
October 1992 "BASIS", newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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Editor: Rick Moen

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by James Randi

[Ed. note: This article is reprinted from the Summer 1986 issue of "Free Inquiry", by kind permission of Executive Editor Tim Madigan. This was the issue containing James Randi's expose of faith-healer Rev. Peter Popoff (and numerous others), in which many BAS activists had assisted. Our "well-healed" Mr. Henvick will discuss his experiences at our October meeting.]

Don Henvick, of Bay Area Skeptics, proved to be a valuable part of the faith-healing research team. Volunteering his services for the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion, Don dressed in various disguises, even going so far as to shave his beard and head. He was able to present a convincing and tempting target for the faith-healers. In Stockton, California, he was called out of the audience as "Tom Hendry", a fictitious name, by the Reverend David Paul, and was healed of a "broken home and alcoholism". In San Francisco, the Reverend Peter Popoff succumbed, as well, calling out our man as "Tom Hendry", and curing him of the same problems. In

Anaheim, Don scored again when Popoff fell for another of his aliases, this time calling him out as "Vergil Jorgenson", and attempted to heal a bogus "serious arthritic condition".

Subsequently, Popoff broadcast both of these healings on his shows, apparently so enthralled by Henvick's acting abilities that he even featured Don's Anaheim healings on three successive programs. Popoff again fell for Henvick's charms in Detroit, where Don dressed as "Bernice Manicoff", suffering from "uterine cancer and edema" and confined to a wheelchair. Her doctor was Dr. Kurtz. Don provided this information to Popoff before the healing session, and Popoff again called him out -- this time as "Bernice" -- and healed him.

Don Henvick also went to Philadelphia on April 19, where the Reverend W.V. Grant approached him before the performance and questioned him about personal details. Later that evening, he called him out during the service as "Abel McMinn", cured him of a "prostate condition and arthritis", and identified Dr. Lambert as his physician, whom Don had invented. . . .

As detailed elsewhere in this issue, other "healees" planted by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Religion were Ivars Lauersons, Marty Post, and Steven Schaeferman. The reason that CSER used this ploy in the course of its investigation was to show that there were only two conclusions to be drawn: EITHER God was informing Grant and Popoff through the "gifts of the spirit" and giving them wrong information, OR the Reverends Grant and Popoff were obtaining the fictitious information before the service began, and were feeding it back by deceitful means. Either God was lying to the faith-healers, or the faith-healers were lying to everybody.

FLYING SAUCER-GATE

Yet another transparent government cover-up! This time, it was a brilliant "flash" UFO seen all over California on Tuesday, 15 September, and called in to talk shows and local news stations all over the state.

"They" tell us that it was just another missile launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base near Santa Barbara, shot over the ocean to the central lagoon of the Pacific atoll of Kwajalein (used as a target for U.S. military practice shots). Yes, we saw launch footage and government claims of "atmospheric conditions", leading to reports of unusual lights in the sky.

We won't be fooled, though, will we?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, OR "SO YOU'RE A SKEPTIC"
by Rick Moen and distinguished colleagues

Most members of the public (and the press) think being a skeptic is an odd thing to do -- if it occurs to them to think about it at all. The questions long-time skeptics tend to hear from them, usually the same questions year after year, strongly reflect this prejudice. Your questioner may be moderately curious about your strange hobby, and willing to make conversation about it, but is generally one step away from dismissing skeptics as an odd sort of blowhard crank harassing (for some reason) harmless New Agers, and is just looking for an excuse to do just that. Nonetheless, this is your opening, your chance to establish that you are a reasonable, intriguing person worth listening to, and also your chance to start dispelling misconceptions widely held concerning skeptics, often spread by hostile parties.

Having brought this matter up at the recent CSICOP "Skeptic's Toolbox" workshop in Oregon, I was assigned the project of compiling a list of the most common questions and some effective answers. "Effective" here means not so much providing a literal answer as conveying a sense of humor and proportion, and an air of benignity, tolerance, respect for one's audience, and due modesty -- for THOSE are the very qualities the questioner (most often) expects not to find. At that point, THEN, you may be taken seriously and listened to -- which is why making a good first impression on these near-inevitable first questions is so important.

I've had considerable help in compiling these questions and answers from across the skeptics' movement, via electronic mail: Becky Long, President of Georgia Skeptics; Keith Parsons, founder and former head of the Georgia group; and Jan Willem Nienhuys, officer of the Dutch group Stichting Skepsis, all contributed responses, marked below with our initials. This is an ONGOING project, whose results may eventually be included in a handbook for skeptical activists. Your contributions of brief answers AND QUESTIONS are welcome.

=> If it doesn't hurt anyone, why bother?

RM: Skeptics are simply curious about which fringe-science claims have merit, and which don't. It's a hobby. Of course, some such claims (like psychic surgery) DO hurt people, and skeptics disclose that. Other claims don't hurt people, but that's beside the point -- is the claim BOGUS or not? Many fringe-science fans consider truth merely a booby prize. Skeptics don't: Although they don't claim to have a lockhold on it, they DO pursue it.

JWN: Good point. If ignorance doesn't hurt you, then don't become a skeptic. Much superstition makes life quite miserable for quite a few people. Having millions of people killed because of pseudoscientifically bolstered race theories shouldn't happen again. More people than you think are ripped off by the paranormal racket, e.g., [provide anecdote]. Billions of dollars are being spent on very doubtful cures -- so people's wallets ARE hurt.

KP: Selling out your intellect is always going to hurt you -- financially, intellectually, and even emotionally. Anyone who thinks that entertaining nonsensical beliefs aren't harmful should read W. K.

Clifford's essay, "The Ethics of Belief", which makes and wonderfully illustrates the point that we should not form beliefs except on adequate evidence and sound reasoning. Accepting shoddy beliefs can erode your whole way of thinking.

=> You say it doesn't work, but how do you explain x anecdote?

RM: Hey, you got it wrong: I never volunteered to explain everyone's weird stories. Of course, I like weird stories, especially unexplained ones, but some are unexplained because of missing details or ones that the questioner (totally honestly) has gotten wrong, and maybe some will never be explained. The point is for YOU, not me, to look for alternative, conventional explanations before jumping to conclusions. Now, if you want, I can tell you about a similar, baffling case that I DID explain when I chased down enough facts. . . .

JWN: I haven't been there, and I can't form an opinion on the accuracy of the witness involved (erring is human), but [other anecdote about same or related matter].

KP: When the evidence for the claim is an anecdote, that's precisely the reason I don't have to explain it. Uncorroborated anecdotes are worth very little, for many reasons: They must generally be unusual, to stick in our memory, and therefore aren't representative. Also, most anecdotes have been told and retold, and become closer to folklore than to real evidence. Even when it's something one person says he himself remembers, memory can play numerous tricks, and is less a tape recorder than a village storyteller. In a sense, each time we recall events, we tell ourselves a story reconstructed to fit our beliefs, wishes, and expectations.

=> What do skeptics believe, anyhow? What's a skeptic?

RM: You might as well ask what a carpenter believes. Carpentry isn't a belief: It's the effective application of tools. That's also what skeptics do, in their case with MENTAL tools applied to claims on the fringes of science, tools like scientific methods, old-fashioned footwork, and checking whether those claims contradict themselves.

JWN: Someone who is interested in examining paranormal and other claims that seem to contradict scientific knowledge. They believe in tests. Skeptics, by the way, are usually interested in testing things that official science finds a bit below its dignity.

KP: The kind of skepticism that skeptics' organizations practice is the kind espoused by scientists. Skeptics welcome new ideas, but suspend belief until a claim has been subjected to a conclusive test. They don't accept a theory just because it sounds appealing, or makes them feel good.

=> When did you become a skeptic?

BL: I joined organized skepticism as soon as I discovered that there actually were folks out there scientifically investigating

supernatural claims, instead of dismissing them out of hand. I suppose I didn't quite know what to make of the whole unsolved mysteries media genre: Although I didn't believe the supernatural explanations, at some level I naively assumed that "they" (something like the FDA) wouldn't allow publication or TV-special coverage of such claims unless the descriptions were at least somewhat truthful. Learning how many of the most familiar claims are fabrications from start to finish was an eye-opener.

RM: That's kind of like asking me when I finally started thinking just a bit. I've always been a bit interested in this stuff because it's fun, but noticed organized skeptics' efforts starting in 1975, and in 1982 found a local group that intrigued and entertained me enough to get involved with it. Maybe I was given a push when my congressman, Leo Ryan, was murdered by a sometime faith-healer and his cult in Guyana, in 1978.

KP: The first time I realized I had been duped by something. As a child, I really wanted to believe in flying saucers, the Loch Ness Monster, ghosts, and the like. At some point, I began to realize on what a shoddy basis it all was built. Becoming skeptical was not, however, a datable experience like being "born again": Skepticism is something you grow into, as you learn about critical thinking.

=> What do skeptics think about spiritual matters? Are skeptics atheists?

RM: No, skeptics basically aren't involved with religious issues, and their own religious beliefs, in their private lives, are all over the map. Religion is mostly concerned with questions like "what must I do and not do" and "what must I take on pure faith". Skeptics AS SKEPTICS are curious about claims (on the fringes of science) that can be checked for evidence, not about morals or pure faith. However, some matters of EVIDENCE that are CALLED religious, such as faith-healing and so-called scientific creationism, are skeptics' business as testable claims, rather than as religion.

JWN: Most skeptics I know are agnostic (atheist sounds like someone actively opposing something and preaching about his/her belief), but as a rule, skeptics don't interfere with others' beliefs or faith, unless empirical claims are made (like weeping Madonnas, Indian statues that can make women pregnant, or faith-healers using tricks, or people who say they can fly). Non- interference with religion and faith is more or less standard policy for skeptic organizations. An exception is India, where lots of people proclaim themselves godmen on the basis of simple magic tricks.

KP: Religious orientation varies with the individual. Some skeptics hold religious beliefs; quite a few are agnostic. In my experience, skeptics tend not to be dogmatic atheists, because being dogmatic about anything goes against the skeptical attitude.

=> What do skeptics do that's constructive? Isn't skepticism a negative concept?

RM: First, skeptics have fun looking at fringe claims to see if they might have merit, and often actually hope they do. At worst, that's harmless. Second, when skeptics do a good job, they help people avoid wasting their time on notions that don't pan out. I'm grateful for being steered away from wild-goose chases, aren't you? Sounds constructive to me! Third, on rare occasions, we've confirmed that we've actually saved lives. [Describe helping Randi with faith-healing investigations. . . .]

JWN: They figure out what's behind all kinds of strange things. Usually, reality is more wonderful than what's dreamt of in all superstitious philosophies.

KP: T. H. Huxley said that someone who clears the weeds and thistles from a field does service, just as much as someone who comes along later and plants an edible plant or grain. So, skepticism is certainly worthwhile. More than that, though, skeptics do many constructive things, such as encouraging logic and critical thinking, and promoting science education.

=> Shouldn't people have a right to believe whatever they want? Who elected you thought police?

BL: I believe thought control occurs when misinformation is knowingly propagated, depriving people of their right to base their beliefs on the facts.

RM: Of course people should believe what they want, and skeptics wouldn't want it any other way. Also, they CAN'T be thought police, even if skeptics wanted to, since all they do is give out information -- usually information most people haven't seen or thought about. If anything is thought control, it would have to be DEPRIVING people of skeptics' work and ideas. Skeptics want to give ALL explanations a fair chance on their merits, while many less critical paranormal fans don't. Who are the thought police, then?

JWN: We are more like a consumer's organization. We provide information to anyone who is interested, and we challenge those who are actively trying to sell worthless or doubtful information.

KP: Of course, anyone has a right to his own opinions, and no one should be persecuted over personal beliefs. Skepticism is not a religious movement to convert the unrighteous, nor are skeptics busybodies out to set everyone else straight. Basically, we advocate being an educated consumer in a huckster-filled marketplace of ideas. People have a right to believe whatever they want, and skeptics have a right to question it. Ours is a small voice, hardly anybody's "thought police".

=> What do you get out of being a skeptic?

RM: Entertainment. An excellent chance to make a fool of myself in public. On rare occasions, a suspicion that I might be doing someone

some good.

JWN: I meet interesting people. I find a way to explain about science to people who would otherwise not be interested.

=> Skeptics want to give all explanations a fair chance on their merits, while many less critical paranormal fans don't.

KP: I feel I am making a contribution to something I consider important. I also admit to a mildly vindictive pleasure when I see rip-off artists and con-men (by no means all those making paranormal claims) exposed for what they are.

=> Isn't skepticism a closed-minded, dogmatic position? How can you pretend to do impartial inquiry when you are logical positivists/fundamentalist materialists/secular humanists/reductionists/scientific realists . . . ?

RM: Look, if I partook of ALL the highly varied ideologies I've been accused of mindlessly following as a skeptic, I'd be one horribly confused little guy. However, this misses the point: Skeptics DON'T ASK to be trusted on faith, based on their personal impeccability: Things they say either have merit or don't, and you can judge that for yourself. They AIM for impartial inquiry, but it's the RESULTS' merit, not THEIR merit, that either stands on its own or doesn't. You be the judge.

JWN: We don't like inquiry in matters of opinion: If someone says he always knows in advance whether the baby is a boy or girl, some people may think this nonsense, others believe it immediately, but the skeptic would be interested in testing. (Often, scientists don't like to do that, because they think it's a waste of time).

KP: These labels don't reflect the way skeptics are, but rather the way true believers see or want to see them. To true believers, anyone who even mildly questions their precious beliefs is not just wrong but also a dogmatist or dangerous fanatic. Statements like this attempt to brush aside skeptics' reasoning by attacking them personally. (One would be hard pressed to find a single living, breathing logical positivist on earth, today.)

Skeptics are open-minded, in that solid evidence DOES persuade them. Having an open mind doesn't mean refusing to learn from experience: After disproving 100 poltergeist cases, you hold out little hope for case 101. Skeptics will be persuaded if the evidence warrants, but have high standards for what they WILL believe.

=> Have you ever had what you considered a genuine psychic experience? What would convince you that a particular claim is genuine?

BL: I've had a few intriguing experiences that I can't explain, and that friends have adamantly labeled psychic, but I don't have the ego to think that when I can't personally explain something, that means it's contrary to the laws of nature! It's reasonable to ask a skeptic

what evidence would convince him of a particular claim's validity. However, the focus should be on the weight of the evidence, itself: The claim's validity doesn't hang on whether a particular skeptic is convinced.

RM: I've had experiences I FOOLED MYSELF into thinking were genuinely paranormal -- specifically deja vu sensations. I've also seen eerie lights in the sky. The former are well-known quirks of brain function that I didn't understand at the time, and the latter I never did chase down, and no longer remember enough details. Those aside, as far as I know, I've never had a paranormal experience -- yet. The point is that I fool myself and jump to conclusions like anyone else, which is why magicians love people like me as audiences. The point is NOT to claim that people don't have anomalous experiences (they do), but rather to find the best INTERPRETATION for them, instead of jumping for a psychic one. [Tell story about Randi being amazed by Arthur G. Lintgen successfully "reading" classical records' grooves.]

As far as a particular claim being genuine, I'd do my best on my own, investigating it. Then, if it still looked interesting, I'd bow to real expertise and find out what a VARIETY of people who REALLY know the subject think. (That's where "skeptical" experts help, by adding to the variety of views to consider.) I'd try to figure out how preliminary the results are. I'd consider alternative interpretations. In the end, I'd either say "yes", "no", or "I don't think we know yet" -- judging each case uniquely.

JWN: No. The closest was a vivid dream of my mother the day after she died. I'd be convinced by a recipe for a not too complicated experiment that can be done by anybody and that consistently yields the claimed results.

=> What about [cases of skeptics making intolerant statements; lawsuits against skeptics; sundry controversies]?

RM: Well, first, skeptics aren't perfect: They lose patience, they lose tempers, they make mistakes. They're also perceived as a threat to some very lucrative businesses that don't appreciate critical scrutiny. So, they must be extremely careful, and expect to pay dearly if they mess up. Second, unfortunately, any crank or zealot can call himself a skeptic, and some do. Therefore, SOME statements by self-described skeptics I absolutely disavow. However, respectable skeptics' GROUPS make every effort to get rid of people like that, make amends for their misdeeds, and distance the groups from them. This is far more than you see from uncritical fringe-science groups, and what more can one do?

KP: As with all organizations, many people who call themselves skeptics make statements not in keeping with skeptical ideals, and they SHOULD be criticized by other skeptics. However, intolerance among skeptics is unquestionably less common than some claim: Often, the very act of questioning cherished belief systems is automatically labeled intolerance. It is NOT intolerant to criticize shoddy thinking, poor logic, fallacies, and manufactured evidence. If that's

intolerance, then I'm happy to admit that I'm intolerant.

ANOTHER GRAND PICNIC

by John Taube

It couldn't be done! The Baumgartners tried to outdo their previous bar-b-que/picnics -- and the August one of this year was just great.

The picnic grounds were good; the food was, as usual, super. Moen's pies were the highlight of the dessert table. Sperling, Henvick, and Steiner, the main thrust of the entertainment, were really good, again.

However, it rained on our picnic! I said that I was not going to take a chance again, and, on the NEXT picnic, was going to come prepared and bring my overcoat. I was one of the Chicken Littles who went home when the rain came.

Well, John, leave your overcoat home, next time. Carol Baumgartner, our neophyte psychic who got her training at the CSICOP workshop in Eugene, tells us that she can influence weather, and can guarantee a perfect day for us.

[Editor comments: Maybe somebody was trying to tell us something! After a clear summer morning, a freak thunderstorm descended on us, just as the feast got underway -- with actual lightning strikes to the ground visible right in the park. Understandably, more than half the attendees beat a hasty retreat to their cars, but the remainder struck out for the adjacent elementary school's covered walkways, for the magic show and al fresco banquet. Magicians Henvick and Steiner were duly accused of arranging all the flashy special effects, but nothing could be pinned on them.

No sooner did the picnic wind down than the storm disappeared completely: Some thirty slightly damp, overstuffed picnickers emerged to blink at the suddenly bright sunshine. (Calling Charles Fort!) This bit of Technicolor weirdness notwithstanding, everyone had a wonderful time. Be certain to come next year: There's something for everyone, including us dessert-hounds.]

"I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education."
-- Wilson Mizner

NESSIE EMIGRATES?

"Unsolved Mysteries" of Wednesday 23 September featured a segment on the Lake Champlain (New York) "monster". Did we see good, clear photos of the beastie? Take a wild guess.

No, according to skeptic David Bloomberg: What we saw was a bit of video footage showing nothing more than bumps in the water, which the witnesses were nonetheless SURE were really a GROUP of monsters! One of the photographers claimed that a monster raised its head out and STARED RIGHT AT HER, but the camera was pointed the wrong way. Darn! Don't you hate it when that happens?

The prize evidence in this case, though, was a print photo from a woman who, we are told, was so embarrassed that she threw the negative away, retaining only the print. Fortunately, she overcame this shyness long enough to provide the latter to a visiting "researcher", who then made it public. (BAS will gladly hold people's embarrassing cryptozoological negatives for them, to help ward off all those nasty suspicious types suggesting that PHOTO HOAXES might be easier without inconvenient scrutiny of the original film.)

Narrator Robert Stack intoned to the viewers that there were numerous other sightings, just after the picture was published. Imagine that!

MA NATURE'S WAKE-UP CALL

Bay Area Skeptics has made something of a tradition of unsportingly reviewing the accuracy of psychic predictions AFTER the fact, in "BASIS's" much-quoted year-end articles. Naturally, we get lots of California earthquake predictions.

Just to get a head-start on the whole affair, here are a couple from clairvoyant Gordon-Michael Scallion of New Hampshire (a safe distance, one assumes): His newsletter claims that Sonoma County's due for a bit of rockin' and rollin' by September 28th (a Richter 7.8, give or take 0.4), and San Diego will get a 7.1 by October 14th. Scallion says he pegged the Florida hurricane in advance, bang-on, and claims in general such accuracy that the U.S. Geological Survey and National Weather Service might as well retire now and save face.

You can see all this for yourself, you closed-minded scoffers, by sending a note to the Matrix Institute, RR1 Box 391, Westmoreland, NH 03467 (tel. 603-399-4916). Best of all is his color, 22"x34" "Future Map of the United States". Suffice it to say that you'll be able to get beach-front property in Denver, and Atlantis will be making a comeback, just off Miami. Just \$11.95. "Not Sold in Stores!" The map comes annotated with "Early Warning Signs, Migration Regions, Political Changes, Weather Insights", etc. Great stuff!

Better ScotchGard it, though: If Scallion's giving us the straight dope, you could be in for a truly horrendous mildew problem.

EUROSKEPTICS BOOK AVAILABLE

Last October 4-5, in Amsterdam, the Dutch group "Stichting Skepsis" hosted a landmark gathering of speakers on fringe-science topics from all over Europe, plus some very familiar American names. Now, just hitting the printing presses is the resulting book, "Science or Pseudo? The Mars Effect and Other Claims: Proceedings of the Third EuroSkeptics Congress," edited by Jan Willem Nienhuys. While this 200+ page English-language volume had not yet been released at this writing, the list of topics sounds very promising. To quote from the editor:

Read articles by Kurtz, Hines and Randi. The inside story on crop circles. The last word about the famous Mars effect of Gauquelin and the amazing defense of Madame Françoise Schneider-Gauquelin! The saga of a successful rebuttal of a creationist claim, the value of psychotherapy, and what you wanted to know about quantum mechanics (but were afraid to ask).

The price of this work will be DFL 25.00, including shipping -- which works out at this date to a bit less than \$16.00. (I'm sure a gift of four more dollars would be appreciated by Stichting Skepsis.) Payment can be made by VISA, MasterCard, Eurocard, Diners Club, or American Express (no checks, please), and should be mailed to J.W. Nienhuys, Dommelseweg 1A, 5581 VA Waalre, The Netherlands, OR sent by fax to 011-31-40436685 or 011-31-40463992, marked to the attention of J.W. Nienhuys. You must include your card number, expiration date, your signature, and a statement that you want the EuroSkeptics book at an amount of at least DFL 25.00.

A listing of the presentations follows: In the Eye of the Beholder: The Psychology of Paranormal Belief (Paul Kurtz), The World According to Quantum Mechanics (J. Hilgevoord), Should the State Interfere in Paranormal Practices? (Steven F. Hartkamp), Skeptics and Parapsychologists. Let's Cooperate! (Rob H. Nanninga), The Struggle of Alternative Medicine for Recognition (Wim Betz), Science in Everyday Life (M. Heap), Placebo Practitioners (Terence Hines), Psychotherapists as Native Healers from Park Avenue to Borneo (Terence Hines), Looking for a Witness of the Flood (Michael E. Howgate), A Pedagogical Project of Paranormal Research in an Engineering School (Claudio Bensi), A Test of Dowsing Claims in Kassel. Aims, Methods, Results (Robert Koenig, Juergen Moll, James Randi, and Amardeo Sarma), Crop Circle Expertise (Martin Hempstead), Introduction to the Mars Effect (J.W. Nienhuys), Spurious Periodicities in Planetary Correlations and the Mars Effect (Cornelis de Jager and Rieks Jager), Circannual and Circadian Biological Rhythms in Relation to Eminency (P.H. Jongbloet), The Mars Effect Unriddled (Carl E. Koppeschaar), Mars Effect Survives Critique of Dutch Skeptics (Suitbert Ertel), Examining Rational Explanations of the Mars Effect (Françoise Schneider-Gauquelin).

This appears to be one to get and keep handy as a reference!

"Nothing so much needs reforming as other people's habits."

-- Mark Twain

WELCOME FROM THE NORTH TEXAS SKEPTICS

by John Blanton

To all attending the October CSICOP Conference in Dallas: The members of the North Texas Skeptics welcome you.

We are proud to be hosting the conference this year, and we look forward to seeing you at the Conference. The NTS will have a desk set up in the lobby, at which you will be able to obtain:

1. Information about the NTS.
2. Help and assistance in finding your way around the Dallas area.
3. A daily information sheet about the Conference.
4. Messages left there by others trying to contact you.

If we can be of any assistance prior to the conference, please contact, me, John Blanton, Secretary, North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, TX 75011-1794, (214) 416- 8038, signing for: Joe Voelkering (President), Laura Ainsworth (Vice President), Mark Meyer (Treasurer), Ron Hastings (Director), and Mary O'Grady (Director).

EDITORIAL: WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT "FATE"

This month, we are in the quite delightful position of having TOO MANY GOOD ARTICLES TO PRINT (but don't stop writing!). So, many things will have to be delayed to November, and this editorial will be a short one. Last month's promise to start surveying the Bay Area's often wild-and-woolly New Age institutions (a daunting task!) will, in particular, have to be put off for a month. What we DO CONTINUE to need is local stories and newspaper clippings. Please consider starting (for BAS's benefit) a "weird things" file: I'll photocopy and return your submissions, and will greatly appreciate your help.

Judging from the response to my first issue (9/92), I seemed to have annoyed a couple of people and satisfactorily entertained the rest -- which I would call an auspicious start, suitable for building on. So, in that same spirit, I'd like to say a few appreciative (if judiciously qualified) words on behalf of "Fate" magazine.

It would seem safe to observe that "Fate" -- a venerable pro-paranormal/spiritualist monthly founded in 1948 by pulp sci-fi editor and UFO-yarn promoter Raymond A. Palmer -- doesn't care ONE BIT for skeptics. It published in 1981 Dennis Rawlins's extremely long, rambling anti-CSICOP rant, "sTARBABY", and every issue, without fail, has had one or more angry reference to us nasty, evil, closed-minded (if not government-paid) skeptics, sometimes descending into more-than-tacky personal attacks.

Ignoring this fixation, which gets a little tedious, "Fate" always has interesting articles from the whole range of fringe-science claims, and the ads alone make it worth a peek. (A future issue of "BASIS" will almost certainly review this magazine properly.) The September "Fate", though, has something truly praiseworthy: a broad-minded but tough and well-researched DEBUNKING OF PSYCHIC CON ARTISTS by Bay Area parapsychologist and conjurer Loyd Auerbach, in his regular column, "Psychic Frontiers".

The article describes in detail one variety of gypsy-style psychic-reading confidence scam, of the sort that annually take untold amounts of money from victims impressed by simple magic tricks. Auerbach, trained as an anthropologist and a student of genuine Gypsy culture, points out in passing that the perpetrators are usually not Gypsy at all, and that these cons are hardly unique to that culture. Then he goes on to powerfully warn readers against some of the classic signs of psychic cons: cold readings, sudden needs for cash (that often mysteriously vanishes) to appease spirits, and so on.

Above all else, Auerbach warns against throwing away one's decision-making faculties, when consulting spiritual advisors: "Beware of giving up responsibility for your own life to anyone else", he says. He closes with the hope that those seeing psychics will "do so with a bit of discrimination, and will consider carefully any and all instructions and advice given by the `reader'."

I ask you: Isn't this a rare and fine public service? Writing to the audience some would say needs it more than most, in fair-minded language it will listen to, Auerbach delivered a powerful (and EMPOWERING) lesson in how not to be taken. I think this is worthy of our respect and admiration.

POPULAR NUTRITIONAL PRACTICES

Reviewed by Michelle Renee Dick

Here's a book for those who enjoy critical analysis of fringe and pseudo-science. This one is on the subject of nutrition.

TITLE: Popular Nutritional Practices: Sense and Nonsense.

AUTHOR: Jack Z. Yetiv, M.D., Ph.D.

PUBLISHER: Dell Publishing. (Gee, I'm surprised Prometheus didn't grab this one.)

YEAR: 1986, 1988. (6 years old? How did I miss it for so long?)

Covers homeopathy, herb treatment, food additives, fad diets, cholesterol cures, megavitamins, vegetarianism, and much more. There's a whole chapter on that dynamic duo, Pearson and Shaw, a fun few pages on (Un)Fit for Life, and a short discussion on the appropriateness of super-low-fat diets a la Pritiken (5-10% fat diets).

I loved the section on Fit for Life. Lots of hilarious quotes from Diamond's book, and a little info on Mr. Diamond's "doctorate in

nutritional science from the American College of Health Science in Austin, Texas." A quotation from the book:

". . . [T]his institution is not even allowed to grant degrees in Texas -- the degrees have to come out of Mexico. . . . Furthermore, Texas has required this correspondence `school' to remove the word `college' from its title. . . . [All] that is necessary to get a `doctorate in nutritional science' is the payment of \$1250 and the taking of a series of tests consisting of open-book questions. . . . [T]he only people that have flunked this program `are people who really couldn't read and write that well."

What a riot!

HELP WANTED

by John Taube

One important but little-recognized position in BAS is that of meeting coordinator. Kate Talbot has been handling this position for some time, and our interesting meetings are testimony to her success. Kate is planning an extensive trip, and BAS needs someone to temporarily take over her duties.

Kate contacted many people without success. While Kate is gone, we will be working it this way: Everyone associated with BAS, either actively or as a subscriber to "BASIS", must consider him/herself as part of the staff of meeting coordinator.

Maybe you have in mind some particular person who would make a good speaker. The person must be qualified to speak on any paranormal subject, any rip-off, or any science subject related to the fringes of science. We ask that you forward article(s) or other information on/about the person, and, if possible, an address/phone number. Send information to John Taube, 55 Chumasero 7E, San Francisco 94132, phone (415) 334-3733. Be sure to include your name and phone number.

We also would appreciate all information about meeting places anywhere in the Bay Area that might be available free of charge. Please try to find such a place, and, if you do, contact the above.

CROP CIRCLE SOLUTION?

by Gary Posner, M.D.

[Ed. note: This article first appeared in Tampa Bay Skeptics' journal, "TBS Report", of which Posner is editor.]

Two bipedal humanoids have come forward to claim responsibility for the genesis of the "Crop Circle" craze. Initially appearing as simple circles confined to British wheat fields, the phenomenon has in recent

years become world-wide, with increasingly intricate geometric patterns being found in increasingly remote areas. As previously reported in "TBS Report," Richard Hoagland, author of "The Monuments of Mars" (and now the former "Science Advisor" to Chuck Harder's "For the People" radio program), claims to have found mathematical proof that the Martian "monuments" and the crop circles are related, and are conveying a message about the existence of an easily tapped fourth-dimensional source of free energy, rendering fossil fuels (and even solar cells) obsolete.

To illustrate their point, Bower and Chorley, using their trusty, if primitive, wooden boards (and accompanied by a reporter), created a crop circle that author and self-styled expert Patrick Delgado declared the genuine article. Later confessing the obvious (that he had been duped in this instance), Delgado protested, "Yesterday, there were circles discovered on a prairie in Canada. Have these guys been out there with their board?"

Delgado's associate, Colin Andrews, [Ed. note: Andrews and Delgado are authors of the leading book on crop circles, "Circular Evidence".] has been a bit more outspoken than his colleague. Appearing with Bower and Chorley on "Good Morning America", on September 10, Andrews railed: "These gentlemen cannot begin to account for the change in the crystalline structure of the plants They cannot explain what we have on film: the unusual objects seen actually in these crop circles It is most disturbing that . . . an irresponsible intrusion into this research, in the form of what appears to be a [British] national newspaper coup . . . has seen fit to go along with these gentlemen who . . . showed how clever they were in constructing a circle that was a mess in every respect . . . nothing like the phenomenon we've been looking at for the last 12 years."

AT A LOSS FOR A PROPHET

There's a long tradition of off-season April Fools pranks on the electronic mail forums. Occasionally, someone pulls a wonderful one on the Usenet Skeptics' forum (sci.skeptic), and we saw a beauty this past September 12th. The best part of this is the totally serious replies that immediately appeared, **CRITICIZING SAVASTIO'S TRANSLATION**, totally missing the hilarious disclaimers at the bottom, and the other broad tip-offs in the text. See, superior-grade street theater can be as close as your computer screen!

From: Michael Savastio
Re: Did Nostradamus predict the end of communism?

Richard Long wrote: "Nostradamus's `Seventy-three years and seven months' in quatrain B.44 may mean the duration of the communistic regime in Russia. What does the original quatrain say?"

Here is the quatrain of Nostradamus that foretells the fall of communism:

Original French:

Nous sommes ici, mais ou sont tes amis, Alice
La bas, sur l'herbe.
Qui est le garçon en maillot rouge?
C'est Guy, mon cousin. Et le garçon sous l'arbre est son compain.

My Translation:

A man with a map on his forehead shall rise and fall.
Once a king, now he waits in line for toilet paper and chicken feet.
The old man who rides the great eagle called it the evil empire.
Three-score and thirteen years, and now bleeding-heart liberals are
calling it the same.

You'll have to forgive the lack of meter in my translation. I believe
it is more important to capture the author's intent than to make it
sound nice.

As you can see, this quatrain (along with every other one written by
Nostradamus) leaves a lot of room for speculation. You could say it
refers to the fall of the Soviet Union, if you use your imagination,
but I'm not totally convinced myself.

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CALENDAR

October meeting . . .

FLEECING THE FLOCK

WHO: Don Henvick, Investigator

WHERE: El Cerrito Library

WHEN: Wednesday, 21 October

TIME: 7:30 pm

Don Henvick was part of a faith-healing investigation team headed by James (The Amazing) Randi. To avoid detection, Henvick donned five different disguises, and the self-proclaimed faith healers "cured" him of "illnesses". The first and second healers cured him of "broken-home syndrome" and "alcoholism"; the third of arthritic conditions, the fourth of a prostate condition and arthritis; the fifth (with Henvick in drag) of uterine cancer and edema. Henvick had none of these diseases -- certainly not uterine cancer. Henvick and the team want it understood that they are not anti-religious.

The El Cerrito Public Library is at 6510 Stockton Ave. From Route 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.

Watch for coming events in the BAS CALENDAR, or call 510-LA TRUTH for up-to-the-minute details on events. If you have ideas about topics or speakers leave a message on the hotline.

WARNING: We STRONGLY URGE that you call the hotline shortly before attending any Calendar activity to see if there have been any changes.

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, 1992 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, 17723 Buti Park Ct., Castro Valley, CA 94546-1413, or by leaving a message on "The Skeptic's Board" BBS (415-572-0359) or on the 510-LA-TRUTH (voice) hotline.

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