



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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January/February 1991

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## Board Elections at January Meeting

by Keith Blanton

There will be no program presented at the January meeting of the North Texas Skeptics. We will devote this meeting to the annual election of the members of the board. I talked to NTS President John Blanton about the upcoming meeting. Anyone who is a member of NTS and is present at the election may vote. According to our bylaws, we will elect at least 5 board members, but no more than 9, all of whom will serve a term of one year. The board members will then elect the officers of NTS.

We will also have a general business meeting afterward to discuss our goals and future projects, the newsletter, how we spend our money, or any other matter of business the members want to bring up. If you have any new ideas, proposals, or complaints, please bring them.

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## 1990 Treasurer's Report

by Mark Meyer

Another year has gone by, and NTS is still in good shape financially; in fact, our current standing is the best since I became treasurer in 1988. Our slight decline in membership and subscription renewals was more than offset by new memberships and subscriptions, thanks to our August membership drive, in which we sent information about NTS to subscribers of the *Skeptical Inquirer* in and around the Metroplex. The drive itself, including flyers, envelopes, and roughly \$125 in postage, cost less than \$200, yet produced an excellent return.

A new expense, a tax levied by the state of Texas, came as a result of our incorporation. However, this was offset by the decline in our newsletter publishing expenses, most of which came simply from switching from grey paper to ordinary white. Our bank recently raised its service charge from \$4 to \$6 per month, but that expense declined this year because the balance in our account rose above the service charge minimum.

As we enter 1991, we still hope to expand our membership, but we would also like to keep the members and subscribers we have. Our financial standing is such that we can consider more aggressive projects and research. Any comments and suggestions from our members and newsletter readers are more than welcome. We thank those whose contributions of time, effort, or money have helped NTS grow in 1990, and we look forward to continued success in 1991.

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## CSICOP European Conference - 1991

CSICOP will be holding its next European Conference in 1991 in the Netherlands. It will be hosted by the Stichting Skeptics organization. The tentative date for the conference is the first weekend in October. We are interested in

receiving papers and/ or suggestions as soon as possible so that we can ensure a successful meeting. Please write to:

Stichting Skepsis Att.: Rob Nanninga and Dick Zeilstra Postbus 2657 3500 GR Utrecht The Netherlands .

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## Three Men and a Standee

**By Mike Sullivan, Associate Editor**

### Special to The Skeptic

Somehow, the early morning smalltalk near the coffee machine landed on the subject of the paranormal, and I confessed my skeptical nature and association with the North Texas Skeptics to one of my office mates.

"Do you believe in UFO's?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"I do believe that there are flying objects that go unidentified, but there is no proof that they are alien spacecraft," I replied.

She didn't know what to make of that answer, so she pressed ahead:

"How about ghosts?"

"There's no evidence to support a belief in ghosts," I said. Her eyes widened even more on hearing this comment, and she immediately came back with something that took me by surprise.

"Then I guess you haven't heard about the ghost in *Three Men and a Baby!*"

"Huh?" was all I could manage.

"You know, the movie *Three Men and a Baby*. My mother told me about it. She says there's a ghost in the movie."

After I grabbed my NTS notepad, my friend proceeded to relate the amazing details of this astounding event, as told to her by her mother. Her mother said that the movie was shot in the house of a family whose son had killed himself, and in one of the scenes in the film, the boy's ghost is clearly visible in the background. The crucial scene had been edited out of the theater version of the film, but it was plainly visible in the home-video cut. In fact, she said, the family is trying to stop the producers from selling the video, since it contains the scene with the dead boy.

"What an astonishing story!" I exclaimed. "And you've seen the video with the dead boy in it?" I asked.

No, my friend said, she had just heard about it from her mom.

"So then your mom has seen it?" I pressed, desperate for a source to call to begin my investigation.

No again, my friend confessed. Her mother had also heard it from someone. I was beginning to see a pattern here. Although this would be the first time an honest-to-goodness ghost has been recorded on a film available to the general public, neither she nor her mom had actually seen it, yet they both accepted the story as fact.

Rather than pressing my friend for any more of the details, I decided that this would be easy enough to check out on my own, and I rented the video that weekend from the local rental store. My wife and I had seen the theatrical version of the hit film from Disney in 1987 when it was released, and we would enjoy seeing it again, especially since it should prove beyond any doubt the validity of my friend's mom's friend's story about the poor soul of the troubled lad.

We played the video at home the following night, watching closely for a certain scene which my friend said contained the image of the dead boy. Readers who have seen the movie will recall that it is primarily set in the apartment of three handsome bachelors: an architect (Tom Selleck), an actor (Ted Danson), and a cartoonist (Steve Guttenberg). The surroundings are decorated with wildly eclectic props and furnishings, relating to the three men's occupations. In fact, nearly every scene reveals more knick-knacks the men have amassed.

The astonishing scene unfolds about two-thirds of the way into the film, when Danson's character and his mother in the film have a discussion in the living room. The scene is a two-shot, with the camera framed on the two actors seated on the couch, then widens out as they both stand to walk to our left. As the shot pans left and widens, we see a brightly-lit window in the background of the scene, and just manage to catch a glimpse of the outline of a person standing in the window, silhouetted against the bright sunlight outside. The figure appears only for the shortest moment as the camera and the actors continue to the left, blocking it.

With the aid of the VCR, we were able to view the scene many times in slow- and stop-motion, and it is quite clear that there is what appears to be the outline of a person, perhaps a teenage boy, standing in the window. The shot is quite startling, since viewers aren't expecting anyone else in the scene. We are suprised by the silhouette being in the scene simply because we thought that the two actors were alone in the room.

Well, there it is, I thought. Proof positive of ghosts. Right there in PanaVision, on video from a major studio. Case closed. My friend's mom's friend was right all along. But before I dialed Time Magazine to give them the scoop I was sure they had missed, I decided to watch the rest of the film, just in case any UFO's appeared in the background of other scenes. You never know.

You can only imagine my disappointment when, just a short while later, there is another scene shot in the same room, and centered on the same window where we caught a peek into the afterworld earlier. In fact, Tom Selleck has about a minute-long shot framed in that same window, and the camera gives us a very clear two-shot of Selleck and—get ready—a cardboard cutout photo of Ted Danson!

In fact, the black-and-white "standee" is the same height and shape as the "ghost" we saw just a few minutes ago. Is it possible that this is what we saw in the window earlier, and not the dead boy's ghost? Same window, same

room, same outline, same height, but this explanation is much more prosaic, and would never be the subject of such tantalizing stories heard from the "friend-of-a-friend" (FOAF).

*Three Men and a Baby* was made by a unit of Disney, Touchstone Pictures. I decided to call Disney and see if someone there could cast a brighter light on the silhouette in the video.

One phone call did it. Steve Feldstein in Disney's publicity department quickly gave me the facts as he had done to hundreds of other callers since this hoax started some months ago.

"There is no family, no house, no dead boy, and there is no ghost", Feldstein told me. "The figure you see is a standee, a cardboard cutout of Ted Danson. It appears in another scene in the movie, too, but from a certain angle it does look like a boy", he added.

So I wasn't the first person to call about this hoax? "No! I've been going crazy answering calls for weeks." Any idea how it started? "Search me", Feldstein said. "I only wish I'd thought of it as a PR stunt." Rentals of the video have been going strong ever since the ghost story started making the rounds, he added.

*USA Today* picked up the story a few weeks after my quick investigation and ran a front-page story on it in Section D of the November 16th edition. Thankfully, it was treated critically and totally debunked by their Anita Manning, who also quoted Feldstein.

The article continued into the general topic of FOAFtales, or urban legends, which always seem to be rocketing around the country. Several were discussed in the *USA Today* piece, all debunked, and all with just enough truth in them to sound marginally believable to the uncritical.

As in this case, the stories are usually very easy to check out. The problem is that the people spreading the legend believe them based on the tiny kernel of truth each story is founded on.

In this case, there is a video of *Three Men and a Baby*, and there *is* a silhouette visible in one of the scenes. The rest is pure fabrication, yet the whole legend gains credence from those two tiny facts.

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## "Psychic" Catchings Amuck in East Texas — Still Batting Zero

by John Blanton

During the summer we received a letter from Thomas Taylor of Longview who thought we might be interested in the goings-on reported in the local newspaper, the *Longview News-Journal*. Thomas had written to Barry Karr at CSICOP, also supplying a clipping, and he graciously sent complimentary copies to the North Texas Skeptics and to the Houston Association for Scientific Thinking.

The essence of the story was that a Marshall, Texas, child had vanished last year and, in the absence of any traces or leads, the family had engaged a succession of "psychics" for assistance. The latest of the string was Dallas' own John Catchings, long known to members of NTS. Catchings was retained by two uncles of the child, and after the police had fruitlessly searched a well (acting on another tip), Catchings told them that the child's body was in the driveway of the family's rural home. The child's father gave permission to dig up the driveway, and (you guessed it) John struck out again.

Later Thomas sent us a follow up letter with another clipping detailing the further exploits of the Dallas seer. This time Catchings had the police and trained dogs searching the family property. Again, nothing.

On behalf of the NTS I wrote a letter to the editor of the *News-Journal* pondering the sensibility of allowing a phony seer to direct the activities of trained, professional law enforcement officers. I did not dwell on what I considered the lack of journalistic integrity on the part of *News-Journal* correspondent Gail Beil for treating Catchings' activities as anything but ludicrous. As far as I could tell, Beil considered following the advice of a "psychic" as just as normal as getting weather forecasts from a meteorologist.

A final note of interest: Harry Martin of "America's Missing Children" told Thomas that Catchings was the twelfth "psychic" to be employed by the family.

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## Media Survey

by John Blanton

Television, radio and the newspapers are a constant window into a world that the sane seldom get to experience. What follows are some of my gleanings from 1990:

PSYCHICS LAY OUT THE NEW YEAR [Their predictions boggle the mind.]

I grabbed a copy of the *National Examiner* before they were all gone (actually I paid for it). "Predictions for '91" the headline told. "Pages and pages of hottest prophecies ever!"

Inside, however, the predictions were less than stellar. *NE* had run up a motley gaggle of would-be prognosticators, whose yearly ranting seem aimed more at stretching our credulity than any other purpose. Here is the lineup:

- Terry Schulz: "The New York Psychic who accurately predicted the winners of the last 10 World Series, including the winning four-game sweep of the Cincinnati Reds in 1990..."
- Grace Gentry: "The leading psychic, who won national attention when she accurately predicted the EXACT number of Americans who would vote for George Bush in the 1988 presidential election..."
- Jeannette Greensboro: "The world-renowned psychic, who has successfully helped police find missing persons for the last 10 years..."

- Benjamin Lebrock: "A psychic who accurately predicted the day of the Exxon oil spill in Alaska and the fall of evangelist Jim Bakker..."
- The Rev. Martin Marray: "a priest who specializes in biblical prophecy."
- Tony Leggett: "The *EXAMINER*'s world-famous psychic."
- Clarisa Bernhardt: "The California psychic known as the Earthquake Lady for her precisely-timed forecasts of tremors..."
- Lou Wright: "The Denver psychic, famed for her predictions of air disasters..."
- Adrian Threadgold: "The San Francisco psychic, who predicted the California earthquake, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the fall of Donald Trump..."
- Jeane Dixon: No introduction needed.

Give me a break, readers. I don't recognize any of these names, except Dixon and Bernhardt. And after reading their predictions, I know why I shouldn't remember their names. Any charlatan worth his two-headed quarter wouldn't get downwind of the vast majority of these forecasts. Only Dixon and Leggett have the good sense to cover their backsides with hedging and vagueness. Look at a few sample prophecies that are guaranteed to string their hosts out rather quickly on the end of a very short rope:

"Pat Sajak will announce that he's running for the U.S. Senate. Polls will show the popular Wheel Of Fortune host will win by an amazing landslide" (Schulz). Come on, Terry. Allow for the possibility he might lose.

"Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev will travel to Hollywood to play a role in a new James Bond movie. He'll enjoy it so much he and wife Raisa will buy a house in Beverly Hills near the Reagans, and he'll take more movie roles" (Bernhardt). Give it up, Clarisa. You should have quit last year when you were ahead.

"Vice President Dan Quayle will shock President Bush when he accepts an offer from Gorbachev to become the Soviet Minister of Sports after he stars in a roller-skating display at the Kremlin" (Lebrock). Come to think of it, this is a pretty safe bet.

Those, readers, are the outpourings of rank amateurs. I doubt even Uri Geller would weasel his way out of those predictions. Here follows what you can expect from an old pro from the psychic merry-go-round - Jeane Dixon:

"Zsa Zsa Gabor is destined to be involved in another dustup with the police in California. Happily, the confrontation could lead to a new business venture."

People, that prediction has more Teflon around it than all of duPont. Even Hulk Hogan couldn't get a firm grip on that ball of wax, what with the vast leeway provided by the "destined to" and the "could lead to." And by the way, what is a "dustup" anyhow? Leggett comes in a close second to Dixon in the maneuvering room department. Here is a sample:

"Freak weather will hit the Midwest and parts of the Northeast next fall and bring destruction and upheaval."



**Keep it up, Tony. You're on a roll.**

#### **MY PREDICTIONS FOR 1991?**

- These "psychics" will be unsuccessful at predicting anything worthwhile that anybody else could not have predicted.
- There will be a new set of predictions next year.
- A local Dallas "psychic" will be engaged to help solve a missing person case.
- Pay for high school coaches will go up. Pay for science teachers will be frozen due to budgetary pressures.
- There will be renewed pressure to allow teaching of creationism in the public schools.
- A few hundred people will journey from this country to the Philippines for psychic surgery.
- Robert Tilton will speak to more people and will make more money than Carl Sagan.

I'm on a roll.

#### **GHOST BUSTING**

Got a ghost in residence? Who're you gonna call? "Dear Abby," of course. A Marysville, Washington, woman wrote saying her daughter believes she has a ghost or spirit living in her house. Things get moved and doors open by themselves. What to do?

Abby advised her to call a clergyman (or woman) who does exorcisms. "It may not help, but it can't hurt."

I will not comment.

## GOOD NEWS

Now the good news: The end of the year issue of *The Dallas Morning News* carried the headline in the Today section "The psychics let us down." The follow-up headline on the next page was "Psychic's predictions were duds." Michael Vitez writing for the Knight-Ridder Newspapers did a splendid job dressing down the phonies of the forecasts. I saved a copy for anybody who wants to read it.

## HEALING

Also in *The Dallas Morning News* from last September is "Controversial healing art's popularity alarms Chinese." Nicholas D. Kristof, writing for the New York Times News Service, describes the *qi gong* craze that is resurgent in China. Li Hanxiang looks into the ear of a man who has been lame for 11 years and diagnoses his ailment as well as those of his family. The Commie establishment is naturally cracking down on this, but its popularity continues to grow. Even the Beijing Military Region operates a *qi gong* clinic.

## AS SEEN ON TV

If you want to see prime Skeptic John Thomas, just switch on your set. John was interviewed last January on a local cable channel, and we have a tape of the interview for those who want to see it. The interview that John gave Channel 8 in connection with a story on psychics was shown recently on that channel.

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# Mims Out at *Scientific American* — Blames Religion

by John Blanton

Forrest M. Mims III, who most recently wrote the Amateur Scientist column of last June's issue of *Scientific American*, is out since they discovered he is a committed creationist. Mims talked to the Houston Chronicle and to the Wall Street Journal, and that's when the watermelon hit the fan. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, in a letter to SA, asked them not to use religion as a basis for publication, and the ACLU has taken up his case. That was where the matter stood the last I heard of it.

*The Skeptic* editor, Keith Blanton, was able to tape record an interview with Mims on the CNN show "Crossfire," and he has made the tape available to interested viewers. Contact Keith at one of the NTS meetings if you want to borrow the tape. Appearing in the interview with Mims was NCSE Director and CSICOP Fellow, Eugenie C. Scott. The interview was moderated by conservative Cal Thomas (substituting for Pat Buchanan) and by liberal Mike Kinsley (of New Republic).

The interview was an unfortunate episode for Mims. Although the show's format did not allow for a decisive debate on the issues, and Mims was not pressed hard to validate his creationist views, he none-the-less was able to do damage to his cause in the amount of time he had available.

Mims' greatest damage was done when he attempted to have it both ways. He claimed that SA canned him because of his religious views, yet he alternately insisted that creationism was based on science and that his beliefs were motivated by religion. He gave the appearance of a man trying to manage a canoe with a ping-pong paddle. Mims brought his next worst problem on himself when he tried to fend off comparisons of creationism to other forms of pseudoscience. Kinsley had obviously done his homework (unusual for a journalist) and pressed Mims for his opinion as to whether SA should be required to hire a writer who believed the earth was flat or who believed that the sun revolved around the earth (a matter that was apparently seriously discussed at a previous creationist conference). Mims tried to sidestep the issue entirely by claiming he had never heard of people believing the earth was flat. He further disclaimed of previously hearing of Eugenie C. Scott. Bad move! Check and double-check. A creationist professing to be a scientist and not knowing of Scott is like a chicken not knowing about Colonel Sanders.

Mims further claimed that the SA editor had quizzed him about personal religious beliefs concerning abortion (and possibly other issues). Kinsley readily conceded that this was a damning blow to the SA case and tried to keep the interview steered to the matter of science versus creationism. Mims, knowing where his strengths and weakness lay, tried to keep the focus on this and other matters not related to the legitimacy of creationism.

Also of interest were the interchanges between Thomas and Scott. Thomas had come to do battle for the cause of religious fundamentalism and continually attempted to link creationism with proper religion. [Are there any conservatives out there who are not creationists? If so, please call me immediately.] Thomas pulled out the old reliable "Which of the three theories of evolution do you think is correct?" attack in an attempt to put Scott on the defensive. If she answered, "I do not know," (which would have been my answer, because I didn't know there were three theories) then Thomas could have countered, "Then why do you want to teach evolution in the schools if you don't know which theory is the right one." Scott blunted that thrust as well as could be done in the time allowed by the interview, and, in general, she got in some good words for legitimate science and for CSICOP.

In all, it was enjoyable to watch the interchange and to get a close look at the man in the center of this minor tempest. I went into this wanting to root for a guy who was trying to do a good job despite some wacko notions about science, but I came away with the feeling that here was someone lacking the sincerity of a real scientist. Mims should not do any more interviews, but should let the ACLU do his talking for him. He should also take some lessons from Richard Nixon on how to make a convincing public appearance.

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# What Is Skepticism?

by Keith Parsons

(Reprinted with permission from the January 1990, *Georgia Skeptic*)

Skepticism has a bad name among philosophers. Indeed, the effort to establish secure foundations for knowledge — foundations impervious to the corrosive influence of skeptical doubts — can be seen as the definitive project of modern philosophy. This self-definition can be traced to Descartes, for whom skepticism was the demon that had to be exorcised so that true knowledge (which Descartes identified with absolute certainty) could be achieved.

Nowadays, in the so-called "Post-Modern" era, philosophers are distinctly less interested in the quest for absolutely sure and secure foundations for knowledge. Indeed, many philosophers are actively anti-foundationalist; they regard the search for such foundations as a wild goose chase — an intellectual boondoggle that has wasted more time and talent than was ever lost on alchemy or astrology. However, some Post-Modern, anti-foundationalist

philosophers are no friendlier to skepticism than were their foundationalist predecessors. Indeed, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose later writings constitute perhaps the most important dissent from the foundationalist project, argues at length against skepticism.

Does this mean that those who characterize themselves as skeptics are at odds with practically the whole of Modern and Post-Modern philosophy? Not necessarily. "Skepticism" is, of course, a very vague term. The sort of skepticism attacked by philosophers from Descartes to Wittgenstein is universal in scope. It brings into question the possibility of knowledge in general. All knowledge claims are regarded as doubtful.

Such universal skepticism, as Wittgenstein points out, is self-defeating. To doubt requires grounds for doubting. That is, if my doubt is to be rational, when I doubt that something is so there has to be a reason why I doubt it. For instance, I might doubt the existence of UFO's for the reason that I regard the evidence for their existence as inadequate. Hence, to doubt UFO's I must believe something else, namely, that the evidence for UFO's is inadequate. But a skepticism that attempts to undermine all beliefs would not permit me to have beliefs about the inadequacy of the evidence for UFO's and thus would deny me of any grounds for doubting their existence. Thus, if we set out to doubt *everything*, we quickly discover that we thereby remove the grounds for doubting anything!

It is therefore impossible to bring *all* of our beliefs into question at once. Beliefs are like the planks of a ship at sea. We can remove a plank and repair it so long as the other planks are left in place. But if we try to remove all of the planks at once, we drown. Likewise, any belief can be subjected to skeptical scrutiny, but only if, for the time being at least, all our other beliefs are left in place.

If universal skepticism is therefore a dead end, what sort of skeptics should the Georgia Skeptics be? I think that the Georgia Skeptics practice the sort of skepticism that is typically deployed within the natural sciences. For science to progress, two contrasting attitudes must flourish within the scientific community. First, there must be an attitude that encourages imagination, that applauds bold new ideas, that stimulates the framing of ever-more comprehensive and innovative theories. Second, and equally important, there must be a rigorous skepticism with respect to all new ideas, i.e., such ideas must not be accepted until they have passed the most stringent tests that scientists can devise. It is this scientific sort of skepticism that the Georgia Skeptics regard as sadly lacking in the current intellectual milieu.

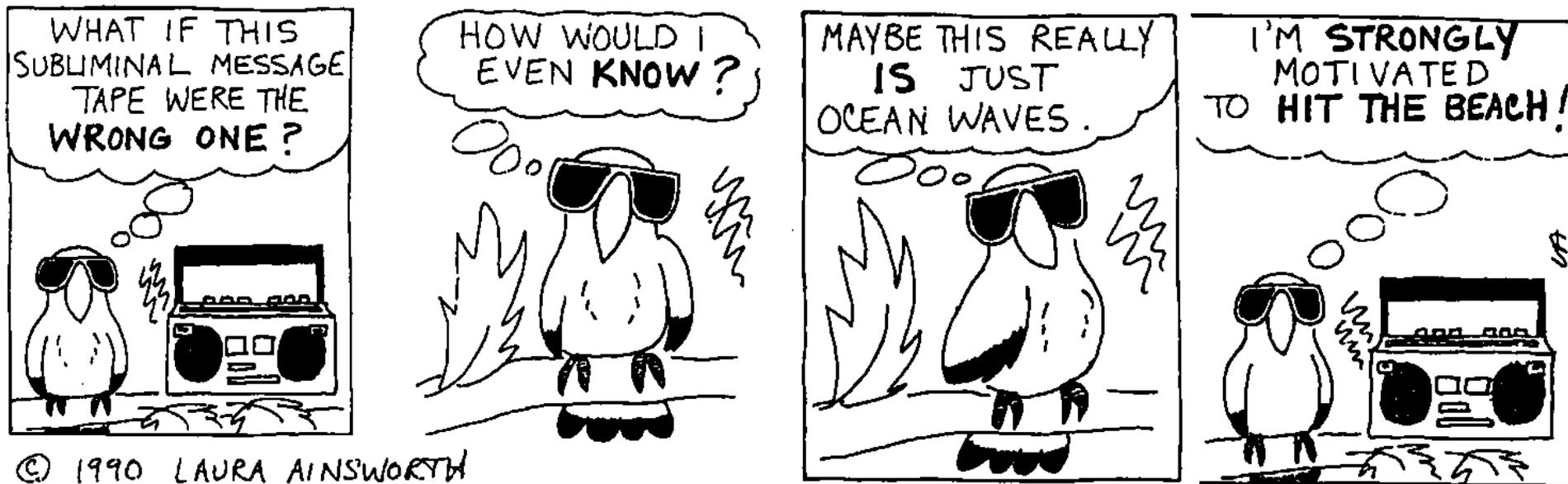
Scientific skepticism does not endeavor to doubt all things. Indeed, scientific skepticism rests upon a rather large body of assumptions. One such assumption is that there exists an objective, determinate natural world that is not entirely created or controlled by us. That is, it assumes that there is some "way that things are" that transcends our theories and which we have a responsibility to try to express or represent in those theories. Only such an assumption can justify the demand for rigorous tests, since the purpose of such tests is to let nature have a say in theory selection. It follows that scientific skepticism is diametrically opposed to New Age relativism: the sort of pick-your-own view of reality that lets, say, reincarnation be "true for me" while something else might be "true for you."

Since we are dealing with fundamental metaphysical assumptions here (I don't think the existence of an objective, unitary "way that things are" can be proven), what can we say to those who make the different assumption and affirm many "realities"? Nothing, so long as they are consistent. So long as Shirley MacLaine only claims that reincarnation is "her reality" (whatever that means), there isn't much the scientific skeptic can say. But if she starts to tell us that reincarnation is true — that it is not just real for her, but is real, period — then scientific skepticism can be deployed. Inevitably, the New Agers (and relativists in general, in my view) slip from talking about their "reality" to reality. They start off modestly claiming only to express what is real for them but wind up dictating what is real. Hence, there is little doubt that there will be need for scientific skepticism for the foreseeable future.

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## Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth



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