
February 1987 "BASIS", newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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Editor: Kent Harker

BAS CALENDAR: FEBRUARY

FEBRUARY 27: JIM LOWELL, HEALTH-QUACK INVESTIGATOR. Jim will be speaking on medical absurdities. Do come out for this one. It will be fun and informative. See article for more detail.

Day/Date:Friday, Feb. 27. Time: 7:30 pm Place: El Cerrito Public Library, 6510 Stockton Ave. Directions: Traveling north on Highway 80, take the Central Ave. exit (the third exit north of University Ave). Go east about three blocks and turn left on San Pablo Ave, continue three blocks and turn right on Stockton. The library is on the right in the third block.

BALLOONS UP YOUR NOSE AND OTHER MEDICAL ABSURDITIES

Presentation by James Lowell

(This write-up by Bob Steiner, plagiarized liberally from James Lowell.)

"Balloons Up Your Nose and Other Medical Absurdities" is the title of the presentation at the February 27 meeting.

While nary a one of you to whom I spoke about this talk was, for even an instant, fooled about the tone of the presentation, some of you expressed the concern, legitimate, I hesitate to add, that those unfamiliar with the work of Jim Lowell and the writing style of Bob Steiner might think, from the write-up, that the February meeting might not make sense. In order to quell such fears, allow me to preface all of this by assuring you that Jim Lowell is serious in his brave and substantive fight against medical quackery. He just effectively uses humor to make his points.

There is something unaesthetic about prefacing humor with a caveat along the lines of: "The following will be humor." But..... Ready?

Jim Lowell is brain surgeon who, after receiving a frontal lobotomy, could no longer practice medicine legally or publicly. Consequently, he joined the alternative medical underground, where he practices psychic surgery, pyramid power, bilateral nasal specifics, and other comparable, highly efficacious, unorthodox medical regimens (Okay, Don Morris, let's see you put THAT on the LA TRUTH line.).

Bring shovels and hip boots.

"PSYCHICS" PREDICTIONS

by Bob Steiner

As we have learned to count on, the "psychics" once more did extremely badly in their predictions. The predictions were vague or wrong or both, or were not predictions at all.

As we have also learned to count on, Robert Sheaffer has done a masterful job in analyzing those predictions for 1986. [Robert will give us his analyses in a later issue. -Ed]

In scoring the "psychics," Robert has properly not given them credit for items which were too vague to call, were already in progress, or were statistically odds-on favorites to happen.

It might be instructive to take a look at the stuff of which the "psychic" "predictions" are composed. Let's see what the seers see over the horizon into 1987. For the sake of brevity, we'll look at two of the most famous predictors: one nationwide and one local.

JEANE DIXON

Regarding the Iran/Arms/Hostages/Contras scandal, JD said: "The strain on all the leading players, from Ronald Reagan down through top White House officials, will take a health toll." Does that surprise any of our readers? Or would you be more surprised if this scandal did not lead to strain?

"AIDS victims will include an eminent dancer, a prominent public official, and another Hollywood leading man." That all seems quite probable.

"The IRS and the public will be confused by the new tax laws." I am a practicing CPA, and I guarantee that. It was already happening prior to her "psychic" prediction.

"Another major tax law will be enacted to clarify matters." Ditto. We know of literally hundreds of corrections which should have gone into the law, but about which Congress decided not to take the time to correct prior to sending the current legislation to the President for signing.

"Look for a tax increase in the near future." I presume that means that the eminent seer is predicting that somewhere, in the United States, in some state, in some county, in some city, or in some unincorporated district within the United States, there will be some tax increase. Isn't it astounding that she can pinpoint that?

"Dolly Parton will be the subject of a rumor linking her to a handsome gentleman who is not her husband." Uh huh.

"Recent scandals on Wall Street... will lead to dramatic changes throughout the business world." That is a fact, not a prediction. It has already started.

"In the next few months, an illness or accident will again strike a person close to Vanna [White]'s heart." Alas, I fear that we all care about someone who will contract the flu, or something.

Hold on to your hats. I don't know if you are ready for this one. "A wedding for The Golden Girls' Rue McClanahan may beat my prediction into print. Rue is very close to remarrying a former husband." Can't you picture it? Rue and fiance are racing to the church while JD is racing to the newspaper.

And that is the stuff from which the predictions of Jeane Dixon are made.

SYLVIA BROWN

For 1986, SB predicted that President Reagan is "more ill than we know." When that failed for 1986, she re-predicted it for 1987.

For 1986, SB predicted that the TV show "Dynasty" would be cancelled. When that failed for 1986, she re-predicted it for 1987.

For 1986, SB predicted a power blackout in New York City - the worst blackout in New York history. When that failed for 1986, she re-predicted it for 1987.

And this last prediction for 1987 just staggers the imagination. "There will be a lot of rain condensed in early spring." Wow! If that surprising, totally unexpected prediction actually comes to pass, think how it will revolutionize the arts. Why, songwriters would have to start writing songs like -- I can almost hear it now - "April Showers."

Poets would write about:

"stirring dull roots with spring rain."

T. S. Elliot: "The Waste Land", 1922.

Another poet could write:

"Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote."

Geoffrey Chaucer: "The Canterbury Tales", c. 1387.

We might even read such stirring verse as:

"Sweet April showers
Do bring May flowers."

Thomas Tusser: "A Hundred Good Points of Husbandry", 1557.

Thank you, Sylvia, for pointing out all of these surprising things which we mere normal mortals cannot possibly foresee. When you can foresee such unanticipated, surprising events as spring rains, we can forgive your missing the Challenger disaster, the ouster of Marcos, the Daniloff affair, the Iran/Arms/Hostages/Contras deal, the Chernoble disaster, and all of the others, plus all of the

misses you made. After all, you can't hit 'em all.

And there you have it folks. Guide your lives well, now that you know what is coming.

All the best to all of you for a wonderful 1987. Hope you survive the unseasonal spring rains.

OH-THAT-EXPLAINS-IT department:

[We wonder how ufologists explain how the government has managed to keep the lid on the "UFO coverup" for 40 years in despite the failure to control other sensitive leaks (Watergate, etc.). The following is an exact transcription made by Don Henvick of Dale Goudie, director of UFO Information Service, heard on KKUP radio on the Larry King show, 1/2/87. Remember, you heard it here second. -Ed]

"[In 1952 President Truman]...might have signed it into effect when he signed in the, ah, if you remember the National Security Agency was signed in by without the permission of the Congress and the Senate. It was, the President signed it in, which is now one of the biggest security organizations in the world today, he might at the same time have signed something that would go into a special effect that no one gave them a special permission to keep this wrapped up within themself. I mean we just don't know that."

PSYCHIC MARKETING

by Yves Barbero

There's probably a lot more integrity in the world of sales than we recognize. In our cynical view of the salesperson, images of the fast-talking, suede-shoe slick easily come to mind.

Even though there are crooks out there, by and large most salespersons are honest, allowing for a certain amount of hype. In most cases, the customer wants the product and uses his intelligence not so much to resist the sale as to drive the best bargain from a trained professional.

It's been well over a hundred years since the U.S. could be even remotely considered a subsistence economy. The majority of what we buy today is what we desire, not what we need. Even in the purchase of foodstuffs we often spend a bit more for a "name brand" because of the packaging. There's nothing wrong with this because underneath the fancy packaging is a real product. The car you buy, no matter how much chrome and sexy lines, will get you from A to B.

In competing with each other, salespersons have developed their

craft to a high art. They often say, "You have to sell yourself." After all, what difference does it make if you buy your insurance from Company A or B? The rates are statistically determined.

So we, the consumer, wind up being convinced that a particular salesperson is going to look out for us and give us a fair shake. This doesn't mean we are naive. We put our trust in a relative stranger because we can only spend so much time monitoring a specific transaction. Anyway, the salesperson wants to remain in business, and the threat of criminal or civil sanctions is likely to reinforce his/her own sense of honesty.

Salesmanship has gained enough professional esteem -- it is a kind of subculture -- that the stature itself is justification for its intellectually careless members. The act of selling thus becomes justification enough for a small minority who don't investigate the product beyond its marketing potential. As long as the process of selling follows their conception of how it's done, they feel they're doing an honest job.

That subculture is a strange world combining common-sense psychology, personal charisma and GOODS AND SERVICES. So long as goods and services are included, there is a kind of balanced honesty in the sense that the customer can usually adjust for hype. Everyone knows \$14.95 means \$15. The real problem comes when the goods and services are figments of the salesperson's imagination. It is in this sense that I consider most psychics, astrologers and faith-healers. This is not to say that there aren't outright frauds, however.

The main gripe a skeptic has with psychics is that they're not really selling a measurable service -- only common-sense psychology and personal charisma. But the psychic sincerely believes there's a REAL service to sell no matter how vague it is or how often it's proved wrong.

A skeptic wants to evaluate the "service" (and occasionally products such as pyramids that sharpen razors, etc.) in the cold light of scientific objectivity, but the psychic assumes that if it's sold, the customer is satisfied, the profit justified (even if profit is not thought to be the motive) and the services valid. The skeptic can never accept this, however. Sincerity implies only personal honesty, not that the psychic is right.

I offer two likely solutions to end the marketing of psychic goods and services. One is to try to interest the state in restricting psychics. This has inherent dangers for the non-psychic, however. The state may stop clearly harmful practices such as psychic surgery but if the state may prevent fortune telling (unless clear fraud in present) it might also have the power to stop other forms of free speech.

We may have to tolerate a certain amount of lunacy to preserve First Amendment integrity. The civil courts have always been

available to redress fraud, be it psychic or otherwise.

Another solution is public education. This is much more to my liking. An aggressive campaign to show that psychics, astrologers and faith healers are all hype and no services is the way to go. Our year-end analyses of the previous year's predictions by "famous" psychics is a good example of what can be done.

Public education serves several purposes. It is a consumer issue in that we're helping people hang on to their hard-earned money. It serves to train people to look at issues in a more scientific way. It may save lives whenever we expose a faith healer so that a member of the public sees a real M.D.

And, critically important, it clears away some of the encrusted debris of pseudoscience, leaving the next generation a more enlightened path.

[Yves Barbero is not a salesman. -Ed]

EDITOR'S CORNER

Statistics lie. This familiar dictum makes a mathematician wince. Wincing in this manner is almost a part of my weekly fare. In fact, only humans lie.

This whole matter came to me again during the ritual playoffs. You know, the family room scene with beer-crazed, pretzel-stuffed idiots trying to remember if it is third and two or a seven-ten split in the tenth frame. Anyway, in my delirium I tried to recall former playoff extravaganzas as the jumble of jerseys, jocks, grunts; crashing helmets, yellow flags and other nonsense tumbled through my already throbbing temples. All I could remember was the Budweiser commercials. Or was it Miller? Whatever.

Of all the statistics that are plied in athletic contests, the beer huckstering was for me the standout of Superbowl XX -- the only thing worth remembering. For all you uninitiated out there who didn't wince at or didn't see those ads I suppose I'm going to explain.

An "impartial, scientific test" was to be conducted to see if Miller devotees would prefer Bud. Each participant (there were 100) was seated behind a little console with two levers, A and B. Then the officiator of the event, dutifully clad in full zebra, came out and explained that all the people at the consoles were red-blooded Miller drinkers. Each then quaffed a healthy draft from each of two tankards marked A and B, one containing Miller, the other, Bud. Tension mounted as the referee blew his whistle signaling the crew to pull the lever corresponding to the brew of their preference as he assured us that the participants didn't know which beer was in which glass and that this was all live so we would know there could

be no fudging. The results of this experiment quickly flashed on a TD scoreboard: 54 had chosen Bud! Our announcer pounded home the fact that 54% of Millerites had picked Bud over their own ale!

My couch mate was a Bud man. He wasted no time wagging a finger in my face and giving me a wild round of raspberries punctuated with the exclamation, "See there, mathematician, Bud is better! Statistics prove it!"

He fell back a little and took his finger out of my eye when I told him all the "test" had proved was that beer aficionados couldn't distinguish one beer from the other, and that the referee should have thrown a yellow flag and yelled, "Foul!" when the results were announced in favor of Bud.

The tip off is the 54%. The ad was repeated about four times, each run with different participants, and each time the outcome was between 45% - 55%.

There were two levers to pull. If there had been no other instruction than to pull one or the other, we should have seen about 50% pulling A and 50% pulling B. Since the outcome repeatedly centered around random expectation (50%) it is most likely that randomness was in fact operating, not conscious decision. In other words, the picky palates could not really tell which was Bud and which was Miller (horrors) but they had to pull a handle anyway. If only 5% or 10%, for example, had chosen Bud it would not have been easy to pass it off as chance -- it might only have been explicable that some taste distinction was indeed possible. The fact that the experiment was repeated several times and all outcomes fell comfortably within a standard deviation of 50-50 chance makes discriminating taste very unlikely to have been the reason.

So the interpretation of a statistic is the crux. The "problem" with probability and statistics is one of ambiguity; but ambiguity is the inherent nature of probabilistic questions. In the cloud of that ambiguity lies the potential for a bushel of evils ranging from honest misunderstanding to blatant lying. Unfortunately, the results are the same whether the interpretation is misguided or from intentional deceit. Untrained people are very susceptible to judgement errors in probability questions. One has only to go to Reno and witness people pouring money in the Keno rat hole to understand this.

Whenever we see some pet theory promoted on a probabilistic foundation it is perhaps sound to say, "Beware." The Madison Ave. moguls knew very well what they were doing in that campaign. They wouldn't have risked their client on live, national TV. The campaign was all the more crafty because it led the viewers to make an obvious but fallacious conclusion. They lied to us with statistics; a pernicious lie because it played to our probabilistic naivete.

Statistics don't lie, but when the whole picture is not available (initial conditions, data bases, extrapolation, etc.) a lot of misunderstanding at least and lying at most can be perpetrated. Creationists do it with abiogenesis probability calculations, parapsychologists do it in psi research, and those silver-tongued devils, the ad men, can punt us right out of the stadium with it.

AMICUS CURIAE

THE So. Cal. Skeptics, one of the more vital affiliates of CSICOP, has shown that vitality by producing the Amicus Curiae brief of 72 Nobel laureates to the Supreme Court on the State of Louisiana's "creationism" appeal. The case has been heard by now, and a decision will probably be announced around mid March.

This twenty-seven page brief is a limited edition. The salient points are wonderfully compacted in the booklet. Most of the material shows the clear (fundamentalist) Christian dogma behind "scientific" creationism's proposal. The legal questions are sketched, also.

The main reason the brief was published for sale to the public is money. The enormous legal fees are being paid by concerned citizens who donated to the cause. The cost per edition is \$25, which you send to: So. Cal. Skeptics, P.O. Box 7000-39, Redondo Beach, CA 90277. [I bought a copy for three reasons: 1.to help the cause, 2.to read the arguments, and 3.to have a "collector's item" that might be valuable someday. -Ed].

DATELINE TULSA. 69-year-old Oral Roberts will die by March if he does not get 4.5 million by then! His shocking message to his viewers really laid it on the line. His ministry is deep in the red (his hospital was a financial disaster) it seems and he is desperate. This would be a psychic prediction to watch except that it might be a tad difficult to look at the books with a live Roberts in April to find that he only received a paltry 4.1 mil. Then again, Oral didn't say WHICH March...

BASIS

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FROM THE CHAIR

by Robert Sheaffer

In the November issue, we published a readers' survey, the results of which I would like to share with you. The response was not as good as we hoped to get, but enough to give us some valuable feedback of what you are thinking. Many thanks to all who took the time to share their thoughts with us. Complications at publication time of that issue made it almost impossible to have the survey as a separate page, and I can understand that many of you did not want to lose part of the issue by sending in the page; several readers sent in copied surveys.

Let's go over the questions, and look at your responses.

1. How long have you been reading "BASIS"?
2. Are You a Current Subscriber?
3. Do you read the Skeptical Inquirer?

About half of those responding have been reading "BASIS" almost from the beginning, in 1982. About 20% of the remainder, two or more years; about 30% joined us during 1986. All of those responding are current subscribers (meaning, if the question is correctly understood, they are not receiving a single "inquiry" copy, or the copies we exchange with other CSICOP-related organizations. Not surprisingly, about 3/4 of those responding also read "The Skeptical Inquirer", one-third of them indicating that they have been longtime subscribers of "SI". (If you are among those who are NOT getting "SI", I can't imagine why not. If you like "BASIS", you'll LOVE "SI". For a one-year subscription, send \$20 to Box 229, Buffalo, NY 14215.)

4. What Did You Like Best in Recent Issues?

The clear first choice was Randi's expose of Peter Popoff, mentioned by about half of those responding. Other items deserving honorable mention are: the review of the Creationist Conference in San Jose; "Sheaffer's items usually pretty good" (blush!); book reviews & library referrals; paradigms and "religions"; Randi's episodes; Steiner's "Steve Turbot" hoax in Australia; "Shawn Carlson discusses criticisms"; "the fine humor of Don Henvick's article on his escapades".

5. What did you like least?

About 20% said they had no complaints. One responded, "I can't remember an issue that didn't give me something interesting to read."

Of those who named something, several objected to what one of them termed "picking on poor Colin Wilson". Several others seemed to be objecting to what they felt were "attempts to be cute; personal reminiscences that have no point"; irrelevant articles; unimportant

details in stories; the editorials. Other "least liked" things were: "stories too short" (better too short than too long!); "some articles weren't relevant" (but we won't know which ones those are unless you tell us!); "the raving on Linus Pauling" (I thought we were discussing.). One reader pointed out an irksome problem with the item mentioning Columbus in the July issue, where we said "Of course, Columbus could PROVE what he was claiming." The reader pointed out, correctly, that this is isn't so. "He claimed he could sail west to the Orient. He claimed he had found the (east) Indies until his death." (Well, at least Galileo could prove what HE was claiming!)

6. Would you be Interested in Helping with "BASIS"?

We received a number of offers of assistance. We still need more help, especially in the following areas: people with IBM or compatibles (or, actually, any computer with a modem) to help with the editing. (A word aside to "BASIS" contributors: we love all interesting and thoughtful submissions. We love them even more when they are on MS-DOS diskettes!) We also need people who have professional knowledge or comparable expertise in fields in which bizarre claims are often made, who can send us well-researched investigations or analyses of such claims. Let's hear from all you Egyptologists out there. Where are our hydrologists, medical specialists, marine biologists, and specialists in Meso-American antiquities?

7. How many BAS meetings have you Attended?

9. What Times Are Best for you to Attend Meetings?

10. What Locations Do You Prefer?

12. How many Meetings a Year Would You Attend, Assuming that the Time & Location were Convenient, & the Subject Interesting

The answers to these questions confirmed what I had been suspecting for some time: that most of our BAS people are not all that keen about coming to meetings. We usually see 30-50 people at our typical meeting, occasionally rather more when we have a particularly interesting subject, and especially effective publicity. Most of the people, however, are not readers of "BASIS", and are coming because they read about the meeting in the paper.

While it is good that we are continually reaching out to new people, some of whom remain with the organization, it is disappointing that relatively few of our "regulars" go to a lot of meetings. About two-thirds of those responding had been to at most one meeting. And since I would assume that those taking the trouble to respond are MORE likely to attend meetings than those who do not, that suggests that most of our readers are exactly that -- readers, not attenders. I read this to mean that some of you people like to go to a meeting once in a while, but once a month is too often.

There are many good reasons for not being able to attend. Some must presumably plead indifference. Interestingly, this contrasts with

the answer given to Question 12, in which most people said they would like to attend six or more meetings a year. There seems to be a significant gap between the number of meetings people say they would like to attend, and the number they actually do. We are going to a lot of trouble to keep our meetings going smoothly on a monthly schedule, and we are fortunate to have been able to tap a long line of excellent speakers. Unless we see more enthusiasm for attending (and, yes, also helping organize) meetings, we may wish to schedule them less often. To paraphrase Greta Garbo in "Ninotchka", "there will be fewer but better meetings".

As for the times and locations preferred for meetings, the responses confirmed what we already suspected: No consensus. As for locations, the strongest preferences were for the East and South Bay. Obviously, no one location will please everybody. We will continue to move things around, usually either near Berkeley, or near San Jose. If you would like to have a meeting near where you live, take the initiative and help organize it!

We received some very interesting responses to the "open ended" questions which I'll share next time. Meanwhile, if you still haven't sent in your survey, please do so now. The more who share their thoughts with us, the more successful we will be in making the Bay Area Skeptics your kind of organization.

WITHOUT GRACE by Rick Moen

"Amazing Grace", a young woman who professes to be a faith-healer, seems to be less than pleased with her recent television encounters with skeptics. Her displeasure has been showing quite clearly.

Last June 3, Grace appeared on the show "A.M. San Francisco", demonstrating her talents. So, however, did BAS founder and former board member Bob Steiner. Although both the host and the audience seemed largely hostile to him, and although he was expected to merely appear at the end and attempt to explain away Grace's "healings" (a most unpromising format), Bob nonetheless managed to cast grave doubt on Grace's abilities.

In the audience was our very own Don Henvick, man of many cures. Don, who has been cured by various faith-healers of ailments ranging from alcoholism to UTERINE CANCER, was picked out by Grace as her first patient, and cured of non-existent arthritis. Others in the audience were similarly "treated". Her routine was similar to that of other faith-healers we have seen in the past.

However, I would like to comment specifically on Grace's tactics: What does she do when her credibility is attacked? Well, it has to be seen to be believed. First, she interrupts relentlessly, smiling beatifically all the while. No critic is allowed to get an entire sentence across if she can help it. If that does not suffice, she

has a whole range of diversionary tactics at her disposal. If she gets a diagnosis wrong, she claims to have healed someone sitting nearby. If that won't wash, she can bring forward one of her followers (they seem to dominate her audiences) and talk about HIS cure instead.

Then again, she can always attack the critic. If the critic is non-religious, she harps on that, suggesting that she is therefore somehow being persecuted. If told she has "cured" a subject of non-existent ailments, she complains about "deceit".

Any doubts I had about Grace were laid to rest when I saw her again, this time appearing on the "Oprah Winfrey Show" with a couple of other ladies with paranormal aspirations and James Randi, the magician. Her usual tactics were present in force. However, here's why I suggested that the skeptics must be getting to her: Towards the end, she felt obliged to ask (smiling demurely) "Randi, is it true that you take young boys into your home?" (I may be paraphrasing very slightly.) Both Randi and Winfrey were clearly taken aback. Grace, as always, just kept on smiling. She's Amazing, all right.

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

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