

The Association for Rational Thought is a new organization committed to encouraging rational, well-informed evaluation of fringe-science, pseudo-science, and paranormal claims. A.R.T. encourages the investigation of paranormal and pseudo- scientific 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 member of A.R.T.

### Joe Gastright Goes Ghost-Hunting

At the November meeting, Joe Gastright, Investigations Officer, gave a full report on his investigation of a Hamilton, Ohio, family troubled by ghosts, including excerpts from an audio tape he made when he interviewed the family. Kim, the 28 year old married daughter in the family, which had been troubled by ghosts for about seven years, contacted Joe through CSICOP in March, 1992. By the time Joe spoke to her, she had called CSICOP twice, and was unable to sleep at night.

She told Joe that she feared that she was being followed by the ghost of a man who had once lived in her family home, a late nineteenth century farmhouse. She also feared that the ghost was sexually attracted to her. The family had earlier consulted their Baptist minister, who refused to talk to them, and a pair of "psychics," who confirmed the family's belief in the ghosts.

Joe volunteered to drive 40 miles to Hamilton to meet Kim at the house and discuss the matter with her. When he arrived at the house, tape recorder in hand, he discovered eight members of the family gathered in the living room. He listened to their descriptions of sightings of the ghosts for two and one-half hours. Every member had ghostly encounters to relate, although Kim's mother reported the most elaborate sightings. The entire family reported that they were haunted by ghosts of the Joseph Symmes family who, they believed, had once lived in the house. As incidents accumulated, they developed an explanation for them: every time family members handled the clothing, papers, and other objects they had found in the attic of their house and believed to belong to the Symmes family, the ghosts harassed the family and their possessions, knocking models off shelves, appearing in the kitchen, banging on the windows at night, and finally appearing behind Kim in a snapshot taken on her birthday.

Once the story was established, every thing that happened was fitted into it, most zealously by Kim's mother. Some of the most upsetting evidence of the ghosts, including the notion that Kim was being followed, was produced through the use of a Ouija board.

After he had heard all the stories, Joe concluded that the family was indeed haunted, but by ghosts of their own creation. He consulted Robert Baker, well-known Kentucky ghost-buster, who suggested a ceremonial exorcism, which would in effect "kill" the ghosts from within the belief system of the family. Joe did not feel comfortable with an exorcism, so took Bob up on his second suggestion, which was that he discover from Kim, who was the most troubled member of the family, how firm her belief in the ghosts was, and if her belief allowed of any doubt, to help her build a naturalistic explanation for the strange events.

Joe consulted Kim, who reported that sometimes she believed in the ghosts and sometimes she did not. Joe then suggested to Kim other alternative explanations for the various sightings, not telling her what he thought had happened, but asking her if it weren't possible that there were other explanations.

Once Kim began to accept the notion of naturalistic explanations for events previously interpreted as "ghostly," Joe was able to explain to her that the construction of a ghostly explanation for everyday events by an entire family is not unusual and that in fact when a family becomes haunted, typically the entire family becomes haunted, because they are all using the same explanatory system. He pointed out that her mother gained both attention and control of the family through fostering the ghost stories. He was also able to explain to her that apparently intelligible messages commonly occur when a Ouija board is used, because of the way in which human psychology works, and that these messages

commonly turn malicious. He advised Kim to tell her mother that she did not want to talk about the ghosts any more. Kim did so, and her mother hasn't mentioned them since.

Joe's listening to the evidence of ghosts provided by the family and his evaluation of the "strange" events from a naturalistic perspective appear to have released Kim from her burden of fear. Joe pointed out that belief in ghosts is not harmless, because once the belief is established, it is likely to become an uncontrolled source of fear, as it did in this case.

### The Cincinnati Nature Center Goes Supernatural

At the October and November A.R.T. meetings, Virginia Jergens reported on a series of lectures held at the Cincinnati Nature Center this fall. The CNC is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to preserving a wooded area east of Cincinnati and to educating its members and the public about the natural world. This fall the Nature Center's program included a series of five lectures on what the CNC labeled "unusual phenomena...hard-to-explain occurrences in the natural world." The series mixed scientific and pseudo-scientific topics. Four speakers dealt with paranormal or pseudo-scientific phenomena from the viewpoint of belief in these phenomena. The fifth speaker discussed sleep and dreams from a scientific point of view. Those attending paid \$7.00 a session, or \$25.00 for the series.

Discussion with staff members at the CNC revealed that some of the CNC staff believed that all the topics were credible and some did not. Because of a fear of unpleasant confrontation, the staff refused to allow a scientific approach to these topics to be presented along with the paranormal approach. Pressure from A.R.T. members who wrote letters criticizing the series or who attended the series resulted in the staff's presenting lengthy disclaimers before each speaker and adding a question and answer period at the end of each lecture. Questions were not allowed during the lectures. Virginia Jergens and Ruthann West attended all five lectures; Richard Shepherd and Carolyn Hunt attended some of the lectures. The following summaries of each lecture were drawn from Virginia Jergen's notes and audio tapes.

On October 22, "Well-known Cincinnati psychic" Mary Lou Ackerman presented a wandering discourse in which she claimed that she could describe clients' past, present and future lives by "reading their auras," their palms, and decks of cards; that meditation cures cancer and heart disease; and that thyroid disease can be cured by placing a square of light blue silk over the thyroid gland at night. She claimed that her daughter can pick the winning horse in 9 races out of 10. She repeatedly described her many satisfied clients, and asked several of her clients in the audience to testify on her behalf. She passed out business cards and told the audience that she charges \$35 for a half-hour reading. The members of the audience were extraordinarily attentive and appeared to have very serious problems that they hoped she could solve.

At the second lecture, October 29, Martin Patton, a "certified hypnotherapist," claimed mental and physical illness is caused by the "possession" of the body by a "spirit of the dead". The cure, of course, is Mr. Patton's \$75 an hour therapy (\$115 for the first session) in which he "dispossesses" the patient. The symptoms that he claims he can cure include fatigue, mood swings, hearing voices, memory loss, poor concentration, anxiety, and depression. He claimed that we know that the spirit leaves the body at death because the body at death weighs five pounds more than the body upon arrival at the funeral home. He cautioned nurses to be careful around hospitals because of the danger of being grabbed by the wandering spirits of the recently dead. He also passed out business cards during the evening, and promoted himself as the colleague of physicians and psychiatrists.

On November 5, Mike Sepate, a sleep disorders expert from the Bethesda Sleep Disorder Clinic, gave a solid, scientifically oriented lecture on sleep and dreams. He made no extraordinary claims.

At the fourth lecture, November 12, Noreen Wessling, a "graphoanalyst," claimed that every nuance of a person's personality is visible in his or her handwriting. She claimed that all you need to understand an individual's motivation, for example, is to know how that person usually writes the letter T. She also claimed that personality can be changed by changing the offending handwriting. You can improve your motivation, for example, by crossing your T's with a stronger, ascending stroke. She also pushed her products, which included graphoanalysis workshops for \$125 for four sessions and therapy for \$75.00 an hour. She also promoted mail-in analyses for \$15.00 each. In fact, although it is true that examination of handwriting can detect forgeries and the probable author of a given sample of handwriting, personality traits cannot be detected by examination of handwriting.

The last speaker, on November 12, was the most spectacular. Brian Thompson said that he earns his living "doing electrical wiring" and other part time jobs. He claimed to be a graduate of the U.C. Medical College, but not licensed to practice medicine. He has collected over 80 audio and visual tapes of individuals recounting what they believe to be their memories of abductions by space aliens under hypnosis guided by Mr. Thompson. His lecture consisted of brief excerpts from the tapes. He claimed to be a thoroughly skeptical "researcher" who seeks out and critically evaluates all information about UFO abductions, but was able to support his claims only with hints and innuendoes. He produced no credible evidence, but made these claims: 1) many people have been abducted and their lives disrupted by aliens; 2) aliens insert implants into people's brains while they are sleeping--the evidence of this is blood on the pillow in the morning; 3) "instructions" planted in abductee's brains prevent the abductee from disclosing the experience; 4) hypnosis using leading questions is a reasonable way to provide evidence of abductions; 5) "the military" and "the government" are systematically hiding evidence of alien invasion of earth from citizens; 6) CSICOP Fellow Philip J. Klass, a science writer and engineer, is a "pseudo-skeptic" who crassly destroys evidence and reputations in his effort to suppress news of the abductions.

#### What You Can Do To Promote Rational Thinking at the Nature Center

In spite of pressure from A.R.T. members who have called or written, the CNC has not taken a position on whether it will permit this kind of programming in the future. Write to the CNC to tell them that these programs are unscientific, fraudulent, exploitative, and will undermine the efforts of the CNC to educate people about the natural world. Point out that several of these speakers used the CNC as a platform from which to market their dubious wares. Urge the CNC to officially eliminate this kind of material from their programs. Send your letter to Ronald E. Heinlen, Chairman of the Board, Cincinnati Nature Center, 3547 Bayard Drive, Cincinnati, Ohio 45208, with a copy to James M. Berry, Director, Cincinnati Nature Center, 4949 Tealtown Road, Milford, Ohio 45150. Telephone the Director, Jim Berry, at the Nature Center at 831-1711. Mr. Heinlen's home phone is 871-0399, work, 651-6836.

#### In Our Own Words: Growing Up Religious Contributes to Rational Understanding

This article, written by A.R.T. member Everett DeJager in response to Keith Brabender's talk on the artist's view of science at the May 1992 meeting, inaugurates what the Editor hopes will become a regular feature of the newsletter. The Newsletter welcomes your experiences and opinions about skepticism, critical thinking, pseudo-scientific or paranormal claims.

Mr. Brabender's talk and the discussion at the May meeting caused me to dig into my theories. Brabender said that enlightenment consisted of replacing inspired knowledge with information experimentally derived. This enlightenment was a struggle--it still is. It is discouraging to note that many of the heroes of the enlightenment had feet of clay, so to speak. Isaac Newton dabbled in alchemy. Albert Einstein believed in a god.

Nobody arrives suddenly at the "perfect" state of skepticism. Errors are found one at a time; we cling to beliefs long after their lack of validity is evident. Each person must, by himself or herself, go through the process that happened in Europe during the renaissance.

I remember when I finally accepted the conclusion that there was no god. On a beautiful clear night I was looking at the stars. "Nobody up there cares, because there is nobody up there," I thought. I felt a terrible loneliness. I had lost something. The process of disillusion was not pleasant. "God will take care of you" became a fraud.

Everybody has his or her own route. Everybody's starting point is unique. I was raised in a religious environment -- strict Calvinist with all the horrible schisms that arise when literal Biblical interpretation is the rule. Fortunately my father had disputes with orthodoxy, and took the family out of the church. I have often wondered whether I would have ditched religion if my father had not given me that break.

Having a religious background gives one an advantage. Let me describe it. I enrolled in a lecture series by the Nathaniel Branden Institute. It was called "Basic Principles of Objectivism." The basis was Ayn Rand's philosophy as expounded in her novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Several lectures followed. They were attended by a group who sat quietly around a tape player and listened. During intermission there were discussions, but never disagreements with the recorded voice.

One lecture dealt with the problem of describing consciousness and its importance. Nathaniel Branden (on tape) said, "No definition is possible, because consciousness is what does the defining." He said that there was no way that consciousness could originate from non-consciousness in evolution. During intermission I stated my objections to his definition. Nobody listened, but I talked anyway. Consciousness can be defined. It is that function in a living organism that monitors conditions, internal and external, for the purpose of staying alive. And, if consciousness did not evolve from something not conscious, where did it come from? God?

Of course, the Ayn Rand philosophy required atheism. One of their lectures dealt with the absurdity of a supernatural god. While listening to Nathaniel Branden's voice developing the importance of consciousness in all actions, I was bothered again. If Branden were right, this "something" called consciousness had attributes that could not be. It did not originate from non-living substances. Then where did it come from?

My conclusion, which nobody in the group bought, was that the Objectivist concept of consciousness was religious. Nathaniel Branden's words could be paraphrased from the Bible: "In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What I am trying to say is that many philosophies have used the religious approach without knowing it. Having a religious childhood has enabled me to spot this. --Everett DeJager.

Calendar

Executive Council Meetings are usually held the second Saturday of the month, 10:00 A.M., Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant. Call President Keith Brabender to confirm, 351- 0921.

January 9, Saturday, 10:00 A.M. Regular Monthly Meeting. Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant.

February 13, Saturday, 10:00 A.M. Regular Monthly Meeting. Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant.

March 13, Saturday, 10:00 A.M. Regular Monthly Meeting. Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant.

April 10, Saturday, 10:00 A.M. Annual Membership Meeting. Election of Officers. Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant.

May 8, Saturday, 10:00 A.M. Regular Monthly Meeting. Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant.

June 12, Saturday, 10:00 A.M. Last Monthly Meeting of the Year. Greenwich Tavern & Restaurant.

A.R.T. Officers, 1992-93:

President: Keith Brabender

Vice-President: Dick McGrath

Treasurer, Peggy Borger

Secretary, Mary Pacinda

Public Relations: Porter Henry

Investigations Officer: Joe Gastright

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. --I Thessalonians, 5.21 [an error occurred while processing this directive]