



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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## NTS News and Events

A mail-in ballot for the January meeting confirmed several important changes in our organization. NTS will soon become a Texas non-profit corporation, with only one class of membership. After incorporation, all present members, both Fellows and Associates will become voting members. Current memberships will be renewed under a new dues structure as they expire. Given the growth in our membership and the expansion of our activities, we think the more formal corporate organization will serve us best.

The following members of the Board of Directors were elected:

John A. Thomas Chair  
Mel Zemek Co-chair  
Mark Meyer Secretary & Treasurer  
R. A. Dousette Newsletter

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## NTS February Program on Shamanism

Prof. Joe Barnhart and Dr. Ray Toledo of the University of North Texas presented our February program on the subject of shamanism.

"Shaman" is a generic term describing non-institutionalized, divinely guided healers or magicians. Prof. Barnhart has long had an interest in shamanistic practice because of his studies of religion and religious movements. He has a special interest in the electronic shamans of present-day America, such as the Rev. Oral Roberts. Dr. Toledo is a medical doctor who has undertaken a study of shamanistic folk healers, particularly in his native Mexico.

These mutual and complementary interests led Barnhart and Toledo to explore the practices of the modern shamans of Mexico. They described their recent investigations in Mexico, and showed videotape of sessions with five healers.

Shamanism is, of course, a pseudoscience at best. But do the shamanistic healers fill a need? Dr. Toledo pointed out that good medical care is not evenly distributed in Mexico. This, coupled with deep-seated religious and magical beliefs among poorly-educated persons, leads many Mexicans to use the services of the shaman. Many consult medical doctors first, and if not satisfied, see the healer. The poorest persons may never even consult a doctor. Some shamans are religious healers, some esoteric in orientation, but most mix a variety of beliefs. Most use what psychologists would call imagery, relaxation and feedback techniques. All understand the culture in which they live and practice, and all touch their patients off and address their fears.

The shamans tend to treat those self-limiting or psychosomatic complaints that fill the offices of the modern general practitioner, and turn away those with obvious acute illness which they sense they cannot deal with.

Dr. Toledo believes that medical science has neglected the social and subjective aspects of healing, and that this is the attraction of the shaman. To say that a complaint is self-limiting or psychomatic does not mean that it is insignificant to the patient. His suffering may be real, and should be dealt with directly.

The audience packed the meeting room and many present had questions or comments. One questioner suggested that shamanistic healing was just as valid as medical healing. Dr. Toledo was careful to make the distinction between the subjective and the objective here. The shaman is doing nothing objectively; everything takes place in the patient's head. The crucial point is that subjective suffering is as real a problem for the patient as the objective organic disorder.

We hope to have Prof. Barnhart return sometime to discuss at length the world of the shamanistic personality in present-day America.

March 19: We take a skeptical look at the Lifespring motivational program in Dallas, which some have called an "urban cult," and others have compared to est and Scientology. Former Lifespring member Karen Thorson will discuss the program's claims, and whether or not scientific evidence supports them.

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## God, Darwin and the Dinosaurs

If you saw the Channel 13 Nova program February 20th on "God, Darwin and the Dinosaurs," you might have recognized NTS member Ron Hastings. Nova included Ron's work on the Glen Rose dinosaur tracks in their program, and concluded with his remarks about creationism and education. If you didn't see it, you missed an excellent program.

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## A Skeptic's Predictions for 1989

by **Tim Gorski**

1. No extraterrestrial spacecraft or aliens will be recovered in 1989, though UFO enthusiasts will insist that the government is continuing to cover up such recovery in the past.
2. James Randi will still be in possession of his \$ 10,000 bounty for proof of paranormal abilities at the end of 1989.
3. An entertainment celebrity will die, another will marry, and another will divorce in 1989.
4. Dan Quayle will prove a source of embarrassment for George Bush in 1989.

5. George Bush will be inaugurated without incident this month and will have a rather difficult first year as president.
6. Congress will enact a pay raise for its members.
7. The price of oil will finish the year no more than 10% changed from the first of the year.
8. The Supreme Court will hand down an important decision concerning abortion in 1989.
9. The Soviet Union will announce a major new peace initiative in 1989.
10. The overall psychic prediction success rate as monitored by the North Texas Skeptics will be worse than the success rate of these predictions by a Skeptic

[Ed. Note- Member Tim Gorski provided us with these predictions before the inaugural, and therefore will get credit for number 5. As for number 6, at least it seemed like a good idea at the time. We hope that Tim doesn't feel too bad, as there's still a lot of room to outperform the TAP seers.)

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## Innumeracy

by **John Allen Paulos**  
**Hill & Wang, N.Y. 1988**

Subtitled "Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences", this engaging little book makes the case that inability to understand and deal with numbers is as crippling as the inability to deal with the written word. Paulos does not advocate a universal education in the calculus and higher analysis; he is concerned with the general helplessness of otherwise educated people in using the concepts of quantity, relative magnitude, fractions, combinations, and probability.

His purpose is not to outline a curriculum (although the alert teacher would find a good place to start), but to explain the simple mathematical skills that anyone can use to grasp meaning from the flood of facts and pseudo~ facts that bear down on us daily. He maintains: "If people were more capable of estimation and simple calculation, many obvious inferences would be drawn (or not) and fewer ridiculous notions would be entertained."

Paulos proceeds by developing entertaining examples of numeracy applied. In the passages on estimation, we are challenged to compute roughly how many watermelons could fit inside the U.S. capitol building, or how long it would take dump trucks to haul away Mount Fuji, or how much human blood there is in the world (surprisingly little). The examples become particularly striking when the author moves into combinations and probability. Here we get tours through stock market scams, tests for AIDS and drug usage, election paradoxes, sex discrimination and many more. The discussion of risk evaluation is especially relevant to life in a technological society.

We learn that a tendency to drastically underestimate the frequency of coincidences is a prime characteristic of innumerates. Paulos explores the problem in a chapter devoted to pseudoscience, delivering an astringent explanation of astrology, parapsychology, predictive dreams, faith healing, and numerology (of course). He shows how fundamental misunderstandings about simple arithmetic, coincidence and probabilities allow the innumerate to be gulled by pseudoscience practitioners (who are usually innumerates themselves).

The author also considers the causes of Innumeracy and puts the blame on poor education, psychological blocks and romantic misconceptions about the nature of mathematics. The issue of poor education is explored at some length. Paulos laments that estimation and informal logic are rarely taught, which tends to weaken the connection in the student's mind between math and real life. Other suspects indicted are dull textbooks, teachers without any math background themselves, and a grim pedagogical attitude that drains the fun out of what is, basically, puzzle-working. Even more troublesome to Paulos are the psychological factors which impede learning, such as the tendency of many people to personalize events excessively and resist the external perspective provided by mathematics. Another is our innate desire to find meaning and pattern in events and attribute meaning to phenomena governed only by chance. By "romantic misconceptions" about math, Paulos means the popular notion that mathematics is cold, rigid and likely to

diminish one's feelings for nature or "spiritual" issues.

This book is fun to read, everywhere instructive, and open to anyone, numerate or innumerate. If most of us understood the simple concepts it explains, our society would be significantly changed for the better. If merely most politicians and news writers understood them, the quality of public debate and decision-making would be dramatically improved.

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## Members Urged to Support Textbook Change

The State Board of Education Will vote March 11 on the proposed protocols for new science textbooks. These new protocols have been written to insure that textbooks thoroughly cover both the essentials of the subject and the methods of scientific inquiry.

Most welcome is the requirement that biology texts cover fully the theory of evolution and its place in the life sciences.

Please consider writing the State Board of Education in Austin or your local state board member to express your support for this rule change. Member Ron Hastings is keeping a close watch on these proceedings and will keep us advised.

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## MEETING SCHEDULE

April 16 - Professor of political science and philosopher-at-large Alan Saxe examines the value of skepticism and speculates on when skeptics should be skeptical of it. Often we need to look at the broader social and political implications of skepticism and scientific rationality. Prof. Saxe promises to give us an entertaining gambol through the Intellectual woods.

1989 Meeting Dates -Topics to be announced In future newsletters: May 21;June 18;July 16; August 20; September 17; October 15; November 19; December 17.

All meetings will be at 2:00p.m., Room 101, University Hall, University of Texas at Arlington (Corner of Cooper and Campus Drive.)

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