



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Dallas Morning News astrology story gaffe draws exec editor's apology

By Mike Sullivan

Critical thinkers across the Metroplex were stunned to see the full-page astrological predictions story plastered across the front of the July 7 edition of the Dallas Morning News' Today section. The piece, written by New York astrologer Fredericka Fairchild, gave no-brainer predictions for the [then] three presidential candidates, and was accompanied by color astrological charts for each man along with their photograph. To compound the insult to their reader's intelligence, The News even billboarded the astrology piece on page 2 of the news section in the political coverage roundup box!

As The Skeptic's Pat Reeder recounts in his column in this issue, the bulk of the piece contained nothing more than fuzzed-up details of each man's biography, which can be lifted straight from the advance press kits given out to reporters. As usual, the truly astonishing events that actually transpire in the real world were not predicted: Fairchild gave no hint, for example, of Ross Perot's sudden non-candidacy, which occurred just 11 days after her consultation with the cosmos.

One of the people who was astounded by The News' lack of editorial judgment for giving astrology such a large play was NTS member and technical advisor John Thomas. With encouragement from News columnist Steve Blow, who, along with other News staffers, was also dismayed by the paper's treatment of the story, John wrote the following letter to News editors:

"I was appalled to see the lengthy astrological analysis of the major presidential candidates in Today. Did The National Enquirer recently purchase The News?"

"I assume your editors know there is no scientific evidence to support astrologers' claims that they can assess personality or predict the future. I assume they know that many people believe astrology works for them, because they subjectively interpret advice that fits their biases, and reject that which does not. Why, then, did you publish this tribute to

superstition and ignorance?

"I realize editors believe it alright to print lies so long as they appear in the features section, because "it's only entertainment." But you don't identify this story as entertainment; in fact, your political coverage in the front section directs the reader to it. Giving credibility to astrology only encourages the already relentless debasement of political thought in this country.

News Response:

John's letter hit the desk of *News* executive managing editor Bill Evans, who wrote back with the following apology:

"Dear Mr. Thomas:

"Thank you for your note copying me the letter you wrote regarding concern about the astrologer's look at three presidential candidates. It is the policy of this newspaper that all letters from readers pertaining to news reports are shared with the news department by the editorial department.

"The report on the *Today* front page was overblown and should have been qualified with an explanation of astrology, the individual making the forecast and the purpose, which was to inject a little humor into the political report without trivializing it.

"From your comments and several others we failed on this point. We should have, as you suggest, made clear that this was not intended to be a part of our political coverage. We referred to it from our regular reports on politics only in the hope that it would provide some offbeat relief for some political readers.

"I apologize for misleading you and others. We will exercise greater care in the future."

John's letter was slated to appear in the July 19 edition of *The News*, according to Evans.

So, strike a minor "win" for critical thinking and the power of the pen. The apology letter from Evans won't be published except in these pages, and comparatively few people will see John's letter in the Sunday Reader section of the paper compared to the tens of thousands of *News* readers who were assaulted with the original wish-upon-a-star story that got front-page play.

Dallas has the unfortunate distinction of being the largest city in the nation to be served by only one major daily newspaper. That means that its readers must act as one of the only checks on the content of the paper, and readers like John Thomas and other NTS members and supporters will need to keep the vigil for science and reason, since even *News* editors can't always be trusted to do so.

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What's old

Commentary By John Blanton

Credulity in the media, that's what's old. Where do I start?

Karen Denard of KERA-FM called me. She thought my discussion of the Gerson therapy ([The Skeptic](#) , July 1992) was out of line, and she wanted to discuss it on her Friday night program. NTS Technical Advisor Tim Gorski called in on the open line segment and discussed Gerson with her. Karen was indignant that I was "sneering" in my references to Gerson (the therapy, not the person).

I ask you: was I sneering?

All right, all right. I've apologized.

More recently, someone made some home video of a moving light in the night sky over Plano and presented it to Channel 4 as "unknown" at least and ET at best, so the station aired it a couple of nights and in the morning (the Democratic National Convention was on at the time, so news was scarce). However, even MUFON spokesman Melinda Chance refused to claim it positively as an ET. NTS President and technical advisor Joe Voelkering was asked the next day by Channel 4's Steve Stoler to help identify the object that had been burning up TV air time. Joe is a pilot and aviation accident investigator, so he has done a lot of looking at the sky and at aircraft, which is what he told Channel 4 they were looking at again.

That reminds me. Channel 4's network, CBS, is running a UFO series. I must make a point to watch it next time.

Want to know what the future holds for Ross and Bill and George in this year's elections? *The Dallas Morning News* has the answer with a big write-up in the Today section by "professional astrologer" Fredericka Fairchild. For Ross Perot in July: "Public approval rises and the press attacks." How about that? She nailed it. If Fairchild ever decides to turn amateur, watch out.

Today editor Terri Burke told me she ran the feature for fun. It was, Terri. *Editor's note: See the Letters section of this issue for more of Dr. Gorski's comments about last month's Gerson Therapy story.*

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Letters to the editor

To The Editor:

John Blanton's comments concerning the claims of the Gerson Institute (Eat Your Veggies!, [The Skeptic](#), July 1992) fell short of his usual insightful skepticism. I was surprised, for example, at how readily he accepted the Gerson claim that a strict vegetarian diet constitutes "eating right." And I can only hope that he was being sarcastic when he referred to the "medical theory behind Gerson Therapy."

The fact of the matter is that the Gerson Therapy is medical quackery and the rationale offered in its support is pseudoscience. There just are no principles of human nutrition to the effect that a completely vegetarian diet is generally better than one that includes lean meats or that organically-grown produce is superior. Gerson promoters are engaging in nutrition terrorism, pure and simple. In addition, much of the Gerson Therapy involves pressing the juice from vegetables and throwing away the dietary fiber.

As for the Gerson Institute's medical claims, there is no reliable evidence whatsoever that tends to justify them. Gerson promoters rely entirely on anecdotes, testimonials, and their dogged insistence that the American diet is tainted with unspecified toxins that cause disease and that the Gerson diet "works" by regenerating and healing the body.

Yet Max Gerson, for all the regenerating that he had the benefit of, died just the same, like everybody else. And although at the time he devised his nonsensical ideas about diet few had as much as an inkling about the importance of the immune system, much less AIDS, Gerson promoters are confidently hawking their books and videos to those infected with HIV.

Indeed, Gerson's is a scam that doesn't even have the humility to stick to one or a few related diseases. No, it's a panacea that's "curing the incurables." But what Gerson means by "incurable" is not really what you might think. Anybody with cancer at any stage is an "incurable" to them, as is anyone with a chronic illness.

Never mind that some cancers are now detected so early that the diagnostic biopsy is itself definitively curative in some cases. And never mind that a cancer or other disease that's often aggressive and associated with poor five-year survival

rates still does leave a few long-term survivors with conventional treatment. Even a 99% death rate still leaves a few survivors, though it wouldn't be sensible to be optimistic at the outset. And any physician who manages patients with chronic disease can tell you that the severity of symptoms naturally fluctuates over time.

The Gerson Institute is also quite clearly engaging in tactics designed specifically to get around U.S. consumer protection laws if it restricts itself to "free speech" activities in this country while referring and treating people with its diet and enema routine in Mexican border clinics. Would it be any more ethical to hold seminars and sell books and tapes about killing people but then take would-be assassins out on the high seas to actually arrange contract killings?

The analogy isn't so far-fetched inasmuch as the Gerson Therapy tends to entice fearful cancer victims, even those who have a chance at a complete cure with conventional methods, into delaying or forgoing effective medical treatment. And the Gerson Institute is just as willing to take on the children of deluded adults as the adults themselves. Meanwhile, Gerson promoters appear to be doing very well for themselves: making a steady killing in cash from its victims.

Tim Gorski, M.D.
Arlington
NTS Technical Advisor

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The disappearing dowser

Skeptic's Six Grand Safer Than In A Texas S&L

By Mike Sullivan

The Skeptic readers may recall the invitation extended by three NTS members to Dallas dowser Bette Epstein, asking her to prove her incredible claims under controlled conditions. Although she declined, she informed us that her nine-year old daughter Cassie was interested in the cash award (see The Skeptic, Letters to the Editor, for March 1992 and April 1992).

I wrote back at once, letting Bette know that we would be only too happy to submit Cassie's alleged dowsing powers to a controlled test, and we included a copy of our standing [paranormal challenge](#) instructions (reproduced on opposite page).

Shortly thereafter, Bette sent along a brief hand-written note. In it, she says:

"This is Cassie's official acceptance of the dowsing challenge. When I return [from a trip overseas], we can work out the details. Cassie can dowse 'on site' for lost items, or from a map. I feel map dowsing would be the easiest to control from both sides. We need a neutral person to help with setting up the test. The way map dowsing works is to need to find something (anything except an animal) in an area. Give Cassie a map of the area & she can find whatever it is."

In a telephone conversation a few weeks later, I tried to get Bette to tell me *exactly* what Cassie can or can't do and what she would consider a fair test. For example, had Cassie ever participated in a controlled test before? No, Bette told me. Can Cassie find things that are intentionally hidden, or only items that have been lost? Bette said that Cassie could find anything, but that Cassie didn't really "work at her dowsing ... she just plays with it."

How Small Is Too Big?

Bette told me that at their meetings with other dowsers, Cassie is able to find buried objects in an area about the size of a baseball infield after dowsing over a map of the site. I told her that I could probably do the same without claiming any dowsing abilities. I think anyone with good eyesight shouldn't have much trouble finding a recently buried object in a

such a small area, I said.

As to the map dowsing, I asked if Cassie would be able to dowse a map of North Texas and precisely locate and then produce a hidden item anywhere in the Metroplex. Bette admitted that Cassie had never done anything like that, and she thought a much smaller area would produce better results.

I then asked if a square block of downtown Dallas was a small enough area, and whether Cassie could find an item hidden there after dowsing over a map of the city. Bette said that wasn't the type of thing Cassie was claiming, either.

How about if I hid something in a public place inside the Infomart, the seven-story office building where I work? Could Cassie find it for me, after dowsing over the extremely detailed computer-generated architectural diagrams for each floor? Again, Bette said she didn't think Cassie would be comfortable with a test like that.

We finally decided that Bette and Cassie need to do some more thinking about what Cassie can do and try to put a specific, quantifiable claim down on paper and then get back in touch with us. Once Bette and Cassie had a clear, precise idea of what Cassie claims she can do, we'd be very eager to meet with them to design a test protocol. I told her I felt that we as the challengers don't want to dictate the type of stunt we want Cassie to perform, since we want to give her every opportunity to succeed without compromising the test conditions.

Would you be at all surprised to learn that I haven't heard from Bette or Cassie since then? Bette and Cassie have either decided they don't want our \$6,000 anymore, or that they really can't tell us exactly what it is they can do. It's a shame, too, because \$6,000 would be a very nice addition to Cassie's college fund -- that is, if she can prove that she can do what her mom says she can do.

Our Money Is Still Where Our Mouth Is

The \$6,000 cash prize is still waiting to be paid out, to Cassie Epstein, her mom, or anyone else that can prove any paranormal effect under controlled conditions. John Blanton, John Thomas and I are confident in our belief that our money is very safe indeed, and we invite others to join with us as signatories of the challenge. Each of us is in for \$2,000, and we'd love to have the support of other critical thinkers with pledges of any size. Please contact us if you are interested in adding your support to our public challenge.

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The third eye

by Pat Reeder

Those wacky space aliens have had a very busy, yet politically disappointing month.

Remember how we reported last month that Ross Perot showed every sign of being a space alien? That story, incidentally, was picked up from [The Skeptic](#) and run by the Associated Press. From that point on, things got even stranger on the Perot-alien front.

It all began when the *Weekly World News* tabloid printed a front-page photo of Ross Perot meeting with a big-headed alien. This was the very same alien that they had shown meeting with President Bush just a year before. Apparently, the alien is from the Planet of Disgruntled Republicans, and he asked someone to "take me to a REAL leader!" The WWN breathlessly reported that the alien met with Perot for two hours, discussing technology exchanges and future interplanetary trade deals. It was your typical hilarious tabloid malarkey, and that seemed to be the end of it.

But a week later, President Bush was handed a copy of the tabloid at a press conference and asked to comment. Bush feigned indignation, and said, "This is not fair! ... I told him, I said, 'If I'm going to meet with you, never discuss it.'" Then he grumped, "I thought he was for me all along and there he is" with Perot. (A note to MUFON members: He was

joking. You know ... a joke?)

The Associated Press and the major networks picked up the story and for a day at least, aliens made headlines. Unfortunately, those spoilsport mainstream reporters have a tendency to ask embarrassing questions that a good tabloid reporter would never bring up. They had the gall to ask why the alien's height matched both Bush's and Perot's in the two photos, when Bush is 6-foot-2, and Perot is 5-foot-6. Well ... maybe they wanted Perot to help them figure out why they're shrinking!

Of course, that's not the end of the story. Just two weeks later, Perot suddenly withdrew from the race. Did the aliens know this was coming? Is it possible that a race of superintelligent beings from another galaxy got snookered in by Ross just like Willie Nelson did? Or is it possible that the aliens had something to do with his abrupt adios? His explanation for pulling out sounded pretty lame. Could it be that he knew the alien he had been photographed with ... the same alien he was considering as a running mate, having run out of Earthlings to consider ... was involved in some bizarre scandal? Was he photographed by a tabloid reporter while having sex with a gas pump?

Alas, we may never learn the full truth. But enquiring minds want to know!

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At least we know that the aliens aren't grieving too much about Perot's departure. Check out the new Miller Lite beer commercial. It begins with glowing saucers zipping through the sky and blowing some cars off the road, <133> la Close Encounters of the Third Kind. The drivers sneak up the hill, peer over the ridge ... and there are big-headed, spindly-bodied aliens in jams and bikinis, drinking Miller Lite and boogieing down. At the end of the ad, we cut to daytime. Hand-held news cameras show the stunned witnesses, and we pull back to reveal a huge crop circle in the shape of the Miller Lite logo!

Now you might just dismiss this as an extremely clever parody commercial ... but look at it from the viewpoint of a UFO believer. The aliens depicted match the descriptions given by alien abductees under hypnosis ... and no human being could possibly create such an elaborate crop circle.

Two possible conclusions: the ad executives have been abducted by aliens and their experience is surfacing subconsciously ... or, the aliens really do get off on Lite beer.

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The Dallas Morning News is to be commended for raising the level of political discourse and helping to create a more informed electorate. On July 7th, the paper devoted three pages of its Today section to charting the horoscopes of George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot. Astrologer Fredericka Fairchild wrote the three lengthy articles, which were filled with startling revelations about the candidate which could only be revealed by the stars, to wit:

- George Bush's career cycle peaked in 1988, he's feeling some strain and exhaustion, and if re-elected, will face tough problems with the economy.
- Bill Clinton was born under conditions "best defined as probationary" (uh-oh!), his early years were ridden with family crises and emotional upheaval, and in August, his opponents will attack him by bringing up all his old scandals.
- Ross Perot is single-minded, family-oriented, secretive, and lucky with money.

Wow.

On the very few occasions when the astrologer left the safety of the candidates' biographies and ventured into future predictions, she was proven wrong within three weeks. For example, she predicted strife and chaos for Clinton during the Democratic Convention (usually a darn safe bet), and said that Perot's political future would be decided in August.

He was out of the race by mid-July. This proves that if you want inside dope on the dopes running for president, forget about the stars and just check with the aliens.

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Infomercials are home to all sorts of ridiculous claims, so it's only natural that there is now an infomercial pushing psychics. I landed on it by accident while changing channels and couldn't tear myself away. It's an infomercial for something called the Psychic Friends Network, a telephone psychic advice operation whose hook is that they're not just strangers doing cold readings over the phone ... they're your friends! And they're psychic! And they only charge \$3.99 a minute to talk to you! Seems to me if they were really my friends, and they were really psychic, they'd call me, but never mind.

Like most infomercials, it's filled with wild, unsubstantiated claims, but this one is worse than most. I only caught about half of it, but I didn't even see them attempt to do a demonstration of psychic powers in front of the studio audience. That would have been simple enough to fake, but they took an even easier route: the "psychics" themselves told us anecdotes about how their amazingly accurate visions helped their caller "friends," and we saw these events realistically dramatized by semi-professional actors. Not very convincing. They could have at least rubbed a psychic on the hood of a Rolls Royce, then set him on fire.

But these reenactments and self-serving anecdotes seemed to be proof enough for the show's host, Dionne Warwick. That's right, Ms. "Déjà Vu" herself! She seems to be quite a believer in the paranormal. She has admitted that during a career slump in the 1970s, she added an "e" on the end of her last name, on the advice of a numerologist ... or maybe it was Dan Quayle who suggested it. Either way, this kept her from having thirteen letters in her name and revitalized her career (having her new material written and produced by Barry Gibb had nothing to do with it).

Anyway, Dionne swears that her psychic friends have helped her with wonderful career advice. Considering that it's been so long since her last hit that she's reduced to doing this for a living, she might want to hire some new friends. Or at least tack that "e" back onto her name.

Check out the infomercial for yourself. You'll find it in your *TV Guide*, listed under "Paid Program." Come to think of it, maybe you'd be better off calling a psychic to ask when it's running.

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Speaking of psychics on TV, David Letterman recently ran a filmed segment in which he visited with a "pet psychic" ... no, not a psychic who walks around on a leash, although that might not be a bad idea. She mentally communicates with people's pets. Dave let several staff members bring pets to her for readings. We discovered that one staffer's parrot was worried about ceiling fans, that goldfish need quiet time, and that another staffer's pet dog would really enjoy dressing up like Batman. Okay, I can accept that ... but if the dog ever wants to dress up like Catwoman, get him to a pet psychiatrist immediately!

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Here are a couple of items from the weird world of showbiz, courtesy of *Entertainment Weekly* magazine ...

- It appears that the British rock band, The Cult, has angered the Great Spirit. The band used a wire photo of a Sioux Indian boy from South Dakota on an album cover, then showed the photo enveloped by fire in a rock video. The boy's parents, who never gave the band permission to use the photo, say their tribe believes that burning a picture of someone curses that person to death. They claim that their son, who is now eleven, is so terrified that he refuses even to leave the house by himself. So they're suing The Cult for \$61 million. Apparently, according to

the medicine man, the curse can only be lifted by the application of 61 million pictures of dead presidents.

- Also, *EW* television critic Ken Tucker recently gave a pretty good review to NBC's *Unsolved Mysteries*. The high marks were based on the crime stories and Robert Stack's hilariously stentorian narration. But Tucker properly balked at the show's supernatural segments, known as "The Unexplained." He pointed out the fatal show in these stories: overproduction. For instance, in one story about UFOs, the witness said he saw "four disc shapes" in the night sky. Tucker wrote, "The reenactment of this made the discs look as boldly flying-saucerish as anything in the movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Watching and believing *Unsolved*, you'd be convinced that UFOs were among us; this mystery looked anything but unsolved." Amen, brother. The only unsolved mystery is, do the people who produce this rubbish actually believe it themselves?



Talk about your public services! If you happen to see Bigfoot lurking about, you no longer have to pay a psychiatrist to listen to your tale. You can now call the friendly folks at the Bigfoot Hot Line to report your sighting. It's all a free service of the Crytozoology Department of the Pennsylvania Center for UFO Research in Philadelphia. From 1980 through 1989, the sympathetic phone counselors logged 101 sightings of the tall, smelly one. They say that July and August are the heaviest months for Big Foot sightings, probably because so many more people are out in the woods (and so many of them bring kegs of beer along ... which is also known to attract aliens).

If you've spotted Big Foot yourself, you can share the experience by calling 800-322-8360 ... that's right, it's toll free! But before calling, please make sure that what you saw really was Big Foot, and not just a lost Jerry Brown delegate wandering in the wilderness.



Finally, according to the *New York Times*, Ronald DeFeo, the man convicted of killing his family and starting the legend of the "Amityville House," is hoping for a new trial. He claims that his sister really committed most of the murders, but his lawyer talked him into taking all the blame and pleading insanity, just so they could sell a phony "haunted house" story to the movies and split a bundle of money.

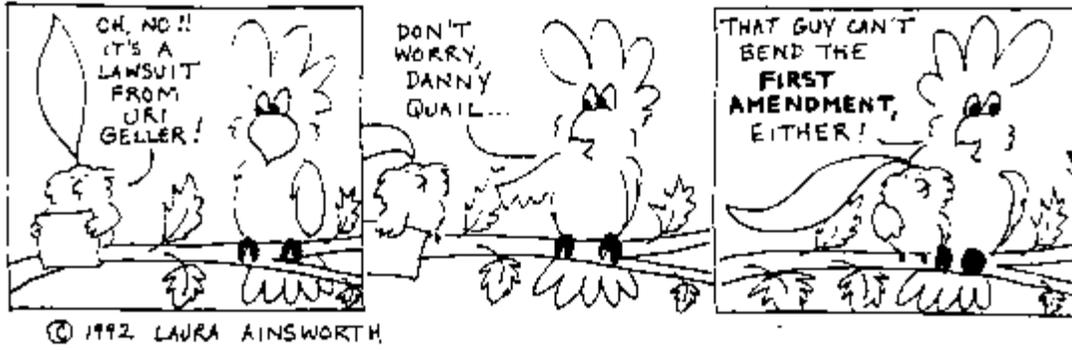
DeFeo claims that he and his lawyer took ordinary events as inspiration and put a supernatural spin on them to make the house seem haunted. For example, he remembered seeing a cat at the window once, so he said he had seen a snarling pig with red eyes. He said he also accidentally splashed spaghetti sauce on the wall ... but in the book and movie, this became a "wall oozing green slime."

No word yet on whether he'll get a new trial, but chances are good that he'll never have his own line of celebrity spaghetti sauce.

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Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth



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