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March 1991 "BASIS", newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics  
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Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet

Vol. 10, No. 3

Editor: Yves Barbero

## CRYONICS

by Brian Siano

Every so often, a topic comes up which stands squarely in that grey area between science and pseudoscience, between fringe speculation and technological possibility. It can't really be ruled out, but then again, it rests on such radical assumptions that the temptation to label it as crackpottery is almost too strong to resist. Such a topic is cryonics: too possible to be dismissed, but also, too far-fetched for many to take it seriously.

In cell biology, cryopreservation is the technique for freezing cell cultures for future use in experimentation. In this case, however, the plan is to freeze an entire human body in hopes of reviving it at some point in the future when a) the cause of that person's death can be reversed, and b) when the technology exists to revive a frozen human being. (Another variant is to freeze only the head of the person in question, in hopes of also acquiring a new body through this future technology.)

The arguments in favor of cryonic suspension are pretty direct. The chance for a kind of immortality -- or even an extended or revived life -- is pretty tempting, as well as the possibility of seeing the future. The techniques for successful cryogenic preservation are understood, at least in principle, and any problems we have currently will probably be fixed in the future. (After all, look at the technological advances made since 1900, many of which would have seemed impossible then.) And, as many cryonics enthusiasts say, a body that's been buried or cremated has no chance of being revived, while a frozen body has at least a remote chance of living again. More about this gamble later.

Those who object to cryonics mention that cell walls tend to rupture when frozen, thus damaging the body far too extensively for revivication. Similarly, there are those who see the promise of cryonics as being too grandiose, that real technical problems are blithely dismissed on the promise of future technological developments. It's also important to point out that, as of this writing, nobody has succeeded in freezing and reviving a dead mammal. (Frogs, however, have been successfully revived.)

The cryonics supporters I've spoken to are quick to describe theoretical technologies that may make cryonics a more feasible

prospect, nanotechnology and gene research the most prominent among them. K. Eric Drexler's "Engines of Creation" describes nanotechnology as the development of micromachines with molecule-sized parts; some of the more extreme speculations on their potential include micro-robots injected into humans as an additional immune system, or micro-robots that could assemble almost any structure out of almost anything, merely by rearranging molecules. So, when asked about the cell-wall rupture problem, one cryonicist told me that the problem would be solved with a "Plastic Polymer" that would preserve the cell walls within a microthin casing. When asked how the polymer would be removed, he chirped, "Nanotechnology!" He then described micro-robots that would remove the polymer and deliver it outside the body. I'd wanted to ask about how the cadaver's brain might be revived, but I almost expected the answer to be "The Hand of Jehovah" which would come down and re-ensoul the corpse.

(There are other objections, resting on moral and ethical considerations. Would it be ethical to preserve and revive people in an overpopulated world? Wouldn't the process be so expensive that only wealthy people would have this opportunity? We can't really evaluate these questions objectively, and either way, an individual may want to preserve his own interests over other considerations even if particular ethical concerns had an empirical basis.)

So, what we have here is an issue whose critics point up current technological scientific limitations, but whose supporters can invoke the deus ex machina of scientific development to almost magically remove any technological limitations. After all, one can't entirely rule out the possibility of micromachines that would solve those nasty cell-wall problems, or even the possibility that one's mind might be encoded into a computer storage system, to be re-implanted into the revived corpse, or the possibility of gene therapy that would arrest or reverse the aging process, or ... well, you get the idea.

Is cryonics a pseudoscience? Well, there's a lot in its supporters' claims that has that rich aroma of crackpottery, where earth-shattering ideas lurk under every theory in existence, where the prospect of time machines are just as probable as bone marrow transplants or gene therapy. But unlike proponents of psychic phenomena, cryonics supporters are not invoking new and unknown forces, or asking science to revise its current models to accommodate their wishful thinking. Cryonics is, at base, a gamble on possible technological development, and there is no way of ruling out the possibility of winning at this gamble.

Let's look at that death gamble again; the part about how a person who's just buried has no chance at revival, while a frozen person has a remote chance of being revived. Doesn't this sound a lot like Pascal's Wager, which attempted to prove the need to believe in God?

Pascal's Wager, in a nutshell, was this: Suppose that a man who believes in God dies. (Yes, this DOES happen.) If there is no God, then he's just dead, he decomposes, and the worst he gets is painless oblivion. But, if there is a God, and he lived a good, religious life, he'd get the infinite rewards of eternity in Heaven. On the other hand, if an atheist dies (this happens too), and there is a God, he may be condemned to Hell's infinite tortures for not believing; the best he can expect from death is the decomposition and oblivion part. So, therefore, Pascal argued, it's far better for a man to believe in God, because the gamble for infinite pleasure makes better sense than risking infinite pain. (The wager's flaw is that it doesn't specify just what kind of God to believe in. You could spend your life worshipping Jehovah, and spending Judgement Day facing off with the Mighty Sword of Allah.)

Cryonics rests on a kind of analogy to this. It's better to gamble on being revived, because losing this gamble still leaves you no worse off than anyone else; but if you don't gamble, you may lose out if the Big Future Wake-Up Call happens.

However, one can also use the same argument against Cryonics that one uses to disprove Pascal's Wager: by pointing out that the wager itself says nothing about the particular religion one must follow. Suppose that, in the future, someone finds out that the best preservative for a human body isn't freezing in liquid nitrogen and a plastic polymer, but something else? (Maybe a mixture of Cheez Whiz and Worcestershire sauce? After all, considering the miracles of science, there's no reason to say this might not ever be the case, hm?) Isn't it worth your while to specify in your will to be preserved in a tank full of the stuff? After all, if this turns out not to be the case, that some other preservative works better, you won't be any worse off than anyone else...

Come to think of it, one could also subvert the cryonicist's argument completely. Suppose they find that they could re-grow you from a DNA sample gathered from your decomposed bones. That way, even if you didn't freeze yourself, you'd still have that remote chance of being revived, in a way. After all, if you can't rule out the possibility of reviving frozen people, you can't rule out reviving decomposed people, either.

I should point out how cryonics isn't like Pascal's Wager; it's not demanding that you live your life according to certain dictates. At most, it's asking that you make an investment, and ask for certain procedures to be done to your body when you die.

Is cryonics a fraud or con game? The potential for it certainly exists, and the fear of death is a powerful motivator to buy into something as radical as this. The economics of the situation are simple; The Alcor company in Riverside, California charges \$100,000 for a full body preservation, about \$35,000 for head freezing, and a \$200 per year maintenance fee. These are paid for, usually, by the person taking out a life insurance policy for the above amounts, with Alcor as the beneficiary. Premiums on such life

insurance policies can be relatively cheap, perhaps \$150.00 a month, and if you change your mind, you can always change the beneficiary. (One company, Cryonics Internment Corporation, used a one-time fee system and went bankrupt about twelve years ago, and many customers thawed like so much spoiled beef.)

I wouldn't call this a scheme for fraud; most cryonics supporters are aware that the company's main promise is that it will keep you frozen. It's not exactly responsible for the nanotechnology or biomedical research part of the bargain. The company also has a responsibility, to its shareholders and clients alike, to stay in business and make a profit indefinitely, otherwise, its clients would start dripping like Slurpees. A Cryonics plan would be fraudulent only if the company did not freeze or preserve its clients according to the protocol it promised.

Speaking personally, I can't make any great pronouncements as to whether cryonics is a worthwhile investment or just another example of technology-fed wishful thinking. There's a lot about the promises made to promote cryonics that I think are a tad suspicious, and resting results on the possibility of What The Future Might Bring is relying too much on some ill-defined Great Spirit that will make things well and whole someday. Scientific basis aside, saying that nanotechnology will make things wonderful when I awake is a lot like telling me that Jesus will cure my diseases when I awake. Still, the most critical attitude I can take is the time-honored Wait-and-See.

[Brian Siano, Delaware Valley Skeptics]

## HISTORY AND DISTINCTIONS

by Rick Moen

The time has come, the Walrus said, to talk of many things: Of ships, and shoes, and sealing wax, of skeptics and humanists.

Some history is in order: The skeptics' movement, as an organized affair, started abruptly, between the covers of "The Humanist", a magazine published by the American Humanist Association to promote that philosophy. The movement's genesis was an article (or perhaps manifesto) in the 9/75 issue called "Objections to Astrology: A Statement by 186 [later 192] Leading Scientists".

Reactions pro and con were so strong that a number of the article's backers, including James Randi, Martin Gardner, Paul Kurtz, and Ray Hyman, decided in May 1976 to form a committee to critically examine fringe-science claims. This was (and is) CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Claims of the Paranormal, run from Buffalo, NY, by its chairman, SUNY Buffalo professor of philosophy Paul Kurtz, on a tight budget but with a dedicated professional staff. CSICOP began to accumulate as follows

and consultants an impressive array of magicians, scientists, and academics, apparently quite diverse as to philosophical and religious inclinations. It has published a quarterly journal, "The Skeptical Inquirer", since 1976.

At nearly the same time, some sort of parting of the ways transpired at the AHA. Kurtz, who was then "The Humanist's" editor, left the AHA and founded a similar organization, CODESH, the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism. (Lest the jest be lost on most people, "codesh" means "holy" in Hebrew.) It's the group that puts out "Free Inquiry" magazine.

CODESH was and is run out of the \_same\_ small building on Bailey Avenue as CSICOP, but its affairs were kept separate. (Note the word "were" -- more on this later.) There are also a number of related enterprises, such as the Academy of Humanism, Prometheus Books, the Biblical Criticism Research Project, and the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (the group that exposed "faith-healers" Peter Popoff, W.V. Grant, etc.)

The substantive difference between the AHA and CODESH is subtle. Even having read both journals for many years, and supported both groups, I find it difficult to nail down. Both seek to advance systems of ethics not rooted in mysticism, but differ in emphasis and tone. Neither group seems to ever refer to the other.

One difference can be seen in the names of their locally-based offshoots. The AHA-inspired local groups all seem to be called "Humanist Community of [location]", while CODESH-type groups are called "Secular Humanists of [location]". CODESH also seem to be associated (if I remember correctly) with the "Secular Organizations for Sobriety", which run AA-type programs devoid of AA's generic deity, the "Higher Power". Both outfits are \_effectively\_ quite secular, but the CODESH-type groups make a special point of it.

There is also the curious matter of the AHA's tax-exempt non-profit status. It's registered as exempt under U.S. Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3), as a \_religious\_ organization, which has caused some dissension among AHA supporters. This is \_particularly\_ odd since the same Code section also covers cultural, scientific, and educational groups, any one of which categories might equally apply, instead.

Back to the skeptics: About a year ago, the folks in Buffalo unveiled a venture called "The Voice of Inquiry", a series of radio and television programmes mixing skeptics' and humanists' topics. Thus, we get "African-Americans and Humanism" chockablock with "Spontaneous Human Combustion". "Euthanasia" rubs shoulders with "Out-of-Body Experiences", and "Can Reason Alone Make Us Moral?" with "Why Astrology Won't Go Away", all on tapes available from something called the "Center for Inquiry", which appears to be a new umbrella group for CSICOP and CODESH.

More recently, we've heard that, according to glossy mailings and appeals for donations in "Skeptical Inquirer" and "Free Inquiry", a new, two-million-dollar "Center for Inquiry" \_facility\_ is being built. CODESH and CSICOP are to be incorporated into this Center, which will also house a "Center for Inquiry Institute" (to run seminars, workshops, etc.).

Now, both the humanist and skeptics' movements strike me, personally, as extremely valuable causes. I support both, strongly. However, this blithe mixing of the two tends to create problems.

Part of the strength of the skeptics' movement lies in its broad appeal: Critical examination of fringe-science claims requires no creed, no investment in any ideology, just the curiosity to look into extraordinary claims. Thus, my [Moen is Secretary -ED.] group, Bay Area Skeptics, can include parapsychologists, Protestant fundamentalists, Catholic nuns, Wiccans, and militant atheists, and \_all\_ can feel equally welcome. For this reason (among others), we've carefully stayed away from philosophical, ethical, and religious-belief claims, to avoid alienating our natural allies for no good reason.

If this point is unclear, consider an analogy: I'm also a feminist and an environmentalist. Now, I'd \_like\_ to see my fellow NOW members arrive at meetings by bicycle, and my fellow Greenpeace supporters lobby for "comparable worth". However, I don't want to \_drive male chauvinists away\_ from Greenpeace, or gas-guzzlers away from NOW. The fact that both these causes aim to improve our condition does not mean that \_combining them\_ is wise. The fact that humanism and skepticism both involve "inquiry" and "critical thinking" does not make their combination a good idea, either.

Further, one of the traditional ad hominem appeals against the skeptics' movement has always been that its inquiry is (allegedly) not objective, but has a hidden ideological agenda, variously called "scientific realism", "fundamentalist materialism", and the like. I've been at some pains, over the years, to refute this mud-slinging charge, by pointing out the tremendous variety of viewpoints in skeptics' journals, and their \_lack\_ of endorsement of particular ideologies. I always invite our critics to submit articles for our newsletter and to speak at our monthly public meetings (which almost invariably disarms the criticism and makes for us a friend). Now, when confronted with the "Center for Inquiry" as contrary evidence, I find myself tempted to reply, "CSICOP is \_not\_ the skeptics' movement". I would prefer not to need this last-resort argument.

I shouldn't overlook the potential harm to the "humanist" movement. I've met plenty of astral travelers, tarot readers, Bigfoot groupies, and assorted cranks who make fine humanists. What's the point of alienating them? (They no doubt say "Moen is an OK humanist, just a bit nutty on fringe-science topics". We get along fine.)

Accordingly, I think both skeptics and humanists have a bit of a problem, and this concern is broadly shared by skeptics I've spoken with here in California. What I don't know -- yet -- is how skeptics elsewhere feel. I'm quite curious.

Sidebar

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: BAY AREA SKEPTICS

The purpose of Bay Area Skeptics is to promote scientific thinking by the general public. This is accomplished by exposing the failures of pseudosciences such as astrology, psychic predictions and other non-scientific but widely held beliefs in dealing with a complex world.

In addition, Bay Area Skeptics also exists to investigate unsubstantiated claims such as psychic surgery and a variety of "systems" designed, either by fraud or sincerely held beliefs, to "fill-in" where "science fails." Bay Area Skeptics acts by itself or in cooperation with like-minded groups and individuals to inform the public about possible charlatans or sincere individuals promoting unsafe and/or ineffective "cures" and may, from time to time, assist law-enforcement agencies in exposing unsubstantiated medical claims.

Bay Area Skeptics also exists to publish a periodical to accomplish its various purposes and to hold public meetings and social gatherings for the purpose of educating interested individuals. Finally, Bay Area Skeptics exists to test claims of the paranormal or unusual phenomena, either traditional or novel, where those claims are made on a "scientific" basis.

Bay Area Skeptics does not make judgements on question of religion or personal faith in divine events unless fraud or scientific claims are involved.

### TOP TEN ANSWERS TO:

"How many psychics does it take to change a light bulb?"\*  
by Art & Emily Freund

10. It all depends on what they're trying to change it into.

9. One is usually sufficient, assuming no disruptive negative vibrations are present.

8. National Enquirer predicts four psychics will each accomplish this feat in 1991.

7. There have been anecdotal reports on this being done by a single psychic on several occasions, but this has never been verified by

scientific experiment.

6. One psychic should be sufficient, however, a spiritual donation of \$100,000 is requested.

5. Two: One psychokinetic to turn the bulb, and one telepath to tell him which way to turn it. (Optional: a clairvoyant to verify that the job was done properly.)

4. One can do it, if he also happens to be an electrician.

3. None -- if Uri Geller, since he will mentally refuse the broken bulb filaments.

2. Psychics don't change light bulbs -- however, they predict Elvis will be changing one in 1991.

1. Two: One to hold the bulb and one to turn the house.

\*The question was slightly rephrased from "How many psychics does it take to screw in a light bulb?." More answers next issue (maybe). Please send in more answers. Contest ends with the Millennium.

## THE SOCRATIC APPROACH

by Bob Steiner

Questioner: How many psychics does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Answerer: 62,827,975.4881.

Q: Why 62,827,975.4881?

A: Because that is the square of the equatorial diameter of the earth, expressed in square miles.

Q: What does the square of the equatorial diameter of the earth have to do with psychics screwing in a light bulb? And besides, how can there be 4,881 ten thousandths of a psychic?

A: You're too skeptical. Science can't explain everything. You've got to keep an open mind. They didn't understand Galileo, either. Get with the program. Manifest yourself. Enhance your energy. Live a little. Believe.

Supporting data (just in case you are interested):

Equatorial diameter of the earth in miles, per The World Almanac: 7,926.41 miles.

Square of the above is 62,827,975.4881 square miles.

## COME TO THE CSICOP CONFERENCE!

Make plans now to join us at the 1991 CSICOP Conference  
Co-sponsored by the Bay Area Skeptics and the University of  
California at Berkeley Physics Department

Claremont Resort Hotel  
Berkeley / Oakland Hills, California  
Friday, Saturday and Sunday  
May 3, 4, 5, 1991

Keynote Address  
"In Search of Our Origins"

Donald C. Johanson  
President, Institute of Human Origins, Berkeley

(See this issue's insert or the Winter 1991 issue of the "Skeptical  
Inquirer" for details and registration information. Volunteers are  
still needed. Write, care of this publication, or call Yves Barbero  
at 415-285-4358)

Letter to the Editor  
RACIST CONNOTATION  
by Molleen Matsumura

Thomas Jukes's "Statement on Water Fluoridation" in the February  
'91 "BASIS", clearly an effort to set the record straight on a  
number of important facts, unfortunately contains an error of its  
own -- the reference to "mongoloid births."

The correct term is "Down syndrome," in keeping with the common  
practice of naming a disorder after a clinician who describes it  
(e.g. "Parkinson's disease"), a major sign or symptom (e.g., "AIDS"  
or "multiple sclerosis"), the infectious or other causative agent  
(e.g., "herpes simplex"), or some combination of the above. Some  
disorders have ordinary names taken from famous sufferers;  
amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and Huntington's chorea,  
respectively, are often referred to as "Lou Gehrig's disease" and  
"that disease Woody Guthrie had."

When it doesn't interfere with treatment, using the wrong name  
often does no harm. My friend won't care if I ask, "Is that sniffle  
a cold or hay fever?" I'm more likely to get a strange reaction if  
I ask, "Is that viral or allergic rhinitis?" But the term  
"mongolism" has racist connotations. It hails from the time when we  
were told (inaccurately) that "there are three races -- Caucasoid,  
Negroid, and Mongoloid", and a member of any one of these groups

often believed that members of the others "all looked alike." Now that the Bay Area has large numbers of people who hail from Japan, Southeast Asia, and all regions of China, any "BASIS" reader can observe that these groups have different eye-shapes, and there is only a superficial resemblance between any of them and the eye-shape characteristic of Down syndrome. A person with Down syndrome doesn't look much like a Mongolian, either (unless the Mongolian also has Down syndrome).

It's also hard to understand why Jukes (or his source) picked on Down syndrome in connection with mortality rates! It's a genetic disorder. Giving birth to a Down child has no effect on the mother's risk of complications; only some people with the syndrome have heart defects which shorten their life span. However, if Jukes has evidence that water fluoridation does or does not affect the incidence of birth defects, "BASIS" readers should certainly hear about it!

Reply From DR. JUKES

I used the term "mongoloid births" ("BASIS" page five, Feb. 1991) because I was referring to anti-fluoridation publications in which this word had been used (ie: Rapaport, as cited in "Health Quackery", Consumers Union, Mount Vernon, NY 1980), although I failed to point this out. The term was used erroneously for "Down Syndrome", which results from a chromosomal defect, and has no distinctive facial characteristics. The word "mongol" should refer only to national and linguistic characteristics of Mongolian people, and should include only speakers of the Mongol languages. It is quite inappropriate for Down Syndrome, as Dr. Matsumura correctly notes, and it is also misused when it is applied to Asian people.

[I failed in my editorial duties by letting this slip past me. I've known since college what Down Syndrome was and what its historical "nickname" was. I regret my sloppiness. -Ed]

Rick Moen in "BASIS", page three, Feb. 1991, says that Bob Steiner told him that John R. Lee would be "interesting" -- "absolutely". Had Bob Steiner heard Lee speak? Rick Moen then proceeds to sermonize at great lengths about "closed-minded, ideological cheerleaders of the science establishment", presumably including me. He misses the point. Our objection to giving Lee a platform was that he uses misrepresentations to oppose a procedure needed for health in children. Ernest Newbrun explained this on page six.

WALLY  
by Bob Steiner

Wally Sampson has just returned home from the hospital, recovering

from a heart attack. It appears that he has weathered it well. I am happy to report that we will have Wally around for a very long time!

Wallace I. Sampson, M.D., was a founding Board Member of Bay Area Skeptics back in 1982. He served on the Board for many years, has spoken at our meetings, has written articles for "BASIS", and has served as an Advisor for the past several years. He has given presentations at CSICOP conferences, at national medical conventions, and teaches courses in critical thinking. He was President of his medical society, serves on the Board of Directors of The National Council against Health Fraud, has testified in Sacramento on important legislative matters, and has been an expert witness at trials.

Did I mention that Wally is a Clinical Professor of Medicine at Stanford University Medical School? -- and that (in his spare time?) he runs a medical practice?

The above does not even begin to scratch the surface. As a matter of fact, it does not even scratch the surface of what I personally know about Wally's enormous contribution to humanity, without even asking him for any c.v. data.

There is so much more to the story of Wally Sampson. This compassionate human being has been an excellent friend to Bay Area Skeptics, as well as to scientific thinking in the health field. He has debated mystics, "alternative treatment" purveyors, "psychics," and more.

Wally has a combination of courage, knowledge, compassion, and a keen ability to think clearly under pressure. He is a definite asset to Bay Area Skeptics, the skeptical movement, the medical profession, and humanity as a whole.

Much good health to you, Wally.

THE SKEPTIC'S ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARD  
2400 Baud, 415-648-8944  
24 hours, 7 days a week  
Rick Moen, Sysop

OUT WHERE?  
by Tom Woosnam

A recent episode of "Inside Edition" took a skeptical look at claims made by Howard Blum in his book "Out There: The Government's Secret Quest for Extraterrestrials" (Simon & Schuster,

New York, 1990, 288 pages, cloth \$19.95). In an interview with the author the program found Blum's research to be highly questionable at best.

Blum claims in his book that an incident that occurred in December 1986 prompted the U.S. government to organize a \$50 million covert UFO investigation by the Defense Intelligent Agency in the Pentagon. The incident in question was supposedly reported by Navy Commander Sheila Mondran in the space surveillance center inside Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, home of NORAD and the U.S. Space Command. According to the Blum an electronic "fence" had been tripped, and Mondran and the crew on duty had witnessed something unexplained on their radar screens which looked like a UFO joyriding in space.

Although Blum stated that he checked every name, date, incident and conversation given in the book the TV reporter verifying the basic facts uncovered a very different story and did a good job of calling Blum on the discrepancies. In the sloppy reporting category could go the fact that the elevator Mondran was supposed to have taken to work every day does not exist -- the only one in the mountain is for freight not passengers and it goes up from the ground floor not down 2,500 ft. as Blum claims. More significant however is that according to military and civilian experts the screens in the surveillance center give numerical readouts rather than real time displays. For Blum to claim that the crew watched a UFO joyride through the atmosphere is therefore a technical impossibility.

When the U.S. Space Command was asked about the event they said that yes, there was an uncorrelated target report in December 1986, but it was "space junk", a piece of debris from a rocket which had exploded in the upper atmosphere. Even more damning was the Navy's statement that they have no record of a Sheila Mondran ever having been stationed at Cheyenne Mountain. In response Blum claims that Mondran was the Navy Commander's unmarried name and not the one she served under, hence the difficulty in tracing her but when asked if he could put "Inside Edition" in contact with her and another major military figure who was impossible to find Blum hedged and in the week after the program was taped he refused to return the reporter's phone calls.

Because these disclaimers come from the government itself and could therefore be claimed to be suspect "Inside Edition" turned to civilians for corroboration. Philip J. Klass, the aviation writer and UFO investigator, states that in roughly five pages of the book that Blum devotes to Klass's career, he counted 25 errors of fact. Another civilian, Jonathan Thompson, is so angry at the lies he says Blum published that he refers the reporter to his lawyer. Stanton Friedman, a ufologist, says that Blum was lazy, that like a lot of journalists he didn't realize how much he didn't know. Does any of this faze Blum? Not much.

When asked why the witnesses that had spoken freely to Blum would

not be willing to speak to the TV reporter he claims that the whole area of UFOs puts a blot on people's careers and not speaking out is a way of dealing with reporters when the witnesses are too embarrassed to tell the truth. He does say that it puts a "chilling effect on the truth" but it really doesn't bother him that he couldn't put the program in touch with one person or one document that could verify his charges. Could part of the reason be that this former New York Times reporter has already sold the rights to his book to TV?

[Tom Woosnam holds the Science Department Chair at the Crystal Springs Uplands School in Hillsborough]

## EDITORIAL

Bay Area Skeptics has been around since 1982. Originally started by six individuals, Robert Sheaffer, Bob Steiner, Terry Sandbek, Lawrence Jerome, Andrew Fraknoi, and Wallace Sampson, M.D., who all thought an organization of this nature was needed, it has grown in scope and influence over the years.

Some of our activities are a great deal of fun. We truly enjoy pointing out the annual errors of the various self-appointed psychics by reviewing the predictions they make for a particular year at the end of that same year. And some activities are deadly serious, such as helping expose faith-healer Peter Popoff's conning of the faithful into giving up real medicine for his expensive and dubious "cures".

Over the years, we've had our successes and failures. One of our biggest successes was in cultivating the press, so that we are often consulted by the media. Now, many in the Fourth Estate no longer routinely accept the claims of psychics. Our biggest failure, in my view, is in educating ourselves. Too many of us have turned skepticism into an ideology.

It is all too human for a group formed to promote a minority idea to build barricades around itself and stop listening. Over the last few years, those who have tried to keep thinking open have clashed with those who want to protect the movement from outside enemies. Personal empire building has also reared its ugly head. This has led to splintering and a lot of energy wasted on in-fighting.

Is this a failure of leadership? Certainly. Honest disagreements have often become ideological struggles, losing, along the way, the real reason for the existence of the group. Since Bay Area Skeptics is entirely voluntary, it is easy for an angry individual to simply walk away. He or she loses nothing financially, but the group loses a valued asset, so that often, perhaps unconsciously, we've held back from being forceful.

This, too, is a failure.

Another problem we've encountered is habit. Because of the nature of the media, which needs conflict to sustain it, we've often become too comfortable with the opposition, holding back to prevent withdrawal by the other side. Criticism is our strongest weapon, but when cliché and predictable attacks predominate, nothing is gained except more TV and radio appearances. This is not to say we can't be polite and civilized to the opposition. It is to say, however, that we've often been too tolerant in assuming the equality of other views. We often forget that in the "marketplace of ideas," bad ideas are supposed to be rejected, not just rehashed on the next talk show.

Skepticism is not an ideology. It is a methodology with no fixed parameters. It borrows from science in the way it approaches understanding. Unlike science, however, it has little in the way of peer review, so it's a simple matter for some of us to go off the deep end or to enclose our minds in oddball cosmologies. It is important that we don't forget the goals, some of which were stated when we filed for non-profit status with the State of California [see sidebar].

Skepticism is not democratic. Just as with science, the majority is not always right. If that were the case, a lot of nonsense would be universally true, and there would be no place for groups like Bay Area Skeptics.

Nor is skepticism equivalent to humanism, however virtuous that movement. Humanism is an ethical system based on the premise that man is responsible for himself and need not look to a deity. Although I find the notion appealing, I don't particularly care to spend time debating the existence of supernatural forces -- especially since I don't possess the intellectual tools to arrive at a meaningful answer. (I suspect no one has them.) Earthly concerns are more to my taste. I simply don't care how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, nor do I have any interest in converting anyone, except that I'd like to see people have the intellectual equipment to arrive at a realistic view of life.

Since I'm not an ideologist, I don't expect any view of life to be perfectly synchronized with mine. Human beings are simply not built that way, nor should they be. On the individual level, we can only hope to have notions subject to change based on new information. Our world view should be flexible. As an organization, we can have some pretty concrete goals, but even those must be modified and configured by reality.

Bay Area Skeptics is beginning its tenth year as it began its first, with individuals organized to promote and support a first-rate system of looking at things. There were six then. Now, there are over six hundred. And no two are the alike.

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The above are selected articles from the March 1991 issue of "BASIS", the monthly publication of Bay Area Skeptics. You can

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