

The Association For Rational Thought News
Practicing The Art Of Clear Thinking In All Walks Of Life
Vol. 1, No. 4
December, 1991

The Association for Rational Thought is a new organization committed to encouraging clear thinking in all walks of life. ART encourages the investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific viewpoint and the distribution of the results of such investigations to the public. You are cordially invited to become a charter member of ART.

December Meeting: A New Name and Near Death Experiences

The Ohio Valley Skeptics met on Saturday, December 14, at the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History and changed its name to the Association for Rational Thought. A clear majority of members thought that the new name better reflected the intent of the organization to support rational and scientific thinking rather than to bash adherents of paranormal and pseudo-scientific ideas.

In other business, the members present expressed a preference for continuing to meet at the Natural History Museum. Pres. Joe Gastright will pursue the possibility of meeting at the Museum for the next few months. The members also decided to recruit new members by telephoning area subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Publicity Chair Porter Henry will design a form to be used by members to recruit new members. Virginia Jergens will bring a xerox copy of the subscriber list to the next meeting, so that the list may be distributed to members. Holly Norton, organizer of the By-Laws Committee, reported that the committee has not yet met. Richard Shepherd, Treasurer, reported that 41 people have paid dues and that after paying for the expenses of the initial meeting and the first three issues of the newsletter, the treasury had a balance of \$167.59. The chief expense is the newsletter, which costs \$49.50 per issue for our present mailing list of 110 names (\$.45 per copy).

Richard McGrath, Professor of Theology at Thomas More College, and a pioneer in teaching about death and dying, spoke to the membership about near death experiences, a label for the reports people make about what they have experienced when they have been clinically dead and then revived. Prof. McGrath noted that interest in near death experiences has increased markedly in recent years, but that the area is confused by a tendency to include many different kinds of experiences under the label "near death experiences." Throughout history and across the world, people of all cultures have claimed to have had unusual experiences when near death. These experiences differ according to the background of the experiencer, but typically include elements like hearing oneself declared dead, floating above and observing one's own body, hearing music or buzzing noises, feeling as though one is in a tunnel, seeing a bright light, feeling peaceful and euphoric, and meeting historical or religious figures or family members who urge the dying person to return to life. The experiences reported reflect the culture and desires of the experiencer. Although most of the experiences reported in news media are positive, many people who have been declared clinically dead (no pulse or respiration) and have been revived report no unusual experience, or a frightening and unpleasant experience, for example, feeling as though one is floating in darkness. A 1982 national Gallup poll found that one third of those who reported having had a near death experience had a positive experience (*New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 15, 1991, p. 44). Most of the available data are anecdotal only, since few systematic studies have been done. Nevertheless some people attach great importance to these experiences, claiming that they reveal an afterworld.

McGrath went on to point out that none of the people reporting such experiences were actually dead, but were merely in the process of dying when the process was reversed, and so could not be said to have had any experience of death or of any reality beyond death. The brain takes about 5 - 10 minutes to cease functioning after respiration and pulse stop. Recent research indicates that as a person begins to die, the brain goes into shock, producing responses apparently aimed at maintaining life. Blood vessels in the brain dilate, drawing an increased supply of oxygen and sugar into the brain, permitting clear thinking, and opium-like substances called endorphins are produced, leading to a pain-free euphoria and floating sensation. Because of the surge of sugar and oxygen, the person is able to think especially clearly and rapidly, which may explain the frequency of reporting seeing one's life in review as part of a near death experience. Any activity or event which sufficiently stresses the brain or convinces the person that death is imminent, for example, fasting, meditation, psychedelic drugs, lack of sleep, lack of oxygen, or a near accident, can induce experiences

including all the elements typically reported by those who are near death. Prof. McGrath concludes that the brain appears to be organized to maintain life in the face of great threat, and that the pain-free, detached, clear thinking provided by the threatened brain's last ditch responses are useful for survival.

The person who has a positive near death experience is likely to attach very different meanings to it, however. The individual often interprets the experience as supporting his or her pre-existing faith or view of death or status in the world of the living. Some see evidence of an afterworld populated by family members and religious figures. Others, particularly ultra-conservative Christians, interpret the experience as a trick perpetrated by the Devil. For others, the experience may enhance a romantic view of death. Some people's sense of self-esteem and self-importance is given a boost by the feeling that they are specially privileged because they have had a unique glimpse into life after death.

After Prof. McGrath's clear, thorough discussion and an energetic question and answer period, the meeting adjourned to an informal lunch and a great deal of lively conversation at a nearby restaurant. Special thanks go to Richard Davis and the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, who generously made the museum available for our meeting.

Next Meeting -- January 18 -- Satanism: What Is It? Why Is It So Feared?

On Saturday, January 18, at 10:00 AM, ART will meet at the Museum of Natural History (Driving instructions elsewhere in this issue). After a brief business meeting, Virginia Jergens, a member of ART and sociologist who until recently taught in the University of Cincinnati Evening College, will speak on satanism, an ill-defined phenomenon viewed as a major threat to society by the religious right and as an unsubstantiated claim by social scientists. Her talk will be followed by an open round table discussion. Read up and be prepared to argue the facts! Here are some sources which will prepare you to contribute to the round table. The Satanism Scare, edited by three sociologists, James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, is a good collection of articles scholarly and popular examining the development and dimensions of satanism as a social problem. It is available in paperback from Aldine de Bruyter, 200 Saw Mill River Road, Hawthorne New York 10532.

The Skeptical Inquirer has published a series of four articles: "Police Pursuit of Satanic Crime," Spring, 1990; "The Spread of Satanic Cult Rumors," Spring, 1990; "Police Pursuit of Satanic Crime II: The Satanic and Urban Legends," Summer, 1990; and "Satanic Cult 'Survivor' Stories," Spring 1991.

"Scholars Debunk Supposed Cult Rise: Fear Called Satanism's Biggest Threat," a report on the recent meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, appeared in the Cincinnati Enquirer, November 17, 1991, p. A-15. On September 14, 1991, in "Authorities Alerted to Signs of Satanism," the Enquirer reported on a seminar given by a Chicago police detective at Clermont College. The seminar was designed to help police and social workers identify crimes committed by "satanists."

Your local public library can provide you with more information. Check out the entries under "satanism" in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature for recent articles.

Calendar

Change in regular meeting day: The day for the regular monthly meeting has been changed from the second Saturday of the month to the third Saturday of the month, beginning in January, 1992.

January 18, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, 1720 Gilbert Ave. Business meeting followed by Round Table Discussion: "Satanism: What Is It? Why Is It So Feared?" Virginia Jergens, Moderator. Informal lunch nearby afterwards for anyone who wants to come.

February 15, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Place to be announced. Monthly Meeting. Place and moderator to be announced. Round Table Discussion: "Reinventing the Wheel, or Does Each and Every Weird Claim Deserve Debunking?"

March 21, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Place to be announced. Bob Baker of the Kentucky Association of Science Teachers and Skeptics on "Ghost-Busting in Kentucky."

Treasurer Richard Shepherd Resigns, New Treasurer Appointed
Telephone Tree Committee Formed

Richard Shepherd has resigned as Treasurer of the Association of Rational Thought for reasons of health. We are grateful for his expert financial help during the first months of organizing ART, wish him well in his surgery, scheduled for early January, and look forward to his rapid recovery. New Charter Member Peggy Borger will carry on as Treasurer. Peggy has also generously volunteered to chair a Telephone Tree organized to alert the members promptly when necessary. Other members of the Telephone Tree Committee are Chuck Rodway, Virginia Jergens, Carolyn Hunt, and Bill Giles. Other officers of ART, elected to serve until an official first annual organizational meeting in April, 1992, are President, Joseph Gastright; Newsletter Editor, Virginia Jergens; Publicity Chair, Porter Henry; and Media Resources Chair, Richard Boznian. Members of the Media Resources Committee are Chuck Rodway and Carl Bunde. Members of the By- Laws Committee are Dick Shepherd, Mary Pacinda, Chuck Rodway, and Holly Norton.

The Association for Rational Thought is an independent, nonprofit, scientific and educational organization. We share the philosophy of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, an international organization which investigates paranormal events, sponsors workshops, and publishes Skeptical Inquirer, a journal of investigations of paranormal claims. ART meets regularly on the third Saturday of each month and publishes The Association for Rational Thought News. ART plans to sponsor public lectures, assemble a panel of experts for news media to consult, and investigate local paranormal claims. Annual dues are \$10.00 for regular members, \$5.00 for full-time students, and include a subscription to The Association for Rational Thought News.

The Association for Rational Thought News

V. H. Jergens, Ed.

[an error occurred while processing this directive]