

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER OF THE GEORGIA SKEPTICS

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 6
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1991

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Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group which shares a common philosophy with the national organization CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), and seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific inquiry as the most reliable means to gather knowledge of the world and universe. Like CSICOP, Georgia Skeptics encourages the investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and helps disseminate the results of such inquiries.

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For further information, contact the Georgia Skeptics through the Astronomical Society of the Atlantic BBS at (404) 321-5904, or:

Becky Long, President
2277 Winding Woods Dr.
Tucker, Georgia 30084
(404) 493-6847

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ATLANTA CROP CIRCLE MYSTERY SOLVED

by Larry F. Johnson, Georgia Skeptics

The September issue of The Georgia Skeptic reported on the mysterious appearance of three crop circles in Atlanta, Georgia, on the Presidential Parkway land near Inman Park. Photos of these amazing circles can be found in this issue's special "centerfold", along with similar crop circle pictures from Omni magazine.

How did Georgia Skeptics investigators solve the circle mystery? Simple: we made the circles! Our high tech equipment included a few lengths of nylon rope and sixteen feet equipped with shoes. The perpetrators included Larry Johnson (mastermind and instigator), Becky Long, Frank Long, Dale and Ann Heatherington, Kelly and Gwyn Hollins, and Larry Johnson.

Several of us held onto a rope while one person acted as the anchor, and trampled a circle until the plants (kindly provided by the Georgia Department of Transportation) was mashed into a flattened spiral. In fairness to cereologists around the world our circles didn't have edges as clean as the best British circles. This was due to the fact that cereal cash crops are more homogenous and of more uniform height. But the other attributes of Andrews and Delgado's "genuine crop circles" were met: largely undamaged stems, spirals, no obvious footprints, etc.. The few footprints we made were easily eliminated by simply raising the plants back up with our hands.

Like diligent cereologists, we dutifully catalogued all the paranormal phenomena around us (a dead pigeon, an old circuit board, and the fact that the circles were roughly in line with a radio tower). Becky Long took some soil and plant samples for later analysis of possible inexplicable chemical and molecular changes or changes in the average nematode content. She offered them to cereologists through the Fidonet UFO echo, but had no takers. Anonymous tips to local news media and the MUFON Skywatch hotline failed to produce any news coverage or detectable level of interest.

Unlike the cereologists, who think that the crop circles require a revolution in modern science to explain and understand, all in all we came to the astonishing conclusion that humans are capable of mashing out big circles without extraterrestrial help. The revelations of Bowers and Chorley further reinforced this amazing set of findings. The circles are no more a paranormal phenomenon than subway graffiti, and a number of people who should know better have been taken in by an out-of-hand practical joke.

CROP CIRCLE RECAP

By Larry F. Johnson

Crop circles are nothing more than mashed out areas in food crops, mostly in Southern England. The most common medium has been cereal crops, but rapeseed, the plant canola oil is derived from, has also been a popular medium. In the earlier circles, the only pattern discernable was a spiral swirl starting at the center, but concentric rings, bars of various sorts, and

cleverly reversed spirals later started appearing.

The History

In 1978, a British farmer named Ian Stevens noticed a series of five circles in his field, which were arranged like the Fives on a set of dice. He took a few photos, and the whole thing became a local news item. The circles kept appearing without garnering much attention. Then, in 1981, Pat Delgado, a retired engineer, was asked by a golfing buddy to look at some circles in a place called Cheesefoot Head. Delgado went to the site, and it was love at first sight. Delgado, an experienced engineer, couldn't imagine how any human could accomplish a mashed-out circle, so he called BBC, ITN and virtually every other media source in Great Britain. A paranormal phenomenon was born.

In 1983 Delgado was contacted by Colin Andrews, who was an electrical engineer with a lot of energy, entrepreneurial spirit, and a flair for showmanship. The team was rounded out in 1985 by Busty Taylor, who had a private pilot's license, and thus could aid in aerial photography.

Psychics, dowsers, ufologists, and a few scientists jumped on the bandwagon, and within a few years the circles were doing tricks for the cereologists. There were Celtic crosses, barbell shaped markings, reverse spirals and all sorts of bars and squiggles.

The "cereologists", as they call themselves, are divided into basically two camps. One camp thinks the circles are being drawn as a message from some paranormal or extraterrestrial intelligence. The other camp believes that some heretofore undiscovered meteorological force is stamping out the circles.

The main advocate for development of a scientific theory to explain the circles is an atmospheric physicist named Terence Meaden. He developed the notion that "Plasma Vortex" was responsible for the circles. In outline his theory is that a vortex is formed by eddy processes in the lower atmosphere set in motion by windflow past hills. About six or seven kilometers downwind of the obstruction, this whirlwind, or vortex, collapses and stamps out a circle.

Another scientist who was attracted to crop circles was Archie Roy, an astronomer at Glasgow University. Roy is also a Vice-president of the Society for Psychical Research, and is solidly in the camp which believes that the spirit world has taken an interest in mashing designs in food crops.

Ralph Noyes is another one of the psychic phenomenon crowd. He was one of the founders of the Centre for Crop Circle Studies, and edited a collection of articles on the circles called *The Crop Circle Enigma*. He seems totally committed to a paranormal explanation for the circles, even after the Bowers and Chorley revelations.

George Wingfield, a systems engineer, has written widely on the circles, and the way Noyes describes his contribution is that he "relates these remarkable events to a wide range of other phenomena including much of the data from ufology and parapsychics".

The Claims

I wanted to casually monitor some fringe belief system or pseudo-science, and examine how the claims developed and grew. The crop circles seemed perfect. The claims about the circles were getting more and more exaggerated, with no data to confirm the claims, and no definitive expose of the circles had been written, so I could concentrate on the development of the claims as they grew without having a canned explanation to fall back on. I'll examine the claims of the believers one at a time:

"The plant stems are undamaged": A big deal is made out of this. Plants are amazingly resilient, especially live, growing plants. Find a tall weed and bend it at ground level. In most cases it will bend without breaking. I had a metal gate section fall on my pepper plants, and they continued to produce up to the frost, lying on their sides. As someone pointed out on the Usenet Sci.Skeptic conference, wheat is a grass, and one of the properties of a tall grass is that it will bend without breaking.

"The stems are woven or braided": It took me a while to track this one down. Like a lot of the sillier claims, it seems to have originated with Colin Andrews. What he was referring to is the swirls and layering that appear whenever you sweep out a circle mashing plants as you go. Try it. If you mash a row of plants down they form into layers. You can even manipulate the layering by backing up, crisscrossing, etc.

"Mysterious chemical and molecular changes have occurred in the circles": The reports of chemical and molecular changes are often repeated and never backed up. According to MUFON's Dennis Stacy, the chemical-changes rumor originated with a test run by a Holistic lab in England, which compares dried blood with various herbs with the purpose of custom tailoring herbal remedies. I have never been able to get anyone repeating this to back up their claim by referring to actual studies.

Everytime the possibility of a hoax is mentioned to Andrews, he mentions these unspecified "chemical and molecular changes" as the best hard evidence that the circles aren't pranks. Since this is obviously true, you can bet that if any solid evidence had been found, Andrews would be more than happy to provide all the specifics. I feel comfortable in saying that this claim is absolute nonsense.

Andrews also ran tests on a sugary goo found near one of the crop circles, and printed the lab results on Plate 12 in Circular Evidence. I haven't seen any followup to this. I guess no sugary goo was found near subsequent crop circles.

"Animals around the circles exhibit bizarre behavior": It's hard to refute this claim because it's purely anecdotal. My own dogs exhibit all sorts of moody and irrational behavior in the presence of UPS delivery trucks, bath tubs, buzzing insects, and all sorts of other objects, animate and inanimate. If people are looking for anomalies they are going to find them.

"The circles affect dowsing rods": Dowsing also fits the category of anecdotal evidence. It's one of those phenomena whereby you can always find someone who'll say "The rod practically yanked out of my hand when we got near the water" but when controlled tests are set up, the dowsers can't seem to find

anything. Both James Randi and Joe Nickell have set up controlled tests and the dowers failed miserably. The fact that the cereologists accept dowsing as a legitimate scientific method without even questioning its reliability gives a pretty clear indication of their commitment to rigorous investigation.

Operation Blackbird

One of the funniest escapades carried out by the cereologists was "Operation Blackbird". On July 25th of last summer Andrews and Delgado conducted a monitoring campaign with sixty observers and a couple of million dollars worth of infra-red and night-viewing camera equipment provided by Nippon-TV. Early in the morning, before dawn, bobbing lights showed up on the monitors. Andrews, bursting with excitement, fired off a press release claiming that ground breaking scientific discoveries were in the works. When daylight broke, Andrews, the observers, and the press converged on the field, only to find a series of crude circles, and a bunch of wooden crosses and Ouija boards. The lights had been the body heat of the pranksters on the viewing equipment.

Andrews said "It was only funny for about ten seconds. Otherwise it was totally irresponsible and set back serious research considerably."

Bowers and Chorley

In August of this year, crop circles made the international news when Doug Bower and David Chorley, two artists in their 60's from Southern England, confessed to making a large number of the circles as a prank, including some of the better known ones. They used a plank and rope gizmo to mash the grain, and a little crosshair sight on a baseball cap to enable them to draw straight lines. They convincingly recreated some circles on camera, and most of the international news services picked it up. When Pat Delgado viewed one of Bowers and Chorley's circles, which had been made in the presence of reporter Graham Brough of the London tabloid <IK0>Today,<NKN> he said " This is without a doubt the most wonderful moment of my research. No human could have done this."

After the Bowers and Chorley revelations, things have been somewhat quiet on the cereology front. Pat Delgado, of the inadvertant comedy team Andrews and Delgado, was evidently deeply embarassed by publically certifying the circle Bowers and Chorley made for<IK0> Today <NKN>newspaper as the genuine paranormal article. However, after making a statement which basically declared cereology dead, Andrews and Delgado regrouped and stated that Delgado had been set up, and that "the phenomenon is still there".

The UFO computer nets have gone through the predictable phases also. A few of the UFOlogists with portions of their feet on the ground accepted the hoax explanation with an electronic shrug of the shoulders. But the larger number played the role of credulous true believers to the end, bringing up straw man arguments ("Those two guys can't have made all the circles"- "What about the chemical and molecular changes?", etc.). All in all, though, "cereology" is probably going to shrink further toward the fringes inhabited by Ancient Astronaut believers and Gulf Breeze UFO groupies.

WILL THE REAL CROP CIRCLE HOAXERS PLEASE STAND UP?

By Mike Sullivan, North Texas Skeptics

One thing is certain: a hoax has been perpetrated in England. Now the only question is, who are the hoaxers? As I see it, there are two possibilities:

- 1) Bower and Chorley didn't make the circles, and are now committing a hoax by saying they did.
- 2) Bower and Chorley made the circles and sustained the hoax for the past 13 years as they say they did. If so, then it follows that the throngs of psychics, dowzers, channelers, mediums, sensitives, investigators, and other hangers-on in the crop circle crowd have created a hoax of their own by claiming paranormal causes or effects related to the circles.

What could be the motives for each of these possibilities?

If Bower and Chorley created the circles and sustained the hoax as they claim, their story will be easy to check out. The wives and friends of the two men can attest to their whereabouts during many of the circle appearances. Today editor Lloyd Turner told National Public Radio that their wives eventually became suspicious enough of the men's activities to check the odometers of their cars during the nights they were gone. The men always had a reasonable cover story ready, but their wives eventually caught on to their scheme, and in the past few years urged them to give it up, Turner said.

They clearly have the means and skills needed to make good circles, as witnessed by the Today reporters and Delgado. Both men seem very fit and vigorous, and healthy enough to perform the physical effort needed to make the patterns. Also remember that they haven't always been 60 years old. When they allegedly started their little hobby, they were a spry 47!

Their explanation of the methods they used to make the circles fit the facts very nicely. They used a simple bore sight mounted on a baseball cap to align with prominent objects in the distance for their straight lines, a rope formed the radius of their circular patterns, and they demonstrated and told how easy it was to enter and exit the fields via tractor ruts.

They always chose remote, sparsely-populated regions for their doodles, which explains why they were never discovered in the act. As they became more expert in their techniques, they drew more elaborate designs in recent years. In fact, some of these methods were eluded to in the report of the MUFON crop circle road show in the May-June Skeptic (reprinted in the September/October issue of Georgia Skeptic).

And, I think they have a fairly plausible reason for both sustaining the hoax for so long (amusement for two rural artists) and for coming forward now (the UK Corn Circle Conference and associated nonsense).

If, on the other hand, Bowers and Chorley didn't make the circles and are fabricating their story now, their motive becomes a little harder to justify.

They are both 60, and it doesn't seem reasonable to me that they hope to get fantastically rich by selling their story. Although they said they planned to write a book about their hoax, de-bunking books never seem to sell as well as pro-paranormal titles on the same subject, as James Randi, Joe Nickell and Phil Klass can all attest.

They also must know that their story will be checked out thoroughly by reporters and skeptics (and possibly by believers, although that is not their traditional strong suit), and they risk tremendous ridicule if they are found to be liars. For their part, Today stated that they did not compensate the men for their story.

I sincerely hope the story is independently investigated by some of the same news and science organizations that have carried circle stories in the past, including ABC's 20/20. It is certainly possible that the Bower/Chorley tale is a hoax, but any good reporter with access to the men should be able to uncover it quickly and score a major scoop.

Circles Provide Fertile Soil for Paranormal Beliefs

That leaves us to consider the implication if Bower and Chorley are telling that truth: that the various and sundry fringe-science and hokum hawkers involved in the circles have been making bogus claims of weird circle-related phenomena where there was none, and doing it all for more than a decade. What arguments could be made for that possibility?

First, the total lack of any measurable physical phenomena associated with the circles provided an open door to wild theories from every corner. Since no scientific evidence existed to support a particular theory, any theory seemed just as good as any other to many circle followers. The UFOlogists, New Ager and psychics seemed to stand on equal footing with legitimate science in the minds of many people, since this was a case where science could not provide a simple explanation other than a man-made hoax, which none of them cared to consider.

Second, the circles were custom-made for each of the various paranormal interest groups: the UFO believers had their theories, the religious-symbolism crowd had theirs, the ancient ascended masters/Stonehenge crowd had theirs, etc. The psychics and dowsers were only too happy to be asked to provide "Proof" of the strange goings-on, slanted to appeal to whatever group was picking up their tab.

Crop Circle Cottage Industry

Third, and possibly most compelling, is the fact that there was a lot of money to be made in sustaining the mystery. The raft of books, magazine articles, T-shirts, photos, cassettes, jewelry, postcards, videotapes, and probably crop circle salt and pepper shakers churned out by the believers made for a tidy cottage industry.

The various psychics and dowsers found plenty of employment opportunities in circle-land, so long as they said there was really "something there." And they had no trouble parlaying their circle-visit experiences into increased patronage and fees to willing psychic suckers back home. Have any of the

psychics who visited the circles ever reported that they felt no unusual sensations in the circles? I doubt it.

In perhaps the biggest crop circle money-waster to date, a 3-month, \$10-million Japanese-sponsored study of the circles ended last fall with absolutely no results. Bower and Chorley say they intentionally waited until the penultimate night of the Japanese survey, then created a circle in the field behind the one under surveillance by the investigators! ABC's 20/20 report tends to corroborate the two men on that point.

Even tour companies, inns and travel agents were able to cash in on the circle boon, with special junkets to circle country. One could argue that perhaps these folks may be excused, as they were simply meeting a demand created by the others. Still, they were helping fan the flames.

Denial-Go-Round

As shown by the Gulf Breeze UFO hoax, we can't always count on paranormal believers to accept or even acknowledge a scientific debunking, even when it boasts far more credible evidence than the paranormal theory they promote. I won't be surprised if the crop circle crowd totally ignored the Bower and Chorley story if it is proven to hold water, simply because it would force them to abandon some of their deeply-held paranormal beliefs.

I can already imagine at least some of the explanations that will be touted by the paranormal believers in the aftermath of the Bower and Chorley blockbuster, although I would be most surprised if they don't concoct even more bizarre ways to keep the myth alive. I can hear it now:

"Well of course, some of the circles were hoaxed. We always knew that! But these circles over here, they're real!"

"Chorley and Bower are fronting for the scientists and skeptics. They're part of the big conspiracy trying to cover up the UFO connection and stifle our research!"

"Chorley and Bower are just grandstanding, trying to make a buck off the mystery of the circles!"

"Those two old geezers couldn't have made all these circles!"

That last one sounds familiar from the ancient astronauts/pyramids/Nazca lines fairy tales spun by von Daniken. Since all the paranormal explanations offered by the crop circle crowd are non-falsifiable, there is really no way to ever shut them up for good. They'll always be able to pull out some kooky set of circumstances that can't be disproven to make their case.

Wherever the Bower/Chorley story leads, it provides some fairly solid evidence that there needs to be no supernatural explanation for any crop circle, anywhere. If these two enterprising pranksters didn't personally create each circle, it certainly doesn't mean that every other circle must have a paranormal cause.

And 'round and 'round it goes . . .

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A TRAVELER's DIARY: 30 DAYS TO AN OBE PART ONE

Reported by Anson Kennedy, Georgia Skeptics

The following was found next to the comatose body of a Member of the Georgia Skeptics. It was handwritten in one of those "blank books" that can be found at any local bookstore.

Attempts to revive the Member (whose name is being withheld out of respect to his family) have proved fruitless. We are presenting these excerpts as an Object Lesson to other Members on the dangers of dallying with Things Best Left Alone...

Day Zero: On Which I Find a Really Neat Book

"Have you ever wanted to leave your body and fly to distant realms, visit outer space, communicate with loved ones far away, or make love on an exotic island [how do you do that without a body, preferably two?] while your actual body stays at home? Now you can accomplish all these things and more! Keith Harary, Ph.D., and Pamela Weintraub [no credentials] teach you how to leave your body with easy-to-follow, day-by-day instructions."

So says the back cover of the new self-help book I just came across. The name of this incredible tome? Have an Out-of-Body Experience in 30 Days: The Free Flight Program. I'll write my progress every day to let you know how I'm progressing. That is, of course, until I can actually communicate directly with anyone I care to from the astral plane!

But wait a minute! How do I communicate from "over there"? I know, I know... don't tell me... ***READ THE BOOK!***

Day One: "Through the Looking Glass"

Its objective is to "help you celebrate your relationship with your body, gaining greater insight into the connection between your psychological and physical selves." You start this by standing naked in front of a mirror and examining yourself. After breaking two mirrors and accumulating 14 years of bad luck, I decided to move on to Part 2 for Day One.

You can wear clothes for the second part (thankfully!). You start by relaxing in a chair and concentrating on individual parts of your body. Sort of like some instructions I've seen in self-hypnosis. You finish by visualizing the world from a different part of your body. I finished the day with a real good impression of the cushion of my chair.

Day One Interlude

I have spoken of my OBE experiments with friends. While speculating on the possibilities and problems of out-of-body experiences, one of them came up with a few questions.

1. Why doesn't the non-corporeal body just keep floating outward? In other words, does gravity act at all on this spirit? I answered: The book cops out: "Exactly what an OBE is, no one really knows. People who have had the experience say their consciousness literally seems to shift out of the body." [from the Introduction]

Although I can't wait to check out Day 20: "Free Flight Sex" Gravity vs. free fall, you know.

2. Related to this, is this spirit form shaped like my normal body? Or is it some amorphous blob of smoky substance, like you see in low budget horror movies with bad special effects? I answered: I would guess the spirit form would have to resemble the physical form (re: Day 20, above).

3. Would it be possible for me to travel to Istanbul and take in the sights, bypassing airfare and surly customs officials? I answered: As I understand it, the OBE can take any form you can imagine. In other words, it's totally imaginary.

4. If not, could I at least make it as far as Cumberland Island? I answered: Yes.

5. What do you do if your nose itches? I answered: Imagine your finger is scratching it.

Day Two: "Altered States"

The object of today's exercise is to learn the technique of "alert relaxation." According to the book, "learning to remain highly alert in an intensely relaxed physical state...you can develop the ability to focus your awareness on distant locations without feeling overly restricted by your body or physical condition."

The technique itself is remarkably similar to standard relaxation methods described in more down-to-earth texts. The book recommends that, once you achieve this state, you remain in it for no longer than 30 minutes on Day 2. However, it goes on to say, "if you should find yourself spontaneously having an out-of-body experience at any point while practicing the alert relaxation exercise, just enjoy the experience without worrying about the time." I was kinda concerned about just that thing until I read that line.

Day Three: "A Sound Approach"

"Day 3 focuses on your sense of hearing...practicing with a nonvisual sense such as hearing, you won't be as likely to let visual information overwhelm you and reduce the input of other perceptions while you are in the midst of an OBE." Such as the house catching on fire.

The book recommends that you do this exercise in an "active and stimulating location, such as a bench in a downtown plaza, the lobby of a museum, or the waiting area of a train station." Since I live in a house with three adults, two children (seven years and younger), two dogs, two cats, and a parrot, I figure my home is stimulating enough.

In any case, I concentrated on experiencing only the sounds around me, while keeping my "eyes open throughout this exercise" and not looking "at the sources of the sounds...unless this is absolutely unavoidable." Oops, was that a dog or a cat I just stepped on? Must've been a cat, it went "Meow!"

I concluded the exercise by listening "to various combinations of sounds [sibling rivalries are the sources of amazing sound combinations], and to all the sounds around [me] at once [was that Murphy Brown I just heard?], without losing track of any individual sound [I'm sorry, did you just say something?]."

As I read further into the book, I begin to realize that all of the exercises are directed towards one goal: To delude myself, through auto suggestion, that my consciousness is really separating from my body and "flying free" throughout the cosmos. I begin to wonder if I should continue my adventure.

Day 4: "Scentimental Journey"

"Day 4 will help you fine-tune your senses of smell and taste...Concentrate first on the familiar smell of your body [ME, SMELL? Never! How dare they suggest such a thing!]" The book goes on to describe just HOW you should smell yourself: "Rub your palms on the part of you where the scent should be the strongest, then hold you hands up to your nose and breathe deeply." This statement requires no comments from the peanut gallery, please.

After sniffing yourself, you're supposed to sniff your immediate environment. After being slapped by several young ladies, I decided I'd smelled enough for today.

Next I took a short break and then began the second part: TASTE! The book recommends going to a restaurant and ordering wild exotic foods. The calamari rings were OK, but I wouldn't recommend the escargot [which reminds me of a stupid joke: This snail went to a car dealer and said he wanted to buy a Cadillac. The dealer said, "OK, no problem." Then the snail said he wanted a big "S" painted on the hood, the roof, the trunk, and all four doors. The dealer asked why, and the snail said, "So when I drive down the street, people will say, 'Look at that "S" car go!'" I said it was a stupid joke.]

'Nuff said today, methinks.

Day 5: "The Louvre Method" (no, this has NOTHING to do with Venetian blinds!)

"The Louvre Method was named after the experience of writer Darlene Moore, who first practiced this exercise one afternoon in the courtyard of the Louvre Museum in Paris [gee, I thought it was someplace in France!]. That night, as she lay on her bed in her hotel room on the Left Bank, she sensed herself separating from her body. Moments later, she felt as if she were literally looking back at her body lying on the bed from across the room [my old high school English teacher would be crying "Wordy! Wordy!" right now]. She had just had her first SPONTANEOUS [emphasis mine, had she had other non-spontaneous OBEs?] out-of-body experience."

The bottom line for this exercise is that, by concentrating on (and thereby enhancing) sensory experience, you will be able to, paradoxically, open your unconscious mind to the possibility of having an OBE." I guess the Louvre, with all of its priceless art works, provides so much sensory input that one is literally FORCED into an OBE. Simply amazing.

The book says, "You'll need a companion to help guide you through this exercise." I chose one of the two dogs in my household (see Day 4). It also recommends using a new location. I chose my backyard.

"Your eyes should remain closed for the entire session, which should take at least two hours to complete. (We suggest that you wear a pair of sunglasses so that you attract less attention from strangers around you.)"

I wore my X-Ray Sunglasses. The squirrels in the yard paid me no heed. The book then goes on to say you should move around your environment, with your companion as your guide. I quickly realized my mistake. Tripping over a dog wanting you to throw a stick for it to fetch is probably NOT what the book had in mind.

However, having made up my mind to use the dog, I was committed (or at least I should be by now). "Your companion should now provide you with a variety of contrasting and surprising sensory experiences [if you've ever walked in a yard frequented by two LARGE dogs, you'll get your surprising sensory experiences, alright]." After stumbling aimlessly around the yard, the book told me I could look around and see (finally!) what I was stepping in. "Now sit in the center of the area you've chosen and take a deep breath [pass, remember TWO really BIG dogs like this place]...flood your senses with all that surrounds you [I REFUSE to use taste OR touch!]. Don't analyze any of these perceptions, but allow them to flow completely through you [I think the dogs have already been having OBEs!]."

The book tells me to take a break and pursue fun activities for the rest of the day. More tomorrow!

Day 6: "Return Ticket"

The true methodology begins to reveal itself. Today I was to begin with the alert relaxation exercise. When I was feeling "fully relaxed" i.e. in a state highly receptive to suggestion, I was to "remember the sensations [I]

had yesterday...imagine [myself] back at the same place...mentally exploring and experiencing the environment, this time without bringing [my] body along." So, in this suggestive (hypnotic) state, I allowed myself to relive my backyard excursion.

After proceeding in this manner for some time, the book instructed me to "try to 'move about' the distant environment by focusing on different spots" and "just 'pop[ing] out of one locale and into the next. This is an example of the many ways in which OBEs don't always obey the laws of everyday life [I'd best be careful, I may end up OBE-ing from jail!]."

To "return" to my body, I just remembered "the way [my] body looked...in the mirror on Day 1, and how it smelled when [I] carried out the sensory focusing exercises later in the week." So you return to you body by frightening yourself. Interesting.

I was most disappointed. While I had (and still have) vivid memories of my experiences, not once have I had the sensation of "leaving" my body. Rather, what I had today was a quiet period of intense memories, enhanced by the "bells and whistles" introduced by my imagination. Oh well.

What is going on is an indoctrination into credulity. By practicing these vivid recollections over and over, and the subsequent ritual of "returning" to my body, I am supposed to find it easier and easier to imagine myself actually leaving my body and travelling the astral plane.

It is apparent that the more susceptible to suggestion one is, the greater the ability to leave one's body. Who would've thought such a thing?

But, not to worry. I shan't let this little setback and credulity crisis discourage me. Instead, I shall tackle Day 7 tomorrow ("Let's Get Physical") with a vengeance!

Day 7: "Let's Get Physical"

Today's exercise is more down to Earth. After spending some time "practicing the Return Ticket exercise...learned on Day 6," I spent some time "pursuing some kind of rigorous physical activity [after Day 20, I'll have to come up with something else to do]."

Basically, today's exercise was to provide a break after the intense study I've been pursuing for the past week. And I guess you could tell I needed one. Although, I imagine if my brain burns out I could always go out of body and inhabit someone who's not utilizing their own to its fullest.

Week 1 Status Report

Well, this is the end of my first week of training.

Lessons have spanned from the overtly physical ("Though the Looking Glass," "Sentimental Journey") to the ridiculously metaphysical ("The Louvre Method," "Return Ticket"). The bottom line is (and I've noted this before) that the object of all these "exercises" is to blur my association of "self" with my body. Therefore making it easier to imagine myself separating from my body and

traveling on the cosmic plane (I wonder if it's a 747 or an L-1011?). I think my greatest stumbling block is the fact that I am not susceptible to hypnosis. I have tried both self-hypnosis and being hypnotized by "experts" in the past. To no avail. THIS, I think, will be the links of the chain which keeps me bound to my body (how's that for explaining away my lack of success? :-)).

Week Two: "Taking Off"

Week Two is titled "Taking Off." This is where I get to implement what I've been practicing. "Week Two exercises will help you shift your psychological perspective as you relate to your body and surrounding world...it will help you simulate the most important aspect of an actual out-of-body experience: the SUBJECTIVE sensation of existing apart from your body [emphasis mine]." So, my earlier speculations are confirmed.

Also, during this week, some of my friend's earlier questions may be answered. "By the time you have completed Week Two...you will know that the OBE does not necessarily involve the perception of a second body that some how separates or 'peels off' from the first. You will know that OBEs do not require that you fly around from one locale to the next, like a restless ghost evacuating a dead body." I may also settle my concerns over whether or not my astral self wears clothes.

Week Two also promises to help me "overcome [my] limitations by defeating the one major impediment to OBEs: fear of leaving the body, never to return." I may not need those ruby shoes after all.

On to Day 8!

Day 8: "Rising Above It"

"This exercise can psychologically prepare you for an OBE; ultimately it can also help you induce the experience at will." Oh boy! Oh boy!

"Begin by lying in a comfortable, quiet, and secure location [we don't want the men in white coats to get in, do we?]. Then induce a state of alert relaxation [what? again?]. Notice how it feels to be 'inside' your body...how it feels to 'look' through your closed eyelids [it's DARK in here!] and how you can focus your attention on the world around you from 'inside' your physical form...imagine your consciousness expanding out to fill the entire room [sheesh, I KNEW I needed to go on a diet, but THIS is ridiculous!]. Finally, imagine yourself returning to your normal size and take a deep breath." WHEW! I think I'll take another -- WHEW!!

"Now...imagine how it would feel to be a few inches above your physical form...floating above your body and also looking up at your floating image from within your body [great! I really CAN be in two places at once! I think I'll sleep in on Monday and just visit the office in spirit]. Then gradually begin moving your attention back and forth between the inside of your body and the point you envision a few inches above." Astral Ping-Pong!

Tomorrow - Day 9: "A Room With a View" Stay tuned...

Day 9: "A Room With a View"

Today's exercise is fairly brief. I am told to "use the same comfortable, secure location" I used yesterday. There was some pounding and banging, but the men in the white coats didn't get in so I figure I'm safe (for the moment).

"This time, instead of imagining that you're floating directly above your body, focus your attention on a specific location across the room. ... Now imagine that you're a point of consciousness and that you're looking back at your body [You notice how I'm ALWAYS having to look back at my body?] ... Focus on this imagined experience in your mind's eye, trying to capture the details with input from all five senses." So today is just an extension of yesterday, imagining my consciousness further and further from my body. Today's exercise concludes by telling me, "The more detailed your images, the more likely you will be to have an OBE." And wishing will make it so.

Day 10: "Being There"

"During spontaneous out-of-body experiences, many people report feeling as though they are visiting places that have a strong emotional attraction for them [Well, there IS this cute 27-year old girl...]. ... By recognizing and envisioning the locations most significant to you, you may be able to induce an OBE [Or was that seduce?]."

The book goes on to tell me that today's is the most complex of the exercises and that I read the instructions several times before continuing. It's against my better judgment, but I guess I will...

I am instructed to first select a place with particular meaning to me; I picked the bathroom. I am then told to pick a place about ten or fifteen minutes walking distance from there; I picked a Little Caesar's pizza place. Man does not live on OBEs alone.

The book tells me to pretend to have an OBE and "go to that outdoor location and stand with your eyes closed [I love the smell of pizza in the morning!]. As you stand there take a deep breath [Pepperoni!] ... and absorb the full impact of your surroundings [EXTRA CHEESE!]." Pause for a moment whilst I now call Domino's...

"... proceed, at a leisurely pace, toward the indoor location you've chosen [And wise choice it was, after all that pizza...]. Remember, you're still pretending to have an OBE ... you should avoid all human contact unless it's absolutely necessary [Darn! So much for the 27-year old today!]. It might even help to think of yourself as a ghost [BOO!]."

After stumbling into traffic a couple of times, I figured I better open my eyes. Fortunately, most cars have working horns. The book goes on to tell me to "continue to imagine that you are in the midst of an OBE" when I get to my indoor spot (out-of-body is right!). "Maintain a sense of objective distance [ALWAYS!] ... as though you were visiting a museum exhibit [not in any museum I know of...] ... Imagine you are visiting this place for the first time [well, not EXACTLY; it's just been awhile...]. What do the tiniest details tell you about the emotional atmosphere of the place [how do YOU spell relief?]." Let us pause for a moment...

"After you've spent ten or fifteen minutes in this indoor location [Nope, not gonna touch THAT one], return to the outdoor spot ... Take a deep breath [Deja vu!]." I am then instructed to return home as quickly as possible and relive the entire experience from a state of "alert relaxation."

I first revisit (in spirit) the "outdoor place" and then the "indoor location." Finally, "it is time to emerge from your state of alert relaxation ... Feel the solidity of your body and the arms of the chair before getting up and moving about the room."

Today's exercise concludes by instructing me to repeat it (with pizza, you can't help it) and gives me the following words of wisdom: "If practicing this exercise seems at all disorienting, keep in mind that this is in keeping with its overall purpose. Ideally, ... you'll develop the ability to focus on any location without being excessively limited by your immediate physical surroundings." 'Nuff said.

Day 11: "Shopping Spree" (or How To Use the Astral Charge Card -- Don't Leave Your Body Without It!)

"Begin by going to a department store or shopping center you've never visited before [Hmmm, I *would* go to the downtown Rich's, but that will have to wait until Day 25: "Time Travel"...your goal will be to pick a small section of the shopping area and explore the various displays of objects for sale without buying anything [Like I'm buying THIS stuff...]. Notice how impersonal your response to these objects can be when you have no intention of buying them [Yet another attempt to get me to disassociate from reality]...a screwdriver is just a screwdriver [Unless it's made with vodka]...spend thirty or forty minutes handling various objects [Well, the clerk is starting to look at me funny, and is reaching for the phone to call security...]."

I am then instructed to take a break before continuing. So, after my strip search, I pick up where I left off. "When you return to the shopping center [I had to find a new one, I'm barred for life from the first one], pick a different section to browse through [Uh-uh, no way buddy! No way am I going through THAT again!]."

Pause while I skip ahead a bit (I know, this will TOTALLY screw up my training!).

"Take an exploratory journey around your home [No one's gonna object to that]...Consider the total impact of your feelings toward all the objects around you [Pretty tame so far]... "For the next phase of this exercise, enter a state of alert relaxation [Just can't get away from that]...Imagine that you are no larger than a tiny dot...then imagine you are your usual size..."

Yet another evening down the tubes...

Day 12: "Within You and Without You"

"You must do the following exercise the first thing in the morning, before you get out of bed [Lucky I'm reading ahead...].

As soon as you notice yourself emerging from sleep, before you even open your eyes or move [Whoops! Felt a muscle twitch there!], concentrate on the image of a face looking back at you...Take a deep breath and imagine one of the emotionally significant objects you imagined yesterday [Let's see, I seem to remember a screwdriver, with Absolut]...imagine that you're floating in the air in front of the object [So close, yet so far...]..."

Basically, today is a rehash, I mean revisioning, of the experiences I've gone through recently. Images of Domino's, Little Caesar's, and screwdrivers dance in my head while I picture myself dancing above me. But guess what! No alert relaxation today!

Day 13: "Unfinished Business"

"...Begin by simply noticing the objects that you take for granted in your home and workplace [Let's see, uh, oh yes, the LIGHT SWITCH! I've taken you for granted for so-o-o-o long...]...it is important to directly acknowledge their presence [You light up my life...'], even if only for a moment [Darn light bulb just burned out!]."

Great, so now I have to find a new bulb... Hey! Maybe I should be experiencing the bulb! Yeah, that's it, experience the bulb. OK, so now I'm holding it in my hand. Is that a dull glow I'm beginning to see within it? My gosh! It's getting brighter! I'm feeling an energy flow! It's getting hot in my hand! Wait! It's beginning to speak to me! What's that? I can't quite make it out... No. Now I'm beginning to get it... "You are losing it. Get back to reality. OBEs are a crock..."

NO! I can't accept this! OBEs are real! YES!! REAL, I SAY!

--- some time passes ---

I've regained control. Sorry for the outburst. I don't think I'd better continue tonight. See ya'll tomorrow.

Day 14: "Days of Future Past"

"You will conclude Week Two...with an exercise designed to alter your perception of time [It seems I'm altering ALL my perceptions]. Begin by...entering a state of alert relaxation [I KNEW it would happen again]..."

I am then instructed to imagine the rest of the day's activities. "Don't just rush...concentrate on specific mental images of exactly where you will be...take the time to make these details as vivid as possible [But I'm still just pretending...]."

The book goes on to tell me to proceed through my normal day's activities, pausing periodically to compare reality with what I imagined. "Ask yourself if you are really where you seem to be...ask yourself if you might even be having an OBE [Like I would be leaving my body while driving down I-85]."

You can see where this is going. I'm to continue blurring the line between

fantasy and reality until I reach the point where I can't distinguish between the two and will believe ANYTHING...

"You may carry this exercise further still by imagining that your present self and your future self may literally coexist [Yeah, and like I'm gonna win the Publisher's Clearing House Giveaway, too]."

Week Two Redux

Basically this week has consisted of exercises designed to make me BELIEVE I'm having an OBE.

I've rehearsed leaving my body. Pretended I'm going places I've never been. Imagined I'm doing what I planned to do later. Imagined what objects feel like without touching them.

I've tried to convince myself that reality is only what you imagine.

It ain't working.

Maybe Week Three "Gaining Altitude" will be more productive (of course, "productive" implies something tangible will result).

Now, let us analyze just what has happened to this unfortunate Skeptic in the first two weeks of his adventure into the Unknown.

Approaching the experience with an obviously skeptical attitude, the Member found himself drawn deeper and deeper into the self-delusions required for inducing out-of-body experiences. Day 13 appeared to be a particularly bad day, with the Member seeming closest to losing touch with reality. However, he seemed able to still draw himself back to this world.

He concluded his first two weeks with a highly skeptical summary. Which leaves us asking the question: If, halfway through his "training," this Member seemed relatively unaffected by the techniques he was practicing, what caused him to be found comatose at the conclusion?

We can only wait until next month's article.

This concludes Part 1 of this two-part series.

UPCOMING MEETING

The next regular meeting of the Georgia Skeptics will be held on November 17, 1991, at the Savoy Dr. Steak and Ale Restaurant in NE Atlanta.

Priscilla Vandecar, of the Council on Battered Women, will speak on the myths and pseudoscience prevalent in today's popular psychology on battered women. The talk will provide an important and fascinating example of the general

need for critical examination of misconceptions and rationalizations accepted by society at large, a problem not restricted to the paranormal.

HOLIDAY POT-LUCK

Members and guests are invited to a holiday season pot-luck dinner on Sunday evening, December 15, at the home of Becky Long, beginning at 5:30. Bring a dish of your choice, and whatever you would like to drink.

THE END