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CONTENTS

UPCOMING EVENTS: July Meeting, September Picnic
GEORGIA SKEPTICS BEGINS MEDIA WATCH, by Dr. William Evans
MEDIA WATCH PRESS RELEASES #1 Through #4
SKEPTICISM AND FALSIFIABILITY, by Dr. Keith M. Parsons
THE BLOOD READERS, by Robert Steiner, Bay Area Skeptics (an excerpt
from Steiner's book Don't Get Taken)
MADONNA WOULD MAKE A GREAT PSYCHIC SPOON-BENDER, by Rebecca Long
AURA-LESS in ATLANTA, by Kathi Schorr
ALIEN ABDUCTION SEMINAR HELD IN ATLANTA, by Anson Kennedy
JURASSIC PARK SPURS ANTI-SCIENCE RHETORIC, by Keith M. Parsons

The Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group devoted to investigating pseudoscientific and paranormal claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminating the results of such investigations to the local community. The group shares a common philosophy with the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP, which boasts such illustrious fellows as Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, and the late Isaac Asimov.

Material from the Georgia Skeptic newsletter may be used by anyone, provided attribution is given to the author and the organization. Article submissions are ALWAYS welcome and are encouraged.

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

Becky Long, President
2277 Winding Woods Dr.
Tucker, Georgia 30084
(404) 493-6857

Joining the Georgia Skeptics organization is encouraged because membership dues help us to disseminate the results of skeptical inquiries to the public and to hold educational events. Yearly dues are \$17.50 for individual memberships, \$21.00 for families, and \$12.50 for full time students.

JULY 1993 MEETING

LIFESTYLES OF THE HUGE AND FAMOUS:
A SKEPTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON JURASSIC SUMMER

The July 1993 meeting of the Georgia Skeptics will be held on Sunday, July 18, 1993, at the Steak and Ale Restaurant on Northlake Parkway, in NE Atlanta, beginning at 4:30 p.m.

The speaker will be Dr. Keith M. Parsons, of the University of Pittsburgh Department of History and Philosophy of Science. A founder and former president of Georgia Skeptics, Dr. Parsons is also a Research Associate of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

Dr. Parsons will discuss what really is known and what is not known about dinosaurs, and how much of what is said about them is reliable knowledge vs. imaginative or speculative reconstruction. The talk will address a number of major controversies in this area, such as the hot-blooded/cold-blooded debate, and periodic extinctions.

SECOND *GRAND ANNUAL* GEORGIA SKEPTICS PICNIC

The second annual Georgia Skeptics Picnic will be held on Sunday, September 19, 1993, at the home of Dale and Ann Heatherington in Roswell, Georgia, beginning at 12:00 noon.

Picnic tickets and additional information may be obtained by calling Kathi Schorr at (404) 963-0012 no later than September 17. The cost is \$6.00 per adult and \$3.00 per child, which includes food (hamburgers, hotdogs, assorted side dishes, snacks, and soft drinks) and entertainment.

This year's entertainment will be Georgia Skeptics' own version of a psychic fair, an original Anson Kennedy production.

We suggest bringing along a folding chair for more comfortable lounging.

GEORGIA SKEPTICS BEGINS MEDIA WATCH

by William Evans

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."
David Hume

"Extraordinary stories require extraordinary caution."
Georgia Skeptics Media Watch

The Georgia Skeptics Media Watch needs volunteers to monitor Georgia media for news of the paranormal. Media Watch is a media monitoring project designed to encourage responsible reporting of paranormal claims by systematically assessing stories for balance and accuracy. In addition, Media Watch attempts to provide journalists with the resources required for responsible reporting of paranormal claims.

Media Watch will issue a press release in response to every high-profile news story on the paranormal. In addition, quarterly Media Watch "report cards" will be printed in the Georgia Skeptics newsletter and distributed to journalists statewide.

Media Watch is designed to increase the awareness of both journalists and the public of the need for cautious and responsible reporting of paranormal claims. For each media story on the paranormal, Media Watch will distill a list of specific paranormal claims made in the story, and we will note whether or not these claims were questioned or challenged in any meaningful way. We will also measure the ratio of credulous to skeptical viewpoints, and we will note the prominence of skeptical viewpoints (if any) within the story. Finally, each story will receive a letter grade from "A" (for balanced reporting) through "F" (for credulous reporting).

At least at first, Media Watch will monitor only mainstream news outlets (such as daily newspapers and local television stations) where we might reasonably expect to find at least a few responsible journalists. We hope ultimately to take on even the most credulous of publications, such as *Creative Loafing*, but again, we will first focus our efforts on news outlets where reporters allegedly still adhere to the time-honored journalistic principles of fairness, balance, and accuracy.

Media Watch needs responsible volunteers to send in clippings of paranormal stories from Georgia publications. We especially need volunteers to keep up with newspapers outside metro Atlanta. If you find a story on the paranormal, please send it to Georgia Skeptics Media Watch, c/o Dr. William Evans, 1301 Cimarron Parkway, Dunwoody, GA, 30350. Be sure to include the name and date of the publication as well as the page number(s) on which the story appears.

Persons wishing to help perform and distribute report-card evaluations should contact the Georgia Skeptics at (404)493-6857.

William Evans, Ph.D, is co-director of the Georgia Skeptics Media Watch. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Literature, Communication, and Culture at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

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GS Media Watch Press Release #1: ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION
RECEIVES "F" FOR CREDULOUS STORY ON CONYERS APPARITION

For immediate release, June 14, 1993:

The Georgia Skeptics Media Watch project has assigned an "F" to today's Atlanta _Journal/Constitution_ story, "80,000 wait as visionary tested," by Richard Whitt. This page-one story contains three explicit paranormal claims, none of which are questioned or challenged.

Claim 1: Alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary are accompanied by radiation emissions and unspecified "changes in energy concentrations." This claim is unquestioned.

Claim 2: One participant is quoted as saying, "You could see the lights of angels flying around" during the apparition. This claim is unquestioned.

Claim 3: Rosary beads changed from silver to gold during the apparition. This claim is unquestioned.

Even though the story is a rather substantial 470 words in length, no skeptical sources or viewpoints are included.

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GS Media Watch Press Release #2: ATLANTA JOURNAL/CONSTITUTION
RECEIVES "D" FOR CREDULOUS STORY ON VIDALIA UFO SIGHTINGS

For immediate release, July 14, 1993:

The Georgia Skeptics Media Watch project has assigned a "D" to the Atlanta _Journal/Constitution_'s July 11 story, "Vidalia harvests UFO sightings as well as onions," by Paul Kaplan. This story quotes two sources who suggest that UFO sightings constitute evidence of visits from extraterrestrial spacecraft. Indeed, one source, Ricky Monroe, claims in the story to have traveled aboard an extraterrestrial spacecraft. No skeptical sources or explicitly skeptical viewpoints are included in the story to balance these claims.

The story would merit an "F" if not for some implicit skepticism supplied by journalist Kaplan, who with perhaps a touch of ridicule characterizes Monroe's account of his journey from Vidalia to Florida with an extraterrestrial named Altrex as "far too remarkable to attempt to summarize here." Still, subtle hints of skepticism are no substitute for careful consideration of fantastic claims. Monroe's tale should have been viewed by Kaplan as far too remarkable to report without more compelling evidence.

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GS Media Watch Press Release #3: GHOSTS MAKE NEWS: JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

TELLS TALL TALE

For immediate release, July 26, 1993:

The July 25th Atlanta Journal/Constitution offers readers a haunted house story replete with the obligatory ghosts, footsteps in the night, and a skeptic who becomes a believer. The story faithfully reports paranormal claims but does little to question or challenge these claims.

The story, headlined "Otherworldly visitors finding room at the inn?" tells of strange occurrences at a Charleston, South Carolina inn. The story reports in some detail the accounts of two guests who independently claim to have been visited by ghosts. Readers are provided with ample details of the ghosts' appearance and behavior. One guest is characterized as a septic who nonetheless now believes he saw, heard, and touched a ghost in his guestroom. Only the owner of the inn remains skeptical, saying "I'll have to see it to believe it." However, this token skepticism appears only at the end of a story 512 words in length.

Ghost stories may be entertaining, but they should not be reported as news unless journalists are prepared to evaluate them critically. It is especially troubling to see a reputable news organization like the Constitution report a common ghost story as news.

SKEPTICISM AND FALSIFIABILITY

by Keith M. Parsons

In "The Blood Readers", a chapter in his book Don't Get Taken, CSICOP Fellow Robert Steiner proposed that the claim "Most Big Mafiosi are Blood Type O" is nonscientific because of the practical difficulties in disproving it. Steiner's use of this humorous example triggered quite an exchange of letters in the pages of BASIS, the newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics.

The falsifiability challenge is one of the favorite weapons in the skeptic's war chest. It works like this: When scientific status is claimed for a particular controversial assertion we ask whether that assertion is falsifiable. That is, we ask whether any conceivable empirical test could show it false. Practical difficulties in performing a test to falsify a hypothesis do not matter; we know that many unquestionably scientific hypotheses have faced considerable practical difficulties when it came to setting up an actual test (e.g. Newton's laws of motion had been accepted almost universally for quite some time before they could really be tested). All that matters is in principle falsifiability.

When no conceivable test will falsify an assertion, we relegate it

to unscientific status. When we can conceive of falsifying tests, we regard the candidate assertion as having met one necessary condition for elevation to scientific status.

The falsifiability test has much intuitive appeal. Moreover, the employment of the falsifiability test as a demarcation criterion between science and nonscience has the endorsement of one of the top philosophers of science of this century--Karl Popper. Nevertheless, most philosophers of science now reject such an employment of the falsifiability test. I think it is important for skeptics to understand their reasoning on this point.

No one doubts that scientific hypotheses must have empirical content. If a putative hypothesis has no test implications at all, if no conceivable empirical evidence could serve to confirm or disconfirm it, then that "hypothesis" is devoid of empirical content and is thus a non-starter scientifically. "The entire universe just doubled in size" is a *_prima facie_* instance of an empirically empty assertion since "universe" includes everything that could serve as a standard for measuring size.

The problem comes when we try to spell out in general terms just how the falsifiability test is to be deployed as a demarcation criterion. It is hard to construe such a criterion in a way that will not render it hopelessly weak or excessively strong.

As it stands, the criterion of in-principle falsifiability is a very weak one that presents very little challenge to the determined purveyor of pseudoscience. Suppose I propose a "theory" that one's personality is rigidly determined by the number of hair follicles on one's head. Further, I say that if my "theory" is true, then at 9:00 a.m. on October 17, 1976, Mafia boss John Gotti had exactly 116,987 hairs on his head. I have now proposed an observation that could, in principle, have been made and which we could, in principle, come to know. Hence, my hair follicle "theory" passes the falsifiability test and cannot yet be relegated to unscientific status. All that a creationist, astrologer, dowser, homeopath, geocentrist, ufologist, or New Ager has to do to pass the falsificationist challenge is to propose one empirical consequence, no matter how far-fetched, that they would take to falsify their claims. Surely no "challenge" so easily met can serve as a demarcation criterion.

Surely though, some will object, the falsifiability challenge has more teeth in it than that. Surely General Relativity is testable in a way that, say, astrology is not. After all, it was Einstein's boldness in making testable predictions, as contrasted to the evasiveness of astrologers and psychoanalysts, that so impressed the seventeen year old Karl Popper. Perhaps then we should see if the falsifiability challenge can be tightened up so that it does serve the purpose we desire of it.

The problem is that in tightening up the falsifiability test, it is very easy to make it too tight. Many hypotheses of unquestionably

scientific standing make very few predictions on their own. They become genuinely testable only when combined with a number of diverse auxiliary hypotheses. For instance, the prediction that so impressed the young Popper was the claim, derived from General Relativity, that the apparent positions of stars observed close to the sun during a total eclipse would be displaced from their true positions due to the bending of starlight by the sun's gravity. This prediction is not derivable from the principles of General Relativity alone, but only in conjunction with a number of auxiliary hypotheses, such as that the astronomical instruments used in such a test will work the way we expect. Perhaps it was his awareness of the number of auxiliary hypotheses that encumber any such actual experiment that made Einstein so insouciant about the results of this famous test of his theory. When asked what he would have done if the results had come out against General Relativity, Einstein is said to have replied "Then I should be sorry for the Dear Lord. The theory is correct."

Hence, when an empirical test generates results contrary to predictions, the hypothesis in question _or_ one or more of the auxiliary hypotheses must be rejected. In other words, when an experiment produces apparently falsifying results, we might choose to blame one or more of the auxiliary hypotheses rather than the particular hypothesis we are testing. In fact, such a practice is common in science. Thus, genuinely scientific hypotheses often are not falsifiable in any straightforward sense. This is why philosophers such as W. V. O. Quine insist that hypotheses do not face the tribunal of experience alone but in batches. Potentially falsifying evidence can almost always be handled by blaming, however implausibly, an auxiliary hypothesis rather than the hypothesis under question.

The upshot is that the falsifiability criterion now seems too strong. Surely it is unfair to demand that a creationist, say, meet a standard that most unquestionably scientific hypotheses fail to meet.

Thus it is very hard to spell out the falsification criterion in a way that is not too weak or too strong. For this reason I wish that skeptics would not rely on that criterion so much. Everything skeptics wish to do by appealing to such a controversial criterion can be done more simply.

For example, as Robert Steiner points out in "The Blood Readers", the statement "Most big Mafiosi are blood type O" is hopelessly vague. This is all that needs to be said about claims such as this. Nothing can be done with statements this vague. If proponents of this claim then proceed to make it clear and rigorous, the tactic of skeptics should then be to show that it has no empirical support. Falsifiability need not be an issue at all.

Dr. Keith M. Parsons holds a Ph.D in philosophy from Queens University

and is currently pursuing a second Ph.D in the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh. During the summers, he resides in Atlanta and teaches philosophy at Georgia State University. Dr. Parsons is a founder and former president of Georgia Skeptics and remains an active member and advisor of the group.

THE BLOOD READERS

by Robert Steiner, Bay Area Skeptics

[The following is a chapter from Robert Steiner's book, *_Don't Get Taken!_*]

There seems to be no end to the proliferation of nonsense. Published in Japan in 1983, translated into English and published in the United States of America in 1988, *_You Are Your Blood Type_* (Nomi and Beshar [1983] 1988) splashed on the scene with yet another "revolutionary breakthrough" in the selling of balderdash to an eager and gullible public.

All quotations in this chapter are from *_You Are Your Blood Type_*; citations are page numbers.

Co-author Alexander Beshar wastes no time getting our attention. By the second paragraph of the Preface, he has already described "this brilliant and lovely Japanese experimental movie director" (11) Kimiko. He did not waste a whole lot of time getting to the important things with her, either. By the end of that second paragraph in the Preface, we are informed that he landed on her on their first date. And then, guess what? You've got it -- they discussed their blood types.

The exciting second paragraph of the Preface concludes with:

Afterwards [after you-know-what], while sipping iced Russian vodka on my deck overlooking the expanse of lights that Los Angeles becomes at night, Kimiko told me that she wanted to share a personal secret. "It's the first time I have been with an AB," she said. "But I knew it would make both of us very happy" (11).

Claiming not to know his own blood type, Beshar tells us that he later learned that Kimiko was correct -- he does indeed have type AB blood.

If you search the book seeking citations of studies proving their hypothesis, you will come up empty. We find only such things as:

The walls in Toshitaka Nomi's office are plastered with graphs and charts showing the state of various studies

being conducted at any given time (12-13).

If the Japanese are taking blood-type analysis seriously, it is probably worthy of contemplation (21).

They laughed at Newton! (21).

So much for the scientific evidence and documentation. Now they get to the practical uses of this hokum. For example, you might use it as a pick-up line. Thinkest thou that I jest? Nay. Nay. Forsooth, 'twas in this wondrous book, to wit:

Just imagine walking up to an attractive stranger and starting up a conversation. "Excuse me," you begin, secure in your knowledge that you are applying one of the most innovative opening lines in modern times. "I was wondering what your blood type is. I thought you might be an A by the way you looked at the details in that Fra Angelico, but I'm not sure" (21).

In a manner similar to the astrologers, the blood readers tell you the important people with whom you share your blood type. For example, President Dwight David Eisenhower, President Ronald Reagan, Nobel Prize winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann, and Lynn Redgrave all have blood type O.

Get ready for an important piece of news: "Most of the big Mafiosi [members of the Mafia] are members of the O blood group" (45).

We have come to an extremely important lesson in learning to recognize bunkum. Frequently it does not take any specific scientific knowledge on your part, nor does it necessarily require familiarity with the subject. Rather, if you simply apply some common sense to the claims, the tomfoolery will jump out at you.

Suppose you wanted to learn the blood types of "most of the big Mafiosi." Where would you begin? Would you go to your local library and ask to see "The Directory of Big Mafiosi"? Do you think such a directory exists? Do you think such a list exists anywhere? Let us assume that somehow you were able to obtain a list of "the big Mafiosi." What is your next step? Ah yes, the survey:

Dear Mr. _____:

In conducting a survey of the Big Mafiosi, it has come to our attention that you are a Big Mafioso. We would appreciate your cooperation in answering just three simple questions for us. The first two questions are for the purpose of verifying that you are properly in our survey. The third question is the subject of the survey. Please circle the correct answers:

1. I hereby admit in writing that I am a member of the Mafia: Yes No.

2. Furthermore, I am considered to be a Big Mafioso:

Yes No.

3. My blood type is: O A B AB.

If you do not know your blood type, we respectfully request that you see your physician, in order to learn it. While we know that your time is valuable, and while we hate to inconvenience you, we consider this survey to be quite important.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

The assertion made by the authors about the blood types of the "big Mafiosi" is NONFALSIFIABLE. That is, there is no way that you could obtain the information to show that their assertion is incorrect. There is no way you could falsify it.

If it is not falsifiable, then it is not a scientific claim. We will discuss falsification in more detail later.

We do not have to dig far to learn that their statement might be reasonably correct. In their own book they state that "more people are Os than any other type" (39). Now let us look at the claimed personality of blood type O people. As with my analysis of the traits of the astrological signs, the contradictory characteristics are all there. You will find whatever applies to you:

- Clear-sighted
- Can lose perspective
- Realistic
- Escapes from reality when troubled
- Can treat superiors well
- Can't follow too well
- Positive, idealistic
- Tramples the less fortunate (49).

I was all ready to put away You Are Your Blood Type and move on when some goodies in the chapter "The Type AB Personality" caught my eye. They are too much fun to pass up:

Is it any surprise then that the most illustrious AB in history was Jesus Christ? Christ was identified as an AB type through chemical analysis of blood stains on the famous Shroud of Turin. . . . Amazingly, the shroud has withstood the most stringent scientific scrutiny. Some experts examining it have concluded that it may well be the shroud that was used to wrap the body of Jesus Christ following his execution on the cross (75).

Read the words carefully: "SOME experts examining it have concluded that it MAY WELL BE. . . ."

It may interest you to know that AT NO TIME did any significant portion of the scientific community accept the Shroud of Turin as being the shroud of Jesus Christ. As of now, it has been totally discredited. It was an elaborate hoax. It was not the shroud of Jesus.

One more:

Unfortunately, the blood types of other great religious leaders remain unknown. But the odds are that the founders of the world's greatest religions like the Gautama Buddha, Mohammed, and mystics from St. Francis to Mahatma Gandhi were likely AB types (75).

Do you wonder how they computed those odds? Well, I did, so I did a little arithmetic.

When they say "mystics from St. Francis to Mahatma Gandhi," we may presume that perhaps they meant to include several in between. However, in order to bend over backwards to be fair to these authors, let us assume that section includes only St. Francis and Mahatma Gandhi. With that assumption, they named four persons of unknown blood type who "were likely AB types."

According to their book, "The rarest of the four blood types, AB people make up only four percent of the American population" (74). While the proportion of blood types might vary from country to country, for want of a better figure, let us go with their four-percent figure.

The probability of those four specific persons of unknown blood type all being type AB is four percent to the fourth power. That means that when they say that "the odds are" and that those folks all "were likely AB types," they are referring to a probability of less than three in one million (less than 3 in 1,000,000).

Think about that. With their careless and completely unfounded and unsupported assertion, stating as an odds-on favorite and likely an event which has a probability of less than three in one million, how reliable do you consider their other completely unsupported assertions?

Robert Steiner, a CPA, is a fellow of CSICOP, a Board Member of the National Council Against Health Fraud, a member of the National Association of Bunco Investigators, and a founder and past chair of Bay Area Skeptics. He is also a performing professional magician, and a past National President of the Society of American Magicians. Mr. Steiner uses his conjuring skills not only to entertain but also to expose fraud and educate the public about con artists. He has actually convinced people he has psychic powers, but always reveals he used trickery. Robert Sheaffer once told him, "The only thing standing between you and a million dollars is principle."

Don't Get Taken! is available for \$14.95 plus \$2.00 P & H from Wide-Awake Books, Box 659, El Cerrito, CA 94530. Mr. Steiner may be contacted through this same address.

"The Blood Readers" was previously published in the August 1989 issue of _BASIS_, the newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics.

MADONNA WOULD MAKE A GREAT PSYCHIC SPOON BENDER!

by Rebecca Long

When I described my experiences at a recent "psychic spoon-bending" seminar to Dr. Gary Posner, of Tampa Bay Skeptics, he immediately surmised that the rock star Madonna would make a terrific spoon bender. The reason? The theory and techniques presented at the seminar could have come straight from Madonna's book _Sex_ or her movie _Truth_or_Dare_. I almost blush when describing them.

The seminar was conducted by Dr. William Roll, a Danish parapsychologist whose thick accent and explicitly sexual but scientific-sounding phraseology made him come across a bit like Dr. Ruth. According to Dr. Roll, psychic powers are of two basic persuasions. The first type, ESP, is the "female" component, in that "one takes something into the body". Conversely, psychokinesis, or PK, is the "male" component, in that the power "thrusts" and "penetrates" another object. As one might expect from the sexual analogy, PK powers "increase as one becomes more excited."

Dr. Roll is familiar to many skeptics due to his writings on out-of-body experiences, and for declaring the "Columbus Poltergeist" case of Tina Resch to be a genuine psychic phenomenon. As documented by James Randi and others, Resch was caught on film throwing several objects. However, Dr. Roll continued to endorse her powers and maintained that she only cheated occasionally. The rest of the times were supposedly real. Dr. Roll studied Resch (now Tina Boyer) for eight more years, and authored a book about her psychic abilities. One of the participants at Roll's spoon bending workshop claimed to live in Boyer's apartment complex and to have recently seen her cause eggs to pass through a refrigerator door. Interestingly, according to the June 12, 1993, edition of _Creative_Loafing_, Boyer and a former boyfriend have been indicted for the capital and felony murder of her three-year-old child, and have been jailed without bond for about one year.

At the seminar I attended, Dr. Roll explained that psychic spoon bending is accomplished by using PK to weaken the metal of the spoon. For the "hands on" exercise, the participants (almost all

women) were told to select spoons from a pile on the coffee table and hold them in our laps. We each made our selection, and examined it to confirm it was rigid. Dr. Roll then showed us how to hold the bottom end of the spoon with one hand, and stroke up and down the handle with the other. We were told to close our eyes and breathe deeply in unison, and to concentrate.

Dr. Roll explained that he would speak words which would help us build the necessary level of excitement to achieve good PK. The participants began stroking their spoons, concentrating on his voice as he himself breathed deeply, and said things like "Oh yes, I can feel it", "We're getting close", and "Yes, yes, that's it, that's it". Following his vocal lead, the participants stroked their spoons faster and breathed ever more quickly. The tension continued to build until Dr. Roll finally said, "Now!" and the participants yelled "Bend, bend, bend" in unison.

At that moment, the bowl of my spoon popped off and shot across the room.

I suppose I should confess a few small details. Like many skeptics, my interest in spoon bending was kindled by the lawsuits filed by Israeli magician Uri Geller against James Randi and CSICOP. After a few conjuring lessons from fellow Georgia Skeptic member Bill Pendarvis, and some more training from Robert Baker and Joe Nickell at CSICOP's 1992 Magic Workshop, I had come to William Roll's seminar primed and ready to debunk.

James Randi gave a most impressive spoon bending demonstration a while back on the TV show Good Morning America. Using an ordinary spoon from the studio kitchen, Randi had the show's host hold it by either end as he rubbed the handle between his thumb and index finger. Before the eyes of countless TV viewers, the spoon began to droop and sag then broke in two. It was incredible.

A spoon bending trick similar to the one performed by James Randi on Good Morning America is explained by Dr. Terence Hines in his book Pseudoscience and the Paranormal, available from Prometheus Books) Dr. Hines writes:

One has to prepare the spoon beforehand. . . When you arrive, go to the kitchen and borrow an all-metal spoon. (The trick doesn't work with plastic or nonmetal spoons.) Prepare the trick by bending the spoon back and forth at the point where the stem and bowl meet. At first, bend only a small bit, then gradually increase the angle of the bend. It's best to do this under running water, as the spoon becomes quite hot from the friction that occurs during the bending. You'll have to practice with many spoons before you'll be skilled enough to know when the spoon is just about ready to break at the junction between stem and bowl. There will be almost no visible sign on the top of the spoon that anything is amiss, although there will be a small crack on the underside.

The running water is not essential, but the spoon can get extremely hot. When it is time to perform the trick, appear to select the pre-prepared spoon "at random". Dr. Hines gives some good hints on presentation and patter:

Tell the audience to concentrate on seeing the spoon bend. Have them chant "bend, bend, bend" if you think they'll go for it. Sweat will pop out on your forehead as you concentrate, focusing all your psychic powers on the spoon. Exclaim that you feel the spoon getting warm. Does the person holding it feel the same thing? (Of course it's getting warm, with one person holding it and you stroking it!)

The trick will look more "psychic" and less staged if you appear hesitant to perform it or appear to struggle and strain to invoke your powers. Failing to successfully perform it on the first try is a good psychological ploy. Dr. Hines gets to the good part:

At first put no pressure on the spoon stem. You don't want it to bend right away. Strain some, and have the group chant "bend, bend" again. After a half-minute or so, apply gentle pressure to the stem as you stroke it. The spoon will start to bend! It will continue to bend until if you've worked it enough, the stem will fall off. The audience will be utterly amazed. Even people who already believe in psychic powers will be astonished at having seen such a powerful demonstration with their own eyes.

A spoon which has been prepared in the manner described by Dr. Hines will withstand a cursory examination and a quick tap on a table to show it is "ordinary". To perform the trick with someone holding either end, when you break the spoon be sure to hold the break firmly so that the audience cannot see that it has broken. Have the other person release the ends, as you continue holding the spoon between your "rubbing" fingers. Make the two pieces jiggle as one, and the metal will appear to melt and sag. (This is a simple optical illusion which can be easily demonstrated by jiggling a pencil between two fingers and observing that it looks rubbery.) Finally, relax your grip and let the mysterious bending spoon break in two.

During Dr. Roll's workshop, I had selected a spoon from the pile on the coffee table, and unobtrusively prepared it while Roll was explaining his PK theory. Seated directly to his left, I observed that Dr. Roll did not select one of the spoons from the table, but instead produced one from his pocket.

After the initial "bend, bend, bend" moment, very few of the other spoons in the room had bent significantly, but I noted that Dr. Roll's spoon was crumpled into a small ball about the size of a walnut. Had I not so rudely upstaged him with my own stunt, I assume this would have indicated the superior strength of his PK powers as compared to that of the trainees. Actually, even without invoking PK, crumpling his spoon like that would have been impressive if he

had used the same heavy duty silverware as the rest of us. But he had not.

The participants whose spoons had not already bent kept on trying. Many of them simply took their spoons and gave them a good bend with their hands, then glowingly attributed the result to psi. I did this several times myself, and others in the group actually seemed impressed when they watched me do it.

Others participants continued to alternately stroke and test, stroke and test, stroke and test, until the metal eventually softened and bent easily. Then they too declared success. Apparently the repeated attempts to bend the spoon weakened the metal enough to produce the desired effect. Some people's spoons never did bend.

It was clear to me that the forces at work during Dr. William Roll's spoon bending seminar were not "male" PK or "female" ESP, they were psychological and metallurgical.

At CSICOP's second Magic Workshop in 1993, I told James Randi about Dr. Roll's psychic spoon-bending escapades. Randi jokingly remarked that he had the perfect challenge for so-called psychic metal benders, and pulled a half-inch diameter bolt from his pocket. No one could possibly bend that! We all had a good chuckle. Shortly thereafter, as Randi held the bolt by one end, the other end began to bend and rise before our very eyes . . .

Rebecca Long is President of Georgia Skeptics. She is a nuclear engineer. She wishes to express thanks to James Randi for doing the magic; to Bill Pendarvis, Dr. Robert Baker, and Dr. Joe Nickell for their spoon bending lessons; and to Dr. Gary Posner for his "inspiration".

AURA-LESS IN ATLANTA

by Kathi Schorr

As an educator, one of the things I admire about my students is their curiosity. When these youngsters are exploring a newly learned skill, something in the brain is triggered that pushes them past what is actually learned and into the realm of "what if". They devise new premises, then proceed to see if they work.

For example, when we completed a simple unit on classifying rocks, my students wanted see if the tests used to classify rocks would also work on plastic or wood. They soon discovered that, despite the superficial similarities between the materials, that plastic and wood cannot be classified using the same tests as rocks. They

had to revise their initial premise.

So, this past spring when I was invited by some Skeptic friends to attend a workshop that a local "parapsychological" group was hosting, I readily agreed to go. The purpose of the workshop was to investigate the body's "aura" - visible bands of light which supposedly surround the human body and fluctuate according to various energies that the body is supposed to emit. The premise of the workshop was that auras not only exist, but that seeing and interpreting auras is a skill that can be taught. The workshop flyer made this sound as simple and straightforward as testing and classifying rocks in my elementary school class.

I went to the meeting truly curious and interested in learning what evidence there is that auras exist, what they mean, and how to learn to see and interpret them. If there is such a thing as a visible aura, how useful it would be! I imagined being able to tell when my children were really sick and not just having an "I didn't study for the test" day, and when it was prudent to take them to see the doctor (the money I could save!). I could warn close friends when their energies are low and they are vulnerable to illness before they become aware of it. What a breakthrough for the practitioners of medical science, for businesses and law enforcement agencies, for politicians. The ramifications are boundless!

Located in an office park, the brick building where the meeting was held was indistinguishable from the others (I guess I expected it to glow or something). The office was of average waiting room size, conservatively furnished with sofas and chairs scattered about, as well as a number of folding chairs. All seats were occupied by well-dressed, very ordinary-looking people. There were perhaps some 30 or more individuals in all. Additional seats were provided for us.

The lady directing the meeting introduced herself as a registered nurse and a practicing counsellor. She apologized because the men originally scheduled to run the workshop had cancelled due to illness. I wondered if they were actually ill, or if they saw something ominous in their auras that precluded attending.

There followed a brief explanation of auras and our leader passed around a book that appeared to contain a number of full color drawings of the human form surrounded by bands of light, rather like little personal rainbows. I say "appeared", because the book never made it back to the corner where I was sitting. It must have been fascinating, as many in the group poured over these illustrations for a prolonged period. The premises of the book and the information in it were accepted without question, and the book was referred to numerous times during the exercises and discussion that followed.

The workshop began with several exercises to prepare us for aura reading before we tried the real thing. Our first exercise was to

form an unbroken circle by holding hands with the persons on either side of us. Because of the large size of the group, it was decided to form two circles (actually more like circuits, due to our awkward seating positions). We were instructed to focus on directing our inner energy in one direction, out of one of our hands to the next person. We were told not to say in which direction we were sending our energy.

No description of inner energy was given, nor explanation on how to direct it. The assumption was that it existed and could be controlled in such a manner. The other folks acted familiar with such things. I was a bit concerned that as a novice, I would gum up the works or break the circuit if I couldn't find or properly direct mine. At the very best, I might slow everything down. As it turned out this was no problem.

After few moments of directing our energies, we were told to reverse the flow. We then released hands and I listened as one person after another reported which direction they had felt the energy coming from. All seemed to agree that it was clockwise at first, then counterclockwise when reversed. To the other participants, this seemed to prove something about auras. But to me, it wasn't surprising since most people are right-handed and tend to sense things in a clock-wise fashion since that is what they are used to. Also, it was extremely unlikely that someone sensing their energy flowing in the opposite direction would contradict those who had already spoken in unanimous agreement. Our next exercise was like something out of a sensitivity training session. Holding our hands open, palms in front of the chest at shoulder height, we were instructed to try to direct our inner energy toward a partner. We were to focus on pushing energy out of one hand and drawing it in through the other. As in the previous exercise, we were to note which direction the energy was flowing but not tell our partner. Then we were to "switch polarity" and direct the energy in the opposite direction.

Afterwards, a number of people said that they had felt a tingling or pulling in a clockwise direction - in from the right hand and out of the left - during the first phase of the exercise. Again, all who spoke up said that they had felt this same thing. I had observed during the exercise that the pairs in my immediate vicinity seemed to indicate through subtle body language which way they envisioned their energy to be flowing. At first, the right hand was held ever so slightly closer to the body, indicating (to me, at least) a reception of energy. I noticed a reversal when the direction change was called for, i.e., the left hand was then placed slightly behind the right.

I felt no tingling, no pulling. I gave an honest try, making certain that my palms were at an even level with my partner's and concentrating hard. If I drew my palms closer to his, I could discern his body heat, but no "energy". Perhaps my hands, notoriously icy, somehow blocked the flow. Perhaps my power of concentration was low or I was distracted by those apparently

"successful" pairs surrounding us. My partner (whom I had never met before and who was, by the way, one of the leaders of this parapsychological group) expressed his failure to "feel" anything as well. He seemed concerned and disturbed.

Thinking that perhaps the "chemistry" between us might not be right, we tried working with different partners selected from those around us who seemed to be successful. It is interesting that while I still could feel no signs of energy flowing, my previous partner got positive results. He seemed genuinely taken aback by his new success.

When I confessed my continued lack of success, a very confident-looking older lady volunteered to work with me in front of the group. She placed her hands very close to mine, stared me straight in the eye and smiled. Concentrating with all my might (and here I should mention that I have some experience with meditation) I tuned out the 30 or so pairs of eyes surrounding us, all sounds and sensations, except the energy I imagined flowing down my left arm, through my palm. I tried to imagine it returning through my right. While I have a fairly vivid imagination (just ask my family), I have to admit that I still, in reality, felt nothing. I could easily imagine the energy flow, but could not actually FEEL it. When I relayed this information, the confidence of this woman was not shaken. The energy was there, she assured me, but claimed that I was staring into her eyes too hard and disrupting the flow. I'm not certain what staring into another's eyes has to do with screwing up an energy flow and no explanation was presented. Perhaps the energy became sidetracked and leaked out my eyes? The lady appeared to grow impatient. I hoped the next exercise would be more fruitful for me.

The room was semi-darkened by turning off electric lights and closing the louvred blinds. Participants were instructed to take three successively deeper slow breaths and to hold their hands, extended at arm's length, elbows slightly bent, palms inward, fingers pointing toward but not touching each other, at eye level. We were told that we would be able to see the aural image best if we could find a blank space as a background. I confess that I found this a most amusing exercise. Imagine a room full of people with arms raised in what, to me, looked like an amateur ballet position, all breathing deeply. It reminded me of an old-fashioned "make-out" session in which all the partners were invisible.

This exercise did prove more fruitful for me. As I stared unblinking at the wall past my fingertips, there appeared a sort of glowing about my hands and each finger. I could discern a faint gray shadow stretched between the fingers of each hand. I wondered whether my aura was supposed to be the bright part or the shadow. On the other hand (pun only semi-intended) it reminded me of an experiment my students and I have done with optical illusions, where one stares for 30 seconds or so at a particular spot in an illustration. When the gaze is moved to a blank sheet of paper, a negative after-image appears. Those of us in the workshop,

however, were assured that this was the beginning of our ability to see our own auras.

Just out of curiosity, I have since repeated this exercise, using pencils at arm's length instead of my extended fingertips. The resulting "aura" was essentially the same. Considering the possibility that all organic matter could have an aura - even though no longer living - I repeated the test with glass, plastic, metal and rocks. All results were remarkably similar. Lest my "inner energy" be possibly flowing into these inorganic materials, and contaminating the results, I lined them up on supports, also with the same results. (It is interesting that this experiment did not work nearly as well in a brightly lighted room or against a day-lit window.)

Our instructor demonstrated the last exercise to us while standing with her back to a blank wall. She took the customary three breaths and then said she was concentrating on pushing her energy up to extend above her head. I would like to have reported that I saw what resembled fireworks, fountains or shimmers but all I saw was a thin woman standing against a wall. Try as I might, the only colors I saw were on her clothes, and the only change was in her position. What a failure I must be to not see what several of the others claimed they did (most notably and vocally was the lady who had failed to make me feel her energy).

We then were instructed to break up into groups of two and three and dispatched to various locations in the rest of the office, anywhere that we could find an essentially blank wall. Our group of three took turns standing against the wall and trying to project our energy upward, while the others stood back and concentrated on observing this energy. Neither the woman nor the gentleman I was teamed with could see any evidence of my aura, though I gave my projection what I felt was my best effort. I thought all living things were supposed to have auras. Maybe I should be worried!

I gave up trying to project an aura of my own and concentrated on observing the auras of the other two individuals.

I was careful to use my peripheral vision, as our leader suggested, and was determined that if there was anything to see, I was going to see it. The fellow stood against the wall, concentrated, and . . . once again I was disappointed. When I voiced my inability to see anything, the lady also admitted her failure. At least I wasn't alone, I thought. Then the woman stood against the wall. I saw nothing. But this time I waited for the man to speak up first. At first he said that he, too, was seeing nothing but asked her to repeat her concentrated effort. While I still saw nothing, I kept quiet. To my astonishment, the gentleman said, "Yes, I think I see something. Kind of like a volcano clouding up from your head and spreading out!" The woman concurred, stating that was just how she was concentrating on projecting her energy: up from the top of her head and out like a mushroom. Once more they tried the exercise, and the gentleman was even more confident of what he claimed to be seeing. It was amazing.

Gathered together once more in the main room, the some members of the group reported their successes. The majority stayed rather quiet about their experience. Each person who spoke up concurred with what the last person reported, but embellished further. Two ladies (one who had been pouring over the book of illustrations) reported seeing colors in her partner's aura. Nothing more specific was said or asked about. I found this omission curious. What colors? What did they supposedly mean? If someone had seen colors in my aura, I would want to know these things.

One of my Skeptic friends was then told that his aura showed that he is in a medical profession. When he responded that he is actually a teacher, the consensus of the group was that teaching is a "healing" profession and is therefore a lot like medicine. The Skeptic, a university instructor, had appropriately written "Dr." before his name on the attendance roster for the seminar. I suspect that his title, rather than his aura, led to the guess that he practiced medicine. Another Skeptic was told that her aura showed her to be exceptionally spiritual and mystical in nature, and definitely very psychic.

The group discussion then digressed into other "psychic" phenomena, particularly UFO abductions. At least two in the group believed that they had experienced such an abduction. How did they know? One had experienced missing time. The other's young son had figured it out.

Rather than probe these ladies' recollection of such an amazing ordeal, their claims were accepted uncritically and the meeting soon adjourned. I'm not sure what I expected the Skeptics' reaction to be, but the car was fairly quiet on the way home.

Without benefit of other opinions, these are some conclusions I came too on my way home from the workshop:

The human body does not necessarily possess an aura simply because someone says it exists, because a book (no matter how detailed) is written about it, or a workshop is held on it.

Perfectly ordinary-looking people sometimes make highly extraordinary claims.

People who want to believe that something exists can convince themselves that it exists, even without evidence. They may jump straight from the realm of "What if" to "Is" without benefit of critical analysis.

If psychic ability exists, it can not necessarily be taught to another person (at least not in one session).

A number of people sure are highly suggestible.

Some people may be too polite or too insecure to question

another's statement of opinion as fact.

Am I psychically impaired? Possibly. It is just as possible, however, that psychic ability doesn't exist. Based on what I saw and heard at this meeting, I am convinced that many of the people in attendance would benefit from what my young students have already learned: sometimes the basic premise needs to be revised.

Would I attend another meeting, workshop, or such on auras or any other psychic phenomena? Certainly. While I have found nothing to convince me that anything of the sort exists, there is still that part of me that says, "Wouldn't it be interesting if . . .?" In the meantime, I suppose I will have to rely on experience, body language, facial expression, tone of voice and other tried-and-true indicators to tell me when a child is ill, a politician is being truthful and the salesman is honest. Sigh!

Kathi Schorr, an educator, is the Secretary of the Georgia Skeptics.

ALIEN ABDUCTION SEMINAR HELD IN ATLANTA

by Anson Kennedy

The following was adapted from the text of a press release issued by the Georgia Skeptics:

On Saturday, March 27, three "Big Name" alien abduction gurus hosted a seminar for therapists. This Atlanta seminar was the third of a series of free events intended to educate therapists on how to properly deal with patients who claim alien abductions.

Only one of the three "experts" conducting the seminar has a background in psychology. John Mack is a Harvard psychology professor who recently completed a book deal to document his work with "abductees." Budd Hopkins is an artist and author who has popularized the idea of alien abductions in the media. David Jacobs is a history professor who has recently gained stature among "abductionists" with the publication of his book Secret Life.

Participants have reported that the seminar focused more on helping convince attendees that alien abductions are "real" than on how to help patients overcome what many psychologists consider are fantasies caused by sleep disorders. The "classic" abduction scenario is a study in sleep disorders: The person awakens suddenly from a sound sleep only to find that he or she is unable to move. He sees a figure or figures near him who then seem to lift or "float" the person out of his bed, through a wall or window, and into a waiting UFO, there to be subjected to all sorts

of medical and erotic stimulation. The "abductee" is then returned to his bed where he fully awakens, very often terrified. All of these aspects of the standard case fit well-known sleep disorders.

Suddenly awakening but being unable to move is known as sleep paralysis. During sleep, the brain inhibits muscular control so that a person will not thrash about when dreaming. Sometimes, this inhibitory effect remains for a few moments after waking up. Hypnopompic hallucinations are frequently associated with sleep paralysis. These are dream images which impinge upon the person's consciousness just after waking up. In fact, many medieval stories of "incubi" and "succubi" (male and female demons who would sexually assault the pious at night) were probably due to hypnopompic hallucinations. A related phenomenon, the hypnogogic hallucination, occurs when people are just falling asleep. "Out of body experiences", or OBEs, often accompany hypnopompic hallucinations and hallucinations readily account for the feelings of floating reported by abductees (Baker, 1992).

Unfortunately, the abductionists running the Atlanta seminar feel that psychological explanations for alien abduction reports are "non-starters" (Jacobs, 1992). They are utterly convinced of the objective reality of the reported experiences, in spite of the complete lack of any unexplainable physical evidence. No abductee has been reported missing during the time he later stated he was abducted. In fact, David Jacobs has acknowledged that several abductees have been seen still in their beds during an "abduction event". The abductionists, however, do not take this as evidence that the abductions may be fantasies; instead they claim these cases indicate a "psychic" element in abductions, implying that the aliens - whoever they may be - are somehow abducting people's spirits or souls (Jacobs, 1992).

The Georgia Skeptics feel this concentration on "alien abductions are real!" poses a hazard by reinforcing delusions and by encouraging false beliefs to the point where very real trauma is induced. We are not in any way criticizing those who feel they have been abducted by aliens. Such individuals require sympathy and understanding. While they may receive sympathy from the abductionists, it seems clear that they will not receive understanding - only reinforcement of what appear to be false beliefs.

References:

Robert Baker, *_Hidden_Memories_*, Prometheus Press, 1992.

David Jacobs, personal communication with Anson Kennedy on Paranet, 1992.

Anson Kennedy is Vice-President of the Georgia Skeptics, Chairman of the UFO Committee, and Co-Chairman of the Media Watch Project. He is also the moderator of the Paranet Skeptic computer echo. He is

an electrical engineer.

JURASSIC PARK SPURS ANTI-SCIENCE RHETORIC

by Keith M. Parsons

The following is a letter sent to the editor of the Atlanta Constitution. It has not been published:

Jurassic Park is one terrific movie. Too bad it has evoked a round of irrational scientist-bashing.

Lillian M. Hall's article in the July 6 Atlanta Constitution is a case in point. The charges she makes in her rambling indictment range from the overblown to the preposterous. Her most remarkable claim is that the test of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo in 1945 was an incident more horrifying than the Holocaust. Her reasoning is that there was a theory--actually it was a speculation--that there was a remote chance that the explosion could ignite the atmosphere. Yet the test was conducted anyway, allegedly demonstrating the astounding recklessness of the atomic scientists.

The Manhattan Project scientists were anything but the Tom-fool fanatics of Hall's caricature, as is shown by any of the standard histories of the subject, such as The Making of the Atomic Bomb by Richard Rhodes. The Manhattan Project was begun after Eugene Wigner and Leo Szillard encouraged Albert Einstein (hardly a rogue's gallery, those three) to write a letter to President Roosevelt advising that the U.S. construct an atomic bomb and warning, with very good reason, that Hitler might soon develop such a weapon. Why, then, wasn't the atomic bomb project simply abandoned when Germany surrendered in May of 1945? Because the war with Japan was projected to last another two years and to cost millions of casualties. Hall's apparent ignorance of the historical circumstances of the Manhattan Project, and of the ethos of total war that made the unthinkable thinkable, leads her to make wild judgments and groundless accusations.

Elsewhere, the level of Hall's argument and analysis reaches that of the finest supermarket tabloids. She tells us that some people in England believe that a pesticide has caused babies to be born without eyes. Who are these people? What is the evidence for this claim? Some people in England also believe that crop circles are caused by space aliens. Without some indication of the grounds for these claims, why should they be taken seriously? Interestingly, Joseph Perkins in the July 7 Constitution persuasively argued that many such claims about the evils of pesticides are considerably overblown.

It saddens me to see that some in the environmental movement have come to show contempt for scientists and for the standards of

scientific argument. It is sad because it encourages the false stereotype of environmentalists, many of whom are distinguished scientists, as tree-hugging fanatics and back-to-nature fanatics. Such is the harm that Lillian Hall's scientist-bashing does to her own cause.

THE END