



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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## March program looks at Lifespring

Karen Thorson spoke at our March meeting about the Lifespring motivational training program, and her personal experiences with it. Ms. Thorson, now a nursing student, took both the basic and advanced Lifespring courses and was a staff volunteer until becoming disillusioned with the organization and its practices.

Lifespring is a national organization which offers five-day training programs at 16 sites in the U.S., including Dallas. The basic training costs \$450, and consists of five days from 6:00p.m. until midnight of lectures, two-person and group exercises, and guided fantasy. The Lifespring promotional literature states the goal: "Clarifying your commitments and mastering interaction and communication are key to accomplishment in all areas of life."

Lifespring has been criticized for using abusive and dangerously stressful techniques and for creating an urban cult. It has also made its founder and owner, John Hanley, a very wealthy man.

Ms. Thorson described the Lifespring training in detail. The idea seems to be to use emotional stress to break down the participant's resistance to conformity with Lifespring concepts, the foremost being that the only reality is subjective -- everything that happens to a person occurs as a result of his own intentions. This seems to be carried far beyond rational limits. At the end of the training the participant feels that these ideas are coming from within him rather than having been put there by the trainers.

The whole thing has a New Age flavor of radical subjectivity and contempt for critical evaluation of ideas and beliefs. (Questions from the participants about the training are strongly discouraged).

According to Ms. Thorson, Lifespring puts intense pressure on basic course graduates to take the advanced course (\$850) and later to work as unpaid volunteers.

We particularly wanted to know if Lifespring has any validated psychological theory behind its training. Apparently it does not. Nor do the instructors have any particular psychological training.

The evidence is mixed as to whether Lifespring training is dangerous. There are certainly cases of real harm to some individuals, but no good studies that show a high risk to most participants, however stressful the experience may be.

Does Lifespring training do any lasting good? The organization certainly has plenty of testimonials from participants who feel they have been helped in some way by it. There are no studies showing any improvement in participant's functioning in any objective sense. One would think Lifespring might be interested in getting such hard evidence, but it apparently prefers to attract customers by word of mouth, personal testimonials and peer-group pressure.

The meeting was well-attended and questions and answers continued for two hours after Ms. Thorson's talk. Some Lifespring graduates appeared to talk about their experiences pro and con. One satisfied Lifespring customer questioned Ms. Thorson vigorously but basically disputed her interpretation of the purpose and effect of the training rather than how it is carried out.

The subject obviously has legal, ethical and philosophical dimensions besides the scientific questions about validation or risk. We are accumulating a file of published material on Lifespring. Before you sign up, you may want to read it.

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## Pseudoscience or Protoscience?

by Lee Moller

As a skeptic, one can find something to argue about with almost anyone -- even other skeptics. After having participated in more than one such good-natured debate, some patterns of criticism of skepticism emerge. One of the most common criticisms is the question "How can one tell the difference between a pseudoscience and protoscience?" By protoscience, I mean any claim which, as the result of the unguessable verdict of history, will ultimately be viewed as a legitimate field of study. A common example of such a protoscience is continental drift. It was initially rejected or scoffed at by many scientists, but now continental drift and plate tectonics are well established facts. Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this question. Philosophers still debate the issue of "where do you draw the line?" I suspect that there is no way of distinguishing between science and pseudoscience (this is one reason why the skeptic must always be prepared to change his or her mind in the light of new evidence), but there are certain characteristics that most quackeries seem to share. This article will suggest some questions one could ask (not in any particular order) that might help to distinguish between the reasonable and the absurd.

### 1. Has the subject shown progress?

Many pseudosciences have been around for centuries and have progressed little, if at all. Graphology (handwriting analysis) is a good example. There have been several theories of graphology over the last century, and they all work equally poorly. Astrology is a second example. Astrologers hardly even blinked when Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were discovered -- although the "theory" of astrology was supposedly complete before this happened.

### 2. Does the discipline use technical words as 'vibration,' 'frequency,' and 'energy' or phrases such as 'different dimension,' or 'plane of existence' without defining what they mean?

For example, many fringe medicines claim to "balance your body's vital energies." Without appropriate definitions, this statement is meaningless. The most common definition of "energy" is "the capacity to do work." What does it mean to "balance the body's vital capacities to do work?"

### 3. Would accepting the tenets of a claim require you to abandon any well-established physical laws?

For example, if one were to accept astrology, one would be forced to reconsider such well-established physical laws as causality or the limiting speed of light. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. The evidence should be extremely compelling if it is going to convince you to abandon your confidence in modern physics -- a science that clearly has some handle on the truth. Witness the modern-day miracles of laser surgery, superconductivity and the silicon chip, to name a few.

#### **4. Are popular articles on the subject lacking in references?**

How many times have you heard phrases like "a recent study showed conclusively that..." but you can never find out which study or who performed it. On the rare occasions when explicit references are supplied, the references are hopelessly out of date or the data on the study often prove to be unavailable. No legitimate scientist will ever refuse to allow experimental data to be examined.

#### **5. Is the only evidence offered anecdotal in nature?**

Anecdotal evidence (e.g. "A friend of my mother had a dream about her daughter being in an accident...") for paranormal claims is ubiquitous and, in general, worthless. As Arthur C. Clarke once said, "If you've never seen a UFO, you're not very observant, and if you have seen as many as I have, you wouldn't believe in them either."

#### **6. Does the proponent of the subject claim that airtight experiments were performed, and that cheating was impossible?**

Many experiments on psi powers (such as those done of Uri Geller) that were supposedly fraud-proof were laughably transparent to magicians. Even in the presence of a qualified magician, cheating in experiments to test psi powers is never impossible. This leads to the next point.

#### **7. Are the results of the experiments successfully repeated by other researchers?**

It is amazing how, with boring regularity, the psychic powers of mediums or "gifted people" seem to evaporate whenever a video-camera or a magician is present in the room. (Psi researchers call this the "shyness effect;" I call it darn convenient.) Repeatability is a cornerstone of science. Without it, science is reduced to rumor and hearsay. Points 6,7,8 and 9 are, of course, tightly inter-related.

#### **8. Does the proponent of the subject claim that he is overly criticized, or the victim of a conspiracy to suppress his ideas?**

Conspiracies are not impossible, but it is inconsistent to suggest that, for example, the medical community is suppressing a cancer cure when doctors everywhere die of cancer with the same regularity as the man on the street.

#### **9. Is the discipline taught in night-school non-credit courses only?**

Check out local continuing education courses in your municipality. You will probably find courses on channeling, astrology, aura reading and many similar topics.

#### **10. Are the best texts on the subject decades old and available from any store?**

Pseudoscientific "experts" stubbornly continue to refer to out-of-date texts, and ignore the more recent literature that might take a little more time and effort to find.

#### **11. Does the proponent of the claim use what one writer called 'factuals?'**

A factual is a statement that contains just enough science to make it sound plausible. A common factual is to invoke the Uncertainty Principle of quantum mechanics to explain psychic powers, but to ignore those parts of quantum mechanics which disallow such an application. **12. When criticized, do the defenders of a claim attack the critic, rather than the criticisms?**

Such ad hominem attacks are an excellent way of distracting the public from the real issues. There are other characteristics that often crop up, but those mentioned above are some of the most common. This is not to say that just because a certain subject displays one or two of these characteristics, that it is necessarily quackery. But most pseudosciences, at least in my experience, will display most if not all of these qualities simultaneously. In these cases, the verdict of history is almost certain. However, you never know... One day someone might actually see a sasquatch, and perhaps provide concrete evidence of the same, but to date, the number of hucksters and frauds that have been caught cheating provide ample reason to remain skeptical. People can say anything -- and many do.

*(Reprinted with permission of the British Columbia Skeptics. Lee Moller is the editor of the Rational Inquirer, the newsletter of the BC Skeptics.)*

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## Creation/Evolution in the Papers

The *Dallas Times Herald* seems to be one of the few local papers with a clear editorial view of the current textbook debate before the State Board of Education. In a March 19 editorial, the *Herald* said "The Board should unequivocally insist that science be taught in science classes and religious theories be relegated to classes on religion. Mixing the two may be safe, fence straddling politics, but it is bad policy." In contrast to this courageous position, *The Dallas Morning News* so far has published three lengthy pro-creationist comments and only one supporting the scientific position. Of course, we wanted to submit a viewpoint piece and even the odds, but our calls to the *Morning News* offering to do so were not returned. If the *Morning News* editors would occasionally consult their able science writers, the editorial page could only benefit.

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## Meeting schedule

May 21-Professor David E. Dunn speaks on creationism. Prof. Dunn is a geologist and Dean of Natural Sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas. He participated in the Louisiana creation science case which ended up before the U.S. Supreme Court. Hear about the continuing threat which creationism poses to science education.

June 18- Dr. Gordon Green of the Dallas County Health Dept. speaks on medical pseudoscience and AIDS. This lingering and incurable disease has led many sufferers to try what the New Age has to offer. Unfortunately, promises do not often match hopes.

Future Meeting Dates:

July 16

August 20

September 17

October 15

November 19

December 17

All meetings will be at 2:00 p.m.

Room 101, University Hall

University of Texas at Arlington

(Corner of Cooper and Campus Drive.)

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## James Randi Hosts TV Special

James Randi will host a TV program "Exploring Psychic Powers-Live!" on June 7th. It will feature a \$100,000 paranormal 'challenge' and Penn & Teller. Check your TV guide for the time and station.

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## On Coincidence

by John A. Thomas

Bill Ritter's essay in the January Source considers one explanation for precognitive experiences. Ritter suggests that many are caused by unconscious reasoning. He gives examples of people avoiding danger on account of hunches that are really logically justifiable concerns. A good scientist should always be looking for alternative explanations for strange phenomena. Another alternative explanation for precognitive experiences we must consider is chance -- the possibility that the seeming match between a feeling we had and another event is simply a coincidence. If we don't know how often an event would happen by chance alone, then we can't assign it any particular cause, paranormal or otherwise. The need to rule out the explanation of chance is one of the great ideas of modern science. Medicine, for example, would be helpless to evaluate new drugs or treatments without applying this principle.

Suppose we had a "precognitive" dream in which we saw our old friend struggling to escape from the flames of a burning building, and the next day we learned that he and his family narrowly escaped from a fire that destroyed their home in another city. Isn't it so unlikely that we would have this dream at the same time as the fire, merely by chance, that we have to call it precognition? Let's see if we can estimate just how unlikely this coincidence would be. Our calculation will be a rough, back-of-the-envelope estimate, but it may teach us something about chance.

Suppose each of us can remember 20 events from a day: dreams, thoughts, conversations, actions, etc. These 20 events can be paired up in 190 different ways. Some of these matches we would call coincidences because they seem significant to us. Most of the matches would not seem meaningful. We might remember unusual events for a year if prodded with questions. If everyone in the United States were consulted, then we would have 190 matches x 365 days x 240,000,000 people, for a total of about 16 trillion matches. If the odds of a startling coincidence like our dream and fire were only one in a billion, we should expect about 16,000 such coincidences a year in the United States alone! So we see that very strange and startling coincidences do not support the claim that precognition is real, because such matches can easily occur by chance. Not only can they occur, with these odds, they must occur to somebody every year.

The Illusion that a match between two random events is meaningful is natural. Most of us find it very difficult to estimate probabilities. We tend to find meaning and pattern in everything that happens to us and discount the random factors in our lives. Our fallible memories also play a part. We all tend to remember events significant to us and forget those which are not. Our memories are not like photographs. They are constantly being reconstructed and mixed with other memories, emotions, and even fantasies. Unless we keep a detailed record of everything that we see and feel, we are not usually in a position to say that a strange match of two events could not have occurred by chance. It's easy to see something happen, but it's much harder to see something not happen! It's even more difficult to keep remembering things that did not happen (your friend's house did not burn down today, or yesterday, or the day before that...). All these psychological factors are discussed in detail in *The Psychology of the Psychic*, by David Marks and Richard Kammann, a book I highly recommend to those interested in psychic phenomena.

So the argument that a precognitive experience was just too unlikely to be a "mere coincidence" does not impress

skeptics. Is there any kind of evidence that would convince them that precognitive experiences are really knowledge of the future? Yes, there is, but we will have to save that discussion for another article.

[This article was first published In The Source, the newsletter of the Texas Association for Parapsychology.]

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## Budd Hopkins Addresses MUFON

by Tony Dousette

Budd Hopkins, artist, UFO investigator and writer, addressed the March 11, 1989 meeting of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). Mr. Hopkins has written two books, *Intruders* and *Missing Time*, on the subject of alien abductions. His talk concerned new cases of abductions and (presumably) new evidence.

Mr. Hopkins' talk did not live up to its promise. Much of the evidence was anecdotal, ambiguous, or unverifiable. Despite the speaker's claim that he had "new" evidence, he had nothing to say that would not be familiar to those who attended John Lear's talk last year.

The speaker offered several anecdotes about people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens. He related stories of various experiments performed by the aliens and played a tape recording of one hypnotic regression that he had performed on an abductee. While this may be perfectly acceptable to someone who agrees with Mr. Hopkins' position, it is not true evidence or proof.

He does have harder evidence, however. Some abductees have drawn symbols that they have seen in the alien aircraft. Mr. Hopkins uses this "alien" alphabet to determine the veracity of those claiming to have been abducted.

This alphabet is a closely held secret, since Mr. Hopkins realizes that if it were made public, unscrupulous claimants could put one over on him.

His skepticism is indeed commendable. It's ironic, though, that what seems to be his strongest argument can only be accepted by a credulous audience that does not share his skepticism.

The usual array of evidence offered by John Lear and others was also presented by Mr. Hopkins. A number of sketches of aliens and alien craft were shown as evidence of alien existence.

Mr. Hopkins showed slides of phenomena that he claimed were UFO's. He showed slides of small scars on various abductees, and then asserted that these were evidence of alien experiments, i.e., sampling of human tissues. And yet none of this evidence is conclusive.

The sketches prove only the existence of artists of varying degrees of ability. Mr. Hopkins points out similarities in the drawings as an argument for their credibility, as a number of abductees are drawing the same kind of alien. Differences in the drawings, however, are an argument for a number of alien species!

The photos of alien spacecraft are poorly done and ambiguous. Mr. Hopkins admits that some of the photos are actually photos of photos, and this explains their poor quality. It also renders them worthless as evidence.

The scars that Mr. Hopkins shows as evidence of alien experiments could just as easily be acne or pockmarks.

MUFON audiences tend to be a tame lot, and this one was no exception. Most of the questioners supported Mr. Hopkins, and asked only that he expound on points already made.

One member of the audience did ask a critical question:

He asked if Mr. Hopkins' status as a UFO investigator might lead abductees under hypnotic regression to give him the answers that he was looking for. Mr. Hopkins gave a short and inadequate reply to a question that deserved a much better answer.

Mr. Hopkins told the audience of a recent appearance on a talk show where he had been interviewed alongside Carl Sagan. At one point Mr. Sagan asserted that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. The well-prepared Mr. Hopkins immediately replied that extraordinary phenomena require extraordinary investigation. Despite his clever rejoinder, Mr. Hopkins' speech to MUFON represented an evening of extraordinary claims without a single piece of hard, solid evidence for the extraordinary phenomena that Mr. Hopkins promotes.

In addition to addressing the MUFON group, Mr. Hopkins appeared on Kevin McCarthy's KLIF talk show and also conducted a workshop on techniques for those investigating alien abductions. Workshop attendance, per the MUFON bulletin, was limited to "serious investigator(s)... providing they have an open mind. This is for serious investigators only." I did not attend the workshop, as I was convinced, after the talk, that I would not be able to do it and keep a straight face.

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## April Meeting on Value of Skepticism

Professor Alan Saxe spoke at our April meeting on the social and political implications of the skeptical, rationalist attitude. Prof. Saxe is a political scientist at UT Arlington. He had many observations from his years of teaching on the resistance of many students to the critical examination of their own ideas, and how many of them can slip through the modern university (perhaps really a "sophisticated trade school?") without being forced to apply such self-examination. Prof. Saxe also considered the ability of the human mind to build compartments between beliefs, such as the case of the scientist who applies critical rationality in his work but holds to a fundamentalist view of the creation of the world. How much can we expect from people, given human nature, and the pressures and fears of modern life? Perhaps the scientific world-view simply cannot offer certain people feelings of satisfaction and meaningfulness, regardless of its obvious successes. The discussion and questions continued into other interesting areas, which we hope to explore further with Prof. Saxe at some later time.

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## News for Paluxy Creationists -- Sad and Bad

**By Ronnie J. Hastings, Ph.D.**

What appeared at first as being new creationist mantrack claims from the Paluxy River near Glen Rose, Texas, has turned out to be old claims in a new form.

Rev. Carl Baugh and the latest of a long, changing string of supporters, Don Patton, claimed to have long last solved the "mystery" of the "mantracks" that turned out to be elongate dinosaur tracks exposed by Glen Kuban and yours truly. Baugh and Patton announced that there were mantracks inside many of the dinosaur tracks at the Taylor site, the locale of the most famous of creationist "mantracks."

But this is the most documented site along the Paluxy, having been studied by Kuban since 1980 and by me, since 1984.

NTS members Rick Neeley, Scott Faust and Jay Woods have also assisted in researching this site. Baugh and Patton said that not only are Kuban and Hastings right, so was Stan Taylor, the namesake of the site, in the early 1970's. A man literally walked in the steps of bipedal dinosaurs, perhaps for better footing!

Demonstration of the "mantracks" inside the dinosaur's consisted of pouring murky water inside the shallow depressions of the Taylor Trail until the desired length (11.5 inches) was obtained. (This was done in September 1988, when the river bed was almost dry instead of its normal condition under water and debris.) The water pooled in an elongate shape due to the depressions left by eroded infilling material which covered and preserved the original dinosaur tracks. Such depressions were elongate because the dinosaur walked originally in an unusual plantigrade fashion upon its foot bones. Erosion patterns within the infilling material (more easily eroded than the outlying limestone) on some tracks were interpreted as human toe impressions.

The oxidation of this infilling material, recently analyzed as a form of ankerite by a UTA team including Rick Neeley, created the coloration phenomenon which led to the positive saurian identification of the tracks by Kuban and Hastings in 1984. The water technique was both meaningless and obscurantist. Differing amounts of water would produce differing shapes, and the erosional patterns inside and outside the tracks could be fitted to a plethora of desired shapes.

Some "toe" marks have been observed since 1980 with no observer, creationist or not, noticing them as such until Baugh and Patton did so in 1988. Photo records of individual tracks show that some of the new "toe" patterns did not appear until after 1984, some when Baugh's crew hosed the site down with pressurized water.

Those features claimed by Baugh and Patton to be human tracks inside actual dinosaur tracks are the same as those claimed by Stan Taylor and others in the 1970's. The only thing new is that Baugh and Patton repeat these old claims in an admitted saurian context.

Why would Baugh and Patton make such a move, abandoning the "mantrack" sites further upstream with which Baugh began as early as 1982? Could it be that they know how bad these other sites are as well as their creationist and non-creationist critics?

They apparently do not realize how thoroughly documented the Taylor site is; a video of their new claims reveals they do not know their way around there very well, as shown in a forthcoming issue of NCSE Newsletter. Only by covering up features with water or casting materials when the site is dry and accessible can they foist these new claims upon the uninformed. When the site is dry and accessible, anyone can see the saurian features of all the tracks and see the erosional features for what they are. As the UTA Anthropology Club found last fall, observation at the Taylor site is not as good when the river is at its normal depth. These not-so-new track claims make up the sad news for Paluxy mantrack enthusiasts and their supporters.

And now for the bad news for such supporters. Baugh and Patton at the end of February announced that their alleged fossilized human tooth found in June 1987 was from a fish, as had been told them from the very beginning by many scientists, among them this writer. The occasion was the February meeting of the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS) in Dallas.

For almost a year and a half, Baugh and Patton had touted the humanity of the find in no uncertain terms and had done little or nothing to find corroborative evidence, as such a find demands. On the other hand, I had found corroborative evidence that the tooth was that of a fish, some with the assistance of Rick Neeley. Both Rick and Jay Woods were present when I found along the Paluxy a reasonable facsimile of Baugh's "human" tooth in October 1987.

On the evening of the announcement, Rick Neeley, Scott Faust and I were among the small gathering present when Patton attempted to soften the blow by giving a talk on the fact that similarity does not necessarily mean kinship. (Baugh's tooth and my find both look like human incisor crowns.) This is a major point in my report on this whole tooth tale to be submitted for publication in the journal *Creation/Evolution*.

Then both Patton and Baugh wriggled around, speaking, doing damage control, emphasizing how they had been lied to and misled by scientists, and how scientific they had been throughout the whole affair. Patton seemed to imply they were egged on to show these people wrong --what happened to being guided by the evidence?

It apparently took repeated scans of their tooth by an electron microscope and a sectioning of the specimen, revealing non-human features, by a dental expert to make them throw in the towel. Dentists had been used as experts early on to assist the human appearance of the tooth, ignoring scientists who pointed out that dentists do very little comparative study of different types of dentition.

Overtures from creationists watching Baugh's and Patton's tooth claims over the past year and a half, including John Morris from the Institute for Creation Research and some members of the Bible Science Association, indicated that their judgment of the mantrack claims might hinge on the identity of the tooth (I suppose the tooth was seen as some sort of corroborative evidence).

Not only are the mantrack claims shabby in and of themselves (certainly in dire need of any kind of corroboration, I suppose), the tooth claim had to stand on its own.

Compare the hominid skeletal material found in Africa seen as such regardless of the Laetoli hominid tracks found by Mary Leakey. The hominid bones and tracks support each other only after each has stood on its own under scientific scrutiny.

But now, using this creationist logic, will the new mantrack claims (the sad news) be abandoned in the wake of the demise of the "human" tooth (the bad news)? By this logic, they should, but, even better, they should because they, like the tooth, do not hold up under scrutiny.

Are the Paluxy creationists finished by the double whammy of the sad and the bad? Probably not, but it might take them a while to recover. The basic scientific lesson that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence has not been learned among them for several years.

And there does not seem to be a lack of the gullible and uninformed to support Paluxy attempt after Paluxy attempt to ignore this lesson. As if this was not enough, some NTS members are carrying out an investigation into the questionable science degrees claimed by both Baugh and Patton. Stay tuned.....

*Ronnie appended a lengthy bibliography to this article, which we have omitted to conserve space. If any of you want a copy of the article with the bibliography, please write or call.*

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## **Bibliography for Librarians Revised**

The Spring 1989 edition of our bibliography for librarians is now going out to libraries in the north Texas area. The revised edition updates entries, adds international standard book numbers and includes some advice to librarians on how to catalog pseudoscience books, especially creationist ones. Our thanks go to James Rusk for putting this project together and to Tae Kim for diligently researching changes and book numbers. To get a copy, you can send us a self-addressed envelope stamped with 45 cents postage.

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