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The Newsletter of The Association for Rational Thought

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December Meeting: Joe Gastright on "The Genealogy of Nonsense"

Joe Gastright, A.R.T. Investigations Officer, continuing his entertaining history of pseudoscience begun last spring, will describe major American contributors to nonsense from the turn of the century to the New Age. Joe's wide-ranging knowledge of the weird and the wired ("invisible" wire, of course) will delight the hearts of skeptics as well as add to members' understanding of the course of pseudoscience and the paranormal through history. The December meeting, like all A.R.T. meetings, is open to the public. It will be held Saturday, December 10, 10:00 A.M., at Raymond Walters College, Muntz Hall, Room 353. Members are invited to join in lively discussion at the meeting and afterwards at lunch at nearby James Tavern.—Ed.

A.R.T. Needs a Few Good Minds!

With the recent resignation of Lance Moody, A.R.T. finds itself with several important jobs vacant. We are actively looking for interested skeptics willing to spend a few hours a month promoting rational thinking in the Cincinnati area. If you are interested in helping out with all or a part of any of the following jobs, please call President Roy Auerbach at 771-6676. You can make a real contribution to supporting rational thinking and have a great deal of fun with your fellow skeptics, too.

Media Coordinator. The Media Coordinator's job is to supply local news media with information on topics of skeptical interest. When reporters call with questions, the Media Coordinator may refer them to a local expert, or supply the reporter with a Skeptical Blurb. When A.R.T. members spot ghosts or UFO's in the news, the Media Coordinator can fax the appropriate Blurb to the TV or radio station or newspaper to supply the usually missing skeptical point of view.

Publicity Coordinator. The Publicity Coordinator's job is to get brief announcements of meetings and other A.R.T. events to local newspapers, TV and radio stations. This job is essential for building membership as well as recognition in the community.

Recording Secretary. The Recording Secretary takes minutes at membership meetings and executive council meetings, sends meeting notice postcards to members using address labels made by Donna Loughry, Membership Secretary, and sends letters welcoming new members.

In This Issue . . .

October Meeting—Propaganda Never Out of Fashion—Joel Senter, Speaker

"Psychology of Belief" Analyzed at CSICOP Seattle Conference—Porter Henry

Coincidence! - Porter Henry

More Skeptical Blurbs: Joshua Stops the Sun and Darwin Recants? - Andrew O. Lutes

Abductees Swap Stories at New York Conference - Porter Henry

October Executive Council Meeting

Joe Gastright Assaults Nonsense

Reason Celebrated in the Queen City

A.R.T. Appears in Skeptical Briefs

October Meeting - Propaganda Never Out of Fashion

Dr. Joel Senter, professor of psychology emeritus, University of Cincinnati, spoke at the October meeting on "Spin-Doctoring Statistics and Other Social Diseases." Along with his professional career in experimental psychology, Joel has maintained an amateur career as a mind reader and psychic, an ideal combination for understanding the arts of persuasion and propaganda. He began by outlining four basic methods of deception useful in appearing to have psychic powers. All of these involve manipulating information without the audience's knowledge. They include the skill (an information-gathering assistant disguised as a member of the audience); the peek (seeing or overhearing information); the forced choice (a choice which the victim believes is a free choice, but which is not); and the switch, in which one

envelope or card is exchanged with another unbeknownst to the audience. Since people generally fail to keep an eye out for deceptive methods, even somewhat inept use of these skills can result in what seem to the audience to be major revelations of information the mind reader "just could not have known."

Leaving public mind reading behind, Joel went on to propaganda techniques. He is concerned with the failure of new psychology texts to include information on propaganda techniques. These methods were in every text book following World War II, when there was great concern about the methods used by Hitler to control German citizens. Now they are out of fashion and excluded from the textbooks, although the techniques continue to be used extensively. He described several methods, beginning with the appeal to fear, in which the propagandizer creates a belief in the existence of a crisis so severe that any action at all seems reasonable to use to prevent the predicted dreadful consequences. Hitler persuaded German citizens that Jews were going to destroy the Aryan race; today an assortment of fear mongers encourages excessive fear of global warming, collapse of the health care system and so on.

Propagandists also use appeals to prejudice, often enhancing the appeal to fear by fanning existing prejudices. All societies have scapegoats who are fair game for attack, including in the United States today smokers, liberals, immigrants, and fat people. Labeling is also a useful propaganda tool. The particular name given can summarize a point of view. Compare for example "labor leader" with "labor boss." Transferring emotion or regard from a revered figure to a person or group by association is also useful. Note for example the wide use of portraits of Lincoln by Republican organizations, and of Jefferson by Democratic ones.

Another method is semantic generalization, in which one word or phrase becomes equated with another, for example "gun control" with "gun control legislation," so that listeners come to believe that gun control legislation will produce gun control. In fact legislation often produces only the appearance of having solved a problem, rather than actually solving the problem. Another propaganda technique is to promote an "unassailable noble cause," like capital gains or family values, or for the Nazis, the purification of the Aryan race. In the name of a sufficiently noble cause, people will permit no end of tyranny. The gratuitous assertion is also useful. In this a claim is made, and repeated until it is believed. Making up statistics and repeating them can be an effective use of gratuitous assertion. - Ed.
"Psychology of Belief" Analyzed at CSICOP Seattle Conference

How accurate are our perceptions and memories? Not very, if you believe most of the speakers at the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)'s 1994 Conference, held in Seattle June 23-26. Our memories are distorted by so many influences that instead of thinking "Seeing is believing" we should think that "Believing is seeing."

John Mack, Psychiatrist to the Abducted

The opening session featured Dr. John Mack, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist who believes, on the basis of reports from his hypnotized subjects, that many people have indeed been abducted by beings from outer space or from another dimension. He brought with him one of his witnesses, who described seeing a large flying saucer hovering over a telephone pole.

To Dr. Mack's surprise, there appeared in the audience Donna Basset. According to Time magazine, Ms. Basset, while researching Dr. Mack's work, made an appointment with Dr. Mack, pretended to let him hypnotize her and then related a totally faked abduction experience, which the doctor swallowed. Dr. Mack's response: "I still think she may have been abducted."

Sources of False Memories

One of the outstanding speakers was Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, a psychologist who has been studying memory for some 25 years. She finds that false memories can be implanted in non-hypnotized, everyday people by indirect suggestion. For example, adults are shown a video tape of a road scene. A week later, when asked, "Was the red car ahead of or behind the black car?", 25% of the responders will remember seeing a red car. There was none.

Questioning itself can plant false memories. Young children were asked "Were you ever in the hospital?" On the first interview they said, truthfully, "No." Asked the same question a week later, some of them said "Maybe." After being asked several times more, some children remembered being in the hospital, could even describe the colors of the

uniforms of the orderlies. So much for people who remember alien abductions and for at least some of those who "remember" childhood abuse by their parents.

Carl Sagan's View of Science, Future

In his keynote address, Carl Sagan, famed astronomer and science popularizer, said he feared that science education was lagging so far behind science that the future might see authoritarian scientists and technologists ruling a populace who couldn't understand what their leaders were doing.

Science gained its power, he said, because it subjects itself to constant questioning and because it designs tests instead of accepting what appears obvious.

Skeptics will never get their viewpoint across, he warned, if they belittle or scorn the believers. The very human fear of death leads people to turn to psychics and channelers. Skeptics should realize that these individuals are not stupid, merely human.

The following half-hour question and answer period ranged over a variety of subjects. One listener asked about the face on Mars. Richard Hoagland insists that an odd-shaped mesa on Mars, which looks like a human face, proves that an intelligent race inhabited Mars centuries ago. Sagan's comment: "I once saw an eggplant that looked like Richard Nixon, but that proves nothing except that out of millions of eggplants, there can be one that looks like Nixon."

Conspiracy Theories

In a session on conspiracy theories, two speakers, Valerie Klein and Don Kates, said that many people feel more comfortable believing in conspiracies, rather than living in a world in which a lone kook can kill a President. (Comment from the audience: "They're more afraid of a world in which a kook can be elected President.")

"The Kennedy assassination is a simple case of first degree murder made obscure by the muddled attempts of true believers to solve the non-existent mystery," Ms. Klein said. "Any major crime is full of coincidence, anomalies, might-have-beens and unanswered questions." [See "Coincidence," below]

Conspiracy believers question the Warren Commission's finding that the same bullet passed through Kennedy and Connally and still showed very little distortion. Mr. Kates quoted from a standard manual on ballistics: "Full-metal jacketed bullets tend to pass through the body intact, thus producing less extensive injuries than hunting ammunition. It is possible for such bullets to pass through more than one individual before coming to rest. These bullets may be almost virginal in appearance after recovery."

Roswell Revisited

Phil Klass, noted UFO researcher, presented the skeptic's viewpoint on the so-called Roswell incident. Some debris - cardboard, aluminum foil, balsa-wood sticks and adhesive tape - fell on a farm near Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. True believers insist it was part of an extraterrestrial vehicle, and that the Air Force is concealing bodies of space aliens found on it.

Actually, said Klass, it was a radar reflector carried aloft by a balloon as part of the then-secret Project Mogul to detect Russian nuclear tests. The purpose of the reflector was to enhance reflected radar signals, making it easier to track the balloon.

Much has been made of the fact that the adhesive tape bore a flower pattern. True believers say the markings are space-alien hieroglyphics. Prof. Charles T. Moore, who participated in Project Mogul, recalls that some of the reflectors were made in a Manhattan loft building formerly occupied by a dress manufacturer. The "hieroglyphics" probably were a flower pattern on a tape used to wrap packages - Porter Henry, A.R.T. member
Coincidence!

Any major crime is full of coincidence, anomalies, might-have-beens and unanswered questions. Let's look at some weird coincidences comparing Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations.

Both were shot in the back of the head on a Friday before a major holiday while seated beside their wives, neither of whom was injured. Both were in the presence of another couple, and in each case that man was wounded by the assassin. Afterwards there were insistent claims that the fatal shot must have come from a different direction.

Each President in his 30's married a socially prominent 24-year-old woman who spoke French fluently. While in the White House each had a family of three children, and both lost a child through death. Both Lincoln and Kennedy were second children. Both had been boat captains. Both were related to a U.S. Senator, Attorney-General, Ambassador to Great Britain, and the Mayor of Boston.

Each had been elected to Congress in the year '47 and were Vice-Presidential runners-up in the year '56. Each was elected President in '60. Before each was elected his sister died. Both had a friend named Billy Graham and knew an Adlai Stevenson.

Kennedy had a secretary named Mrs. Lincoln and Lincoln had a secretary named John Kennedy. Their names each contain seven letters. Both were succeeded by Vice-Presidents named Johnson: Andrew born in 1808 and Lyndon born in 1908. Both of them had 13 letters in their names and two daughters.

Both assassins had 15 letters in their names. Both were murdered away from their places of work. Booth shot Lincoln in a theater and fled to a warehouse; Oswald shot Kennedy from a warehouse and fled to a theater. Both assassins were killed in their turn by assassins who used a Colt revolver and fired only one fatal shot.

But does this prove any connection? No, but it does illustrate the remarkable potential of selectivity: Take the nearly infinite points of comparison between Lincoln and Kennedy, discard all the differences, select only the similarities, and lo and behold, coincidences and ironies surround great public tragedy. - Porter Henry, A.R.T. member.

More Skeptical Blurbs

Andrew O. Lutes, an A.R.T. member who lives in Mansfield, Ohio, has contributed two new blurbs for A.R.T.'s Skeptical Blurb program, Joshua's Long Day? and Darwin's Deathbed Recantation. He picked these topics out, read about them in Skeptical Inquirer and elsewhere, and wrote a brief, clear, factual summary of each (about 1 double-spaced typed page) and tacked on a source or two at the end. Each statement adds to the usefulness of the Skeptical Blurbs database.

What's your favorite bit of nonsense? Or your paranormal pet peeve? Write it up and send it along to ART at
The Association for Rational Thought
PO Box 12896
Cincinnati, OH 45212
Abductees Meet, Swap Stories

Why are those big-eyed aliens from outer space kidnapping so many of us earthlings every year? That was one of the questions discussed at a three-day conference of abductees and students of the phenomenon held in New York City last fall. I happened to get tapes of two of the sessions. Here is my summary.

Virtually all the abductees, as well as researchers like Budd (sic) Hopkins and David Jacobs, agree that the extraterrestrials take sperm from male abductees and ova from the female abductees to crossbreed with aliens to form a race of human/alien hybrids. But why?

One theory is that the extraterrestrials are benevolently trying to assist us. The human race, in the distant future, will face problems too complicated for our limited brain capacity, so the aliens are interbreeding with us to produce greatly enlarged mental capacity. They are expanding our cranial hardware to deal with the software of the future.

The opposite theory is that they are creating hybrids for selfish reasons. Their own race is dying out and they need our more vigorous reproductive capacities to keep it going. Or, alternatively, they are creating a race of aliens to take over our world some day.

There have been numerous reports of women having been impregnated with alien sperm, returned to earth while the embryo developed, then abducted again and the fetus removed.

Budd Hopkins related his now familiar story of a woman who was levitated out of the window of her 12th floor apartment near the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City at 2 o'clock one morning and hoisted up into the belly of a hovering space ship for the usual experiments.

Hopkins reported that he later received a letter from two men saying they were policemen and had seen the event from the street. Later it developed that they were not policemen but bodyguards for a Very Important Person - supposedly the Secretary-General of the United Nations. One other woman reported seeing the kidnapping as she was driving across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Psychological tests of abductees, said Hopkins, indicate that they are perfectly sane, normal human beings, but as a result of their extraterrestrial travels experience feelings of low self-esteem, a separation from their physical bodies, and a difficulty with human relationships. Presumably all persons with these symptoms has been abducted, whether they know it are not.

Abduction advocates seem to believe that "All who have been abducted exhibit these symptoms; therefore those with these symptoms have been abducted." My own comment: this is exactly the same as saying "All horses are animals; therefore all animals are horses."

Michael Hesemann, a UFO researcher from Germany, said that reports of alien abductions in Hungary were quite similar to U.S. reports, although they were made before any of the U.S. books or TV shows about aliens had been seen in Hungary. There have been similar reports in Russia, South Africa and England, he added.

Abductions were also reported in ancient times, he said. In fact, in some versions of the Old Testament, Methuselah's son reported to his father, "I have begotten a strange son, diverse from and unlike men, and resembling the sons of gods in Heaven." This strange son, presumably a hybrid, in turn bore a son called Noah, and since he was the only male to survive the great flood, we are, according to abduction advocates, all descendants of hybrids.

Several abductees reported that the aliens seem to be studying human emotions. Aliens are said to place a hybrid child on a human's lap to see how she reacts. One five-year-old abductee reported that she had been taken from her bed to a playground, where there were nine alien children. The abductor ordered the human to play with all the playground equipment while the aliens watched in silence.

While 85% of the abductees describe the usual big-headed, round-eyed aliens, the remaining 15% describe aliens who are just like humans, or hybrids, or insects like the preying mantis, or even reptilian beings - although Hopkins admitted he had only heard of that latter and not had a first-hand case of it.

It was generally agreed that the same person is often abducted many times, and that alien abductions run in families, sometimes for four generations.

Hopkins criticized Carl Sagan for saying that eye-witness accounts are unreliable and that he would be convinced only by physical evidence in the form of some piece of a UFO that could not have been manufactured on earth.

"I would hate to be a prosecuting attorney with two witnesses to a murder," Hopkins said, "and have him on the jury. Our justice system is based on the idea that eye-witness testimony of credible people is very powerful evidence."

My comment: establishing what happens on our little old earth is one thing; a different kind of evidence is needed to prove that aliens traveled 25,500,000,000 miles from the nearest galaxy. - Porter Henry , A.R.T. Member.
October Executive Council Meeting

The Executive Council met the first Saturday in October at the Bethesda Blue Ash Medical Center. Dick McGrath, Treasurer, reported that after spending \$75 on the annual postal permit and putting \$50 in our postal account, we had a

balance of \$661.

Membership Secretary Donna Loughry reported that we have about 75 current members. The Council decided to begin a membership campaign to remind members to pay their dues.

The Council also agreed to aim for mailing 300 to 400 copies of each issue of the newsletter, about 125 for members and courtesy copies, and the rest to prospective members. An up-to-date Skeptical Inquirer subscriber list for the Cincinnati area will be the first list used as a source of prospective members.

Newsletter Editor Virginia Jergens gave a draft of the "Best of Cincinnati Skeptic" newsletter issue to Council members. The Council decided to mail the final version of the "Best of" newsletter to members and to hand it out to other groups. The "Best of" issue is now with Layout Editor Peter Jergens. The Council also discussed ways to improve the layout of the newsletter.

To provide A.R.T. with a single, permanent address, the council decided to rent a post office box and have letterhead stationary printed. Donna Loughry has rented a box at the Norwood post office; our new address is A.R.T., P.O. Box 12896, Cincinnati, Ohio 45212. Peter circulated possible letterhead designs at the membership meeting October 7 for comments and is now working on a design incorporating those comments.

President Roy Auerbach announced that Media Coordinator Lance Moody has reluctantly resigned because of increased travel connected with his new career as a free lance video editor. Lance did two jobs for A.R.T., Media Coordinator and Publicity Coordinator for the southern part of the Cincinnati area. Everyone expressed regret at losing Lance's creative, energetic, and generous contributions to A.R.T. We will miss his cheerful approach to getting the skeptical word out, but we know he will continue to offer a thoughtful, scientific point of view wherever he is.

As Media Coordinator, Lance designed and implemented the Skeptical Blurbs Program. Members write brief statements of skeptical positions on pseudoscientific and paranormal topics. These are kept in a computer-assisted database and faxed to news media when members spot topics in the news. Roy will take over the Blurb program until a new Media Coordinator is found. Members are asked to report news items on topics of skeptical interest to Roy, who will fax the appropriate blurb

The Council agreed to look for volunteers for Publicity Coordinator, Media Coordinator, and Recording Secretary.

Possible new projects discussed included some kind of Halloween project for 1995, a book store event, a Mensa Special Interests Group, a skeptics fair, and a workshop for teachers. A skeptics fair is an entertaining, educational event designed to offer naturalistic explanations for unusual event. Such a fair might include demonstration "psychic readings" in which the reader's techniques are explained, demonstration superstition-breaking like walking under ladders, stepping on cracks, or breaking mirrors, or fire-walking. - Ed.

Joe Gastright Assaults Nonsense

Cincinnati non-skeptics had better duck - A.R.T. Investigations Officer Joe Gastright has retired from his work at the Cincinnati Public Schools and has hit the anti-nonsense trail with a beneficent vengeance. In August, while the pastor was on vacation, he spoke at the Unitarian Church in Clifton on skepticism, aiming at establishing the notion that nonsense is not just fairy rings and silliness, but often destructive. He used the damage caused by credulous acceptance of recovered memories as an example of nonsense that can ruin innocent people's lives. As he does whenever he lectures, Joe included the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and A.R.T. in his talk.

September found Joe in Lexington, Kentucky, for a meeting of the Kentucky Association of Science Educators and Skeptics (KASES). KASES members were treated to a talk on Edgar Cayce, a twentieth century sleeping clairvoyant - that is, he could only do his thing when in a trance. While tucked safely in a trance, he foretold the future, gave medical advice, made dietary suggestions, and reviewed people's past lives. Fortunately for his legal bills, once awake again he remembered nothing he had said. When his pronouncements were repeated to him by listeners he claimed to understand not a word. Joe, who is working on a book about Cayce, says he is especially interesting because he has been taken up

by New Agers eager to find a Christian who supported their ideas. New Age writers have been attacked because their ideas have been influenced by eastern religions. Cayce is surely a good candidate for this role - a Christian clergyman from Hopkinsville, KY, he claimed that reincarnation was clearly a part of Christian beliefs, suppressed by the church, but worthy of, well, resurrection.

The Cincinnati Astronomical Society was Joe's October target. When I spoke to him, he planned to treat the members to a history of people who took mental trips to the planets, including Emmanuel Swedenborg and Alexander Jackson Davis. These adventurers in outer space were not traveling in the imagination as Jules Verne did - they firmly believed that they, or at least their minds, had been there. Although they often visited the same planets, their reports on what they saw differ markedly. Hmmm. Probably landed in different places. - Ed.
Reason Celebrated in the Queen City

You may have thought that last October 12 was merely the traditional date for Columbus Day, not enough of a holiday even to hold up trash collection. But October 12, 1994, was a great deal more than that.

At the behest of William Messer, a member of Free Inquiry Group (F.I.G.), a local freethought group associated with the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism(CODESH), Mayor Roxanne Qualls proclaimed October 12 a "Day of Reason" in Cincinnati, and October 8 through October 15, "Freethought Week" in Cincinnati.

On October 12, 1692, Governor William Phips of the Massachusetts Bay colony issued an edict that spectral evidence (including ghosts, angels, devils, voices from deities, the claim that milk soured because of witchcraft, and so on) would no longer be admissible in the courts. His courageous and reasonable act brought to a halt the Salem witch trials, which had already taken the lives of nearly two dozen people executed because they were believed to have practiced witchcraft.

October 12, as the proclamation states, "deserves to be recognized as a truly significant day in the history of human enlightenment, marking a triumph of reason and sanity over ignorance and superstition." Celebrating Governor Phips' edict also provides a somber reminder that belief in the supernatural may well be accompanied by tragic real world consequences. - Ed.

A.R.T. Appears in Skeptical Briefs

The September, 1994, issue of Skeptical Briefs: Newsletter of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) includes an article on A.R.T.'s activities. It's there because in an idle moment your editor discovered and responded to an e-mail message from Barry Karr, editor of Skeptical Briefs, inviting local skeptics' groups to send him information on their doings.

All of which gives me an opportunity to introduce you to Skeptical Briefs. It's a newsletter of about 16 pages filled with short articles on skeptical topics, news of CSICOP, news of skeptical groups and events around the world, and feisty letters to the editor. Skeptical Briefs, a nice supplement to Skeptical Inquirer, CSICOP's major publication, is published quarterly by CSICOP. A year's subscription is \$18 - send your check to Skeptical Briefs, P.O. Box 703, Amherst NY 14226-0703, or telephone 716-636-1425. - Ed.

Upcoming Meeting Plans in Process

A.R.T. Meeting Organizer Mary Pacinda is exploring several possibilities for 1995 meetings. One meeting in January or February will center around a discussion of a selected article in the January/February issue of the Skeptical Inquirer. Members will be invited to read up and come to the meeting prepared to present their views. Bob Contadino of False Memory Syndrome, a group concerned with the credulous acceptance of unconfirmed memories, will be scheduled to speak at another meeting. Mary also has her eye on a local UFO and mind reading experts as a possible future speakers. March will bring nominations for officers for next year, with discussion of where to focus A.R.T.'s energy in the future. Elections will follow in April. The last meeting of the year will be held in May, with perhaps repeat of last year's highly successful picnic over the summer.

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