20, 8:00 PM: The Grotto is sponsoring Robert Sheaffer, "The UFO Verdict: Examining the Evidence".
Dec. 1, 7:30 PM: BAS meeting, open to the public, Campbell Public Library. Topic: "Psychics and Police Work".
Dec. 15, 8:00 PM: The Grotto is sponsoring "Does ESP Exist? Demonstration and Debate."
Jan. 8, 1983, 8:00 PM: BAS Party in San Jose.

ANDY HAS HIS OWN SHOW!

Every Sunday at 11:00 AM, Andy Fraknoi will host a radio show: "Exploring the Universe with Andrew Fraknoi". He will have guests, commentary, and call-ins from the listeners.

Much luck to you on this new venture, Andy. We all wish you well.

It will be a two-hour show on KGO-FM, 104 on your FM dial.

KGO-TV INVESTIGATES "PSYCHICS"

In an in-depth field study, KGO-TV News investigated "psychics" operating in the Bay Area. Bob Steiner was on hand for observation

and evaluation. This will be a mini-documentary on the 6:00 PM news, Channel 7, Nov. 14 through 19.

SHEAFFER ON UFOS

Robert Sheaffer will be sponsored by The Grotto on the topic "The UFO Verdict: Examining the Evidence". It will be on Nov. 20, 8:00 PM, at the Habitat Center, 3895 18th Street (at Sanchez), San Francisco. Admission: \$3.00.

"PSYCHICS" AND POLICE WORK

In response to a lot of feedback, BAS has commenced to sponsor meetings open to the public. On Dec. 1, at 7:30 PM, there will be an open meeting at the Campbell Public Library, 70 North Central Avenue, Campbell, CA.

In addition to welcoming the public and meeting one another, the topic for the evening will be "Psychics and Police Work".

There is no admission charge.

VOLUNTEERS WANTED (CORRECTION: NEEDED!)

Bay Area Skeptics is growing. Some of us are spending a great deal of time on it, and we are seeing tangible results, about which read the rest of this newsletter.

Who would like to be, uh, let's call the position Corresponding Secretary? For the month I handled approximately 50 pieces of mail regarding only subscriptions and inquiries. In addition to that, there are calls from the media, someone with claimed psychic powers wants to accept our challenge to prove psychic ability, there are interviews, and like that.

Then, of course, there is the bookkeeping, bank deposits, and don't forget that I'm editing "BASIS".

Please understand that I'm not complaining -- I love it; and I'm not looking for sympathy. I'm looking for some help on this. Please call me at (415) 525-2841.

BAY AREA SKEPTICS BALANCE SHEET, OCTOBER 27, 1982

Assets:

Cash in Bank		\$ 5

Total Assets		\$ 5
	=====	
Liabilities and Deficit:		
Liabilities:		
Estimated Liability for Printing and Postage on this newsletter		\$ 85
Loan Payable to Bob Steiner		200
Liability on Unfulfilled Subscriptions*		--

Total Liabilities		\$ 285
Deficit		(280)

Total Liabilities and Deficit		\$ 5
	=====	

*We listed only Liabilities resulting from Cash or immediately upcoming Cash transactions.

Thanks to Robert Sheaffer for his recent generous contribution.
Thanks to all the Board -- No one has submitted expenses for telephone.

IN ADDITION TO NEWSPAPERS, BAS has been on radio, TV, and given other presentations.

`PSYCHIC' SKEPTIC GIVES LESSONS IN REALITY

by Morgan Cartright, Neighbors staff writer
[from the "Sacramento Bee", October 21, 1982]

Some of them read minds.

Others move objects across the room without lifting a finger or predict the death of presidents and disasters at sea.

But psychics, astroprojectionists, astrologers, telepaths, and other practitioners of the paranormal arts have one thing in common, according to psychologist Terence Sandbek.

They're all fakes.

"There may be paranormal things out there", Sandbek told a Cordova High School psychology class last week. "I've never seen it."

A member of the newly formed Bay Area Skeptics, Sandbek runs a psychology clinic in Fair Oaks and teaches psychology part-time at American River College.

He was invited to speak to the class by teacher John Tamblyn.

Sandbek impressed his message on the class by demonstrating numerous "psychic" phenomena -- mostly mind-reading card tricks and other flim-flam lifted from the stock magician's kit bag.

It was only after the class had been duped into believing in his psychic powers that Sandbek let the rabbit, er... cat out of the bag.

"Everything you saw there was a fake", he admitted. "We can all be conned by any person, anytime."

"Even magicians no longer do some of these things", he said of the so-called psychics who he said make millions by pulling the same tricks regularly on network television.

A poll of his class -- before he admitted his demonstration was a trick -- showed 75 percent of the students believed in psychic phenomena.

And afterward?

"I don't know", said junior Michele Catlett. "I still think it's possible. Anything's possible."

"I'm bothered by people coming over here and fooling us", said a miffed Lorrie Stewart.

Sandbek maintained, however, that he was not there to fool people but to give them a valuable lesson in reality.

"It's better that you be fooled here than somewhere when it will cost you \$10,000", he said. "Even if you are intelligent, you can be conned very easily."

The Bay Area Skeptics was formed, said Sandbek, not to bad-mouth psychics, but to ask for proof. Any psychic who can prove, under laboratory conditions, his claims of psychic powers will receive a check for \$11,000 from the group.

So far, no one has cashed in.

As Sandbek explained it: "If you know you are conning people, and you know you are conning people, any you gonna want to be tested by them?"

Sandbek said he has appeared on local call-in radio talk shows with an associate and similarly fooled the audience into thinking he was a psychic, only to later de-bunk the fakery.

After one such show, a caller asked for a prediction about his job. "Even after being told I was a fraud, he believed I had psychic powers", recalled Sandbek.

Among the more blatant fakes, said Sandbek, are astrologers and psychics who make scores of predictions for the upcoming year each January, the most famous being Jeanne Dixon.

Their forecasts are vague and generalized, said Sandbek, such as, "There is going to be a revolution in South America this year." Successful predictions are usually just chance. "We follow Jeanne Dixon's predictions for the year and so far she hasn't had one right. Not one", he said.

Another famous psychic, Uri Geller, is also a fake, Sandbek alleged. Geller's displays of bending keys and reading books from another room are just standard magician's tricks, performed by a master, he said.

Although he calls himself a skeptic, Sandbek insists he is not a cynic.

"I want to find a psychic. I want to be a believer. But I don't want to be conned and I don't want to be scammed."

The following little blurb in the October/November/December 1982 issue of the "Open Education Exchange" newsletter has so far drawn 19 responses, including four subscriptions. Thank you, Bart Brodsky and Janet Geis.

You folks might find the newsletter and listed courses, ads, commentary, and such to be of interest. Write for a sample copy: Open Education Exchange, P.O. Box 5905, Berkeley, CA 94705.

"BAY AREA SKEPTICS FOUNDED

Have you grown weary of having an attractive new acquaintance at a party inquire about your sign, rather than being interested in what you think? Are you tired of hearing about past lives, and outraged at the thousands of dollars paid by a desperate person for `psychic surgery'? Take heart, fellow skeptic, you are not alone! Learn of others who, like you, are grounded in reality, and challenging the mystics, `psychics', UFOers, past-livers, astrologers, and more. \$5 for a year's subscription to our newsletter; SASE for a sample copy. Bay Area Skeptics, Box 659-A, El Cerrito, CA 94530."

THE SKEPTICS WANT TO TALK TO YOU

by Mary Schmich, Times Tribune staff

[from "The Peninsula Times Tribune", Thursday, October 21, 1982,

front-page story]

If you seek guidance from your newspaper horoscope or trust the wisdom of palm readers, if you believe in biorhythms, clairvoyance, extrasensory perception or close encounters of the extraterrestrial kind, the Bay Area Skeptics want to talk to you.

This small club of sophisticated doubters from around the Bay Area includes a doctor, an accountant, an engineer, an astronomer, a professor, and a software designer. They banded together this summer to investigate, and usually debunk, "paranormal" claims that range from mind-reading to spoon-bending.

The group's leader is a dark-eyed, rangy master of hocus-pocus named Bob Steiner, a certified public accountant who also works as a magician and writer.

"The idea is not to make people switch over and believe us on faith", Steiner says. "It's to have people learn to critically analyze any claims that come along. People who believe in many of these things -- psychics, astrology -- are giving up their self-direction."

Steiner runs the organization from his El Cerrito home, a modest apartment cluttered with tributes to human curiosity or gullibility. The living room furnishings include Rubik's cubes, "Psychology Today" magazines, books on the occult, a gizmo called an I.Q. tester, a game called the Vanishing Leprechaun, and a statue of Merlin the Magician.

Of the many tricks Steiner uses to convince people that things are often not what they seem, none is more dramatic than his bogus performance of the Philippine practice of psychic surgery.

Under the unrelenting eye of a television camera and without the aid of scalpel or anesthesia, Steiner has extracted bloody, "diseased" organs from his patient -- then pulled a balloon or two from the patient's body just to prove the absurdity of the exercise and how believably it can be faked.

He can, with his sleeves rolled up, make things disappear in his hands or he can, seemingly without evidence, accurately guess which playing card his subject pulled from an invisible deck.

He will roar with laughter at his inscrutable feats, then chide anybody who believes he is anything more than very clever and very deft.

"If you don't know how it's done, you have two basic choices", he said with a broad, boyish grin one day last week, having just sent a red silk scarf into the Great Void. "One is that a human being has the power to alter the known laws of nature at his or her whim. The other possible explanation is that somebody fooled you with a trick. Absent knowing, it seems much more sensible to assume it

was the latter."

Bay Area Skeptics is the local chapter of a national organization with the unwieldy title of "The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal".

In addition to Steiner, the chapter's board of directors includes Wallace Sampson, a Mountain View hematologist and oncologist who teaches at Stanford University Medical Center; Terence Sandbek, a psychology professor at American River College in Sacramento; and Andrew Fraknoi, a professor at Canada College in Redwood City and the executive officer of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific.

The other directors are Robert Sheaffer, a San Jose software designer who wrote "The UFO Verdict: Examining the Evidence", and Lawrence Jerome, a science writer trained as an engineer.

The group is still deliberating how best to put its varied talents to use demystifying pseudo-science for the public.

Some members of the group have lectured on the subject at colleges and universities, including Foothill and De Anza colleges, Sampson said.

Sampson, who is particularly concerned with phony medical claims, has joined Steiner in seminars demonstrating the chicanery of psychic surgery. He says he is skeptical of "most of the holistic medicine scene", and he discredits claims that large doses of vitamins can cure most anything, that sugar causes violent behavior, and that laetrile cures cancer.

He discourages universities from teaching mystical the psychic explanations for natural events. He talks to journalists reporting seemingly psychic events in an effort to convince them that there are rational explanations for those occurrences.

It is hard not to wonder how the notion of God fits into this philosophy of skepticism.

"A belief in God is not a disqualifying characteristic for belonging to the group", says Sampson. The group includes agnostics, a devout Christian, and at least one atheist, Steiner.

The group members insist that they would welcome any proof of psychic claims. In fact, they invite such proof.

For the past few years, Steiner has had a standing promise of \$1,000 for anybody who, in controlled conditions, can demonstrate a psychic power that he can not duplicate or explain by normal means. So far, he says, nobody has taken him up on his offer.

Steiner continues to marvel that so many people are so gullible.

He tells of being introduced not long ago as a psychic during a

guest spot on a radio station.

People called and asked him for predictions on their jobs, their finances, their love lives. He gave them answers; they told him he was amazing. Twenty minutes into the show, he confessed to his listeners that he was a fake.

The radio station phone continued to ring.

"Call after call came in after that", he said. "One guy wanted to know about his health. I said, 'But I told you I was a fake.' He said, 'I don't care.' I said, 'Have I ever met you? How can I know anything about your health? Why don't you tell me about my health?' He said, 'Do it anyway.'"

Steiner shook his head in amused dismay.

"The will to believe", he said, "is just so strong."

GO AHEAD, INDULGE YOURSELF -- BUT BE A LITTLE SKEPTICAL

by John Askins

[from the "San Jose Mercury News", Sunday, October 24, 1982.]

Here's a challenge for you. Of course, if you've got any chance of winning, you already know what the challenge is.

For those who haven't discerned by now whether they're going to win \$1,000, not to mention \$10,000, let me explain: Bay Area Skeptics, a new organization, is offering \$1,000 to "any person who can demonstrate any psychic power under controlled conditions." The demonstration must be one that BAS chairman Bob Steiner, a professional magician, can't duplicate.

A prize of \$10,000 is also available from a New Jersey magician called The Amazing Randi, and Bay Area Skeptics promises to notify Randi if anyone passes the local test. "Thus", says a BAS announcement slyly, "anyone with genuine psychic powers can easily collect \$11,000 from these two men."

Well, I hope someone does. I doubt it will happen, but I hope so.

You don't have to read minds to know that BAS doesn't expect anyone to collect the reward. BAS doesn't believe in psychic phenomena. "Nothing would be more exciting than to discover the existence of a genuine psychic power, if such a thing exists", the announcement says. "However, experience has shown that the field of psychic research is so filled with self-delusion, evasion, and fraud, that we are frankly quite skeptical that any genuine paranormal powers exist at all."

Why do they care? What difference does it make to them if someone else believes in telepathy, clairvoyance, astral projection, and

the like? Robert Sheaffer, a San Jose programmer and science writer who is BAS vice-chairman, says it's because belief in the paranormal is "the antithesis of a rational, open society."

"We live in a democracy", he says, "where majority rules. If the majority believes in irrational things, we run the risk of something absurd becoming policy. Look at what happened to the followers of the Rev. Jim Jones, a practitioner of phony psychic arts."

When I object that Jones's pitch was more religious than psychic, Sheaffer adds palm readers and faith healers to his list of dangers. Palm readers may defraud the unwary of large sums, he says, and psychic healers may prevent ill people from seeking medical help until it's too late.

What about the need of humans to believe in something magical? What are we supposed to do when we want a little inspiration, some nourishment for the imagination?

"That's the reason we have literature, theater, art, and music", he says. "Counterfeit miracles are not the answer to any genuine human need."

In my heart, I know BAS is right. There are no ghosts, astrology doesn't work, Kirlian auras are a trick, and the Bermuda Triangle is just another patch of water. In my heart, I also know that a perfectly rational world would be drabber than blueprints. You can't prove the existence of love or God, either, but who wants to give them up?

It's good to be open to new ideas, to give a hearing to any claim, however improbable. The notion of humans flying once sounded like a pipe dream, too, don't forget. And it's good to let the imagination roam freely.

Rationalism is all very well, but we have not yet learned all there is to know about the world. And if people didn't think and act irrationally once in a while -- following intuition and "crazy hunches" -- we probably would know less than we do.

But BAS is right at least this far. There is a difference between being open to new possibilities and being a fool.

I can afford to play with ideas like clairvoyance if I care to, because I'm not going to base any important decisions on them. There are a lot of people in the world more credulous than I, and this stuff may have a serious impact on their lives. Thus it is necessary to say, as obvious as it may sound: Believe in the possibility of all things, but don't hand over any money without tangible proof.

Along that line, let me add that rationalism is also a belief system, and as such has its own inherent dangers. For one thing,

it can lead to feelings of superiority towards persons perceived as being less than rational. For another, it can emphasize reason at the expense of emotion.

With those caveats, I hereby pass on the address of Bay Area Skeptics (Box 659, El Cerrito, Calif. 94530) for those who wish to join, and for any psychics who hope to pick up the \$1,000 prize.

To the latter: Remember, be skeptical. Ask to see the money before you do your trick.

[Compiler's note: For this computer-based edition of "BASIS", I wanted to add some brief comments to Mr. Askins's article: Mr. Askins seems to attribute to BAS quite a number of extraordinary positions it has in fact never taken. Specifically, BAS has NEVER maintained that

- inspiration and "nourishment for the imagination" are bad,
- one shouldn't be "open to new ideas" or "new possibilities",
- the imagination shouldn't be allowed to "roam freely",
- we have "learned all there is to know about the world",
- people shouldn't follow intuition and "crazy hunches",
- one should adopt rationalism as "a belief system",
- one should emphasize reason (or anything else) "at the expense of emotion" (whatever that means),
- one should believe only in the existence of things that can be demonstrated to skeptics (and thus not in "love or God"),

and is highly unlikely to ever do so. -- Rick Moen, BAS Secretary, Nov. 30, 1989]

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 October, 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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