



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Randi Writes

Three Open Letters from James Randi

(Editor's note: The following three open letters from conjuror, debunker, author and former CSICOP fellow James Randi were received over the Internet computer network. They relate some recent developments regarding Uri Geller's various lawsuits against Randi, CSICOP and others, and some of Geller's latest claims. We reprint them here verbatim.)

April 5, 1993

The incredible Uri Geller never ceases to further stretch the gullibility of his devoted fans. Last week's edition of *Psychic News* in the UK chortled over the "justice and vindication" granted the "leading Israeli psychic" by a Tokyo court, along with the "awarded damages." Unmentioned was the embarrassing amount of that award, and the even more devastating fact that an Hungarian court awarded Geller just \$25 in a similar case he brought in that country. Nor did *Psychic News* regale its readers with the \$106,000+ that Geller must pay CSICOP by the 15th of this month. Can't wait to announce the result of that adventure.

What really boggles the mind, however, among all the misleading and simply wrong details in the *Psychic News* story, is the claim by Geller that he "now believes he has found . . . the Holy Ark of the Covenant." I suggest that Geller has been watching too many Harrison Ford films of late.

The *Psychic News* story quoted Geller as hoping that "last month's verdict in his favour would be the first in a series of such judgements which would 'set the record straight.'" He can believe me when I say that I, too, want to set the record straight. We just have different notions about "straight."

Will there ever be a claim preposterous enough to dismay Geller's disciples? No, though he's trying hard for that goal. There was the flying saucer named "IS," the giant Hawk-god Horus who spoke English, bringing the astronaut's camera back from the moon, stopping Big Ben, repairing Russian satellites by psychokinesis, and now he's bringing us the Holy Ark of the Covenant. I ask you, where would we be without him?

JR

April 15, 1993

In a libel case brought by Mr. Uri Geller against Prometheus Books, author Victor Stenger and Paul Kurtz, a decision has been made. Yesterday, Judge Ursula Ungaro-Benages ruled that:

"Defendant's motion for sanctions ... is granted and plaintiff [Geller] shall pay the reasonable costs and attorney's fees incurred by defendants Victor J. Stenger and Prometheus Books. ..."

All claims against all defendants have been dismissed. The "reasonable costs and attorney's fees" are not yet announced, but will be in five figures. Meanwhile, today is the day by which Mr. Geller was to have paid CSICOP the six-figure costs of their defence in the other case. He has filed a motion for "reconsideration" of that action.

I have suggested to the UK press, concerning Mr. Geller's announcement that he has found the Holy Ark of the Covenant, that he should be told that Steven Spielberg is not a documentary film producer, and Harrison Ford is not really an archaeologist. Our aim is always to educate and inform.

JR

April 29, 1993

I've heard today from Gerard Majax, a magician colleague of mine in France, who was sued by Mr. Geller for comments Majax made in his latest book. In what seems to be more or less a habit with Mr. Geller, he brought the action beyond the statute of limitations in other words, too late. Now we will sit back and see what M. Majax's lawyers will do in light of this latest performance. Under French law, bringing a case in this manner can be the cause for serious counter-attacks. One might almost suspect that all these actions are being brought just too late to be able to win them, but to still harass the defendants with legal costs. ... One wonders. ... I'm off to Switzerland, where further interesting news awaits me.

JR

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April Meeting Report

By Joe Voelkering

Despite an early lead by the gremlin Murphy, the group at the April 17th program "The Attraction of Paranormal Beliefs Computer Viruses of the Mind on Parade" proved to be unbeatable. Between Dr. Jim Baerwaldt of UTA's Psychology Department carrying a double load of panelist duties and active participation from an obviously knowledgeable audience, it turned into a meeting that saw a few people still discussing the subject in the parking lot well after the building closed.

In brief, some of the more significant impressions or conclusions the author came away with are:

- There is virtually no pattern to the profile of "typical paranormal believers."
- Almost all of us have a variety of irrational beliefs; some have more, some have less.
- Those irrational beliefs generally have little or no effect on a high percentage of our decisions or work product.
- Remedial training promoting rational thinking is not very effective in overcoming beliefs already held.
- Very early training in rational thinking may be somewhat more successful than the remedial training.
- Family and peer groups tend to "set the pace" as to beliefs in many cases, presenting claims that are accepted as fact by the weight of majority opinion. These beliefs tend to be passed along, almost like a virus.
- We like to find reasons for why various things happen, and tend to find "patterns" suggesting a "cause" when such patterns really do not exist.
- People tend to feel very uncomfortable with uncertainties and will often accept irrational "facts" if they appear to offer the "stability" that is sought.
- The simple statistical "regression toward the mean" can often create a "false pattern." A classic example cited by

Dr. Baerwaldt is the athletic coach evaluating praise vs. a "chewing out." A big win followed by praise is typically followed by a lesser performance, which is simply a regression toward the mean. A big loss followed by a "chewing out" is typically followed by a better performance, again, merely a regression toward the mean. However, the pattern that could be interpreted is that a "chewing out" enhances performance while praise decreases it. Thus, a myth is born.

Finally, as a moderator/panelist, it was an absolute delight to be involved with a group that made the task almost a "walk on." I certainly left with a better grasp on the subject than I arrived with!

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Healthy Skepticism

"Life Extension" Pseudoscience

First of Two Parts

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

It's not the hardest thing in the world to recognize that pills and potions claimed to slow and even reverse the aging process are medical quackery. Or is it?

It's certainly an appealing notion to think that human beings might one day achieve a real victory over age and death. There's nothing about such an idea that's terribly outrageous, after all. Senescence and the degenerative diseases that accompany it are biochemical phenomena, the mechanisms of which surely are appropriate and ultimately tractable problems of rational inquiry. The belief that death is a part of life (besides being a non sequitur), though it may comfort the doomed, is not a scientific fact.

So imagine what the results might be of someone's purporting to have surveyed the present status of scientific knowledge about aging and its associated disorders. Suppose they claimed to have come up with something like a first approximation to a rigorous science of living longer and healthier. Suppose that, instead of embarrassing themselves with talk of divine inspiration for their ideas, "balancing the body's energies," "chakras," and such nonsense, they claimed to take a level-headed scientific approach. Suppose that they even added their voices to the criticism directed at the many pseudoscientific claims in this area and took care to couch their own arguments in terms of those of cutting-edge science and ongoing basic research. And suppose that, instead of giving their ideas some corny, idiosyncratic label, or naming it all after themselves, they called it "Life Extension."

Well, it's been done, as it turns out, in the form of an 858-page book that's sold some two million copies. The authors, Durk Pearson and Sandy Shaw, are said to have made more than 300 television appearances on the subject and continue to popularize their ideas. But who are Pearson and Shaw? Does their work stand on scientific grounds? What have their book, and the subsequent commercialization of their ideas actually accomplished? I'm sorry to have to say that those seeking the fountain of youth are going to have to keep on looking.

To begin with, Pearson and Shaw are not recognized authorities in the realm of science in which they claim special insight. Nor do they enjoy such a status in any other field of scientific study, for that matter. Pearson is said to have graduated from MIT after having studied physics, biology and psychology, while Shaw is said to have graduated from UCLA with majors in chemistry and biology. These are hardly "formidable credentials" as it's put in an ad for "LifeForce Technologies," one of many commercial efforts to capitalize on the popularity of "Life Extension." And though they claim to be "scientists," they do not reference any work of theirs in their book and, indeed, don't seem to have ever published original research in any peer-reviewed publication. Neither has any scientific group or association endorsed their views

Not Necessarily Newton

Like many who have sought to seize greatness, Pearson and Shaw quote Isaac Newton as saying that "No great discovery is ever made without a bold guess." Quite true. But Newton went on to root his ideas deeply in facts and reason. Pearson and Shaw do nothing of the kind, despite their promise to provide "a practical scientific approach" to the subject of increasing human longevity. Instead, their book is a selectively biased and systematic misrepresentation of what few facts are available concerning their subject. Most disturbing of all is the fact that, while they admit that they have no medical training, they nonetheless make specific medical recommendations and encourage their readers to begin their own "life extension experiment." But let me be more specific.

For a work that is supposed to appeal to scientists, the book is poorly referenced. Articles from the popular media are cited as if they were from the scientific literature and references for many key claims aren't given at all. In other cases, Pearson and Shaw cite a published report "proving" their contentions while ignoring other available evidence to the contrary. At times, they refer approvingly to research results that contradict their claims entirely. They argue, for example, that the famous Framingham Study of heart disease showed "no clear relation between serum cholesterol and deaths due to heart disease," which is simply and utterly false.

Pearson and Shaw argue that free radicals' ability to induce mutations points to their involvement "in the genesis of atherosclerotic plaques (a type of tumor)." In fact, atherosclerosis is not a tumor at all. They claim that "table sugar can contribute to the development of atherosclerosis," which has not been shown to be the case. And they state that "excess insulin is thought to cause cholesterol and other lipids in the blood to be deposited in arterial walls" which they argue puts diabetics taking insulin at greater risk for heart disease. In reality, the medical consensus is that poor control of diabetes leads to such complications as heart disease, and those with more severe forms of diabetes are the same people who require insulin because they cannot be controlled with diet. "Excess insulin" causes hypoglycemia, not atherosclerosis.

Having discounted the relationship between serum cholesterol and the risk of heart disease, Pearson and Shaw later on give paradoxical advice on reducing cholesterol by taking supplements like niacin (which is known to reduce serum cholesterol) and Vitamin C (which is not). But maybe that's only because they believe that "LDL [a form of serum cholesterol] may play a significant role in the genesis of many types of cancer as these lipoproteins carry in the bloodstream the carcinogenic polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons." But, alas, Pearson and Shaw don't say where they get this from, either.

Anecdote Central, U.S.A.

Early on in their book, Pearson and Shaw caution their readers about the unreliability of anecdotes, saying, correctly, that "individual cases (anecdotal evidence) can never be proof of anything" and that "on the basis of individual cases, you can find people claiming therapeutic benefits from almost any imaginable substance." But they then go on to rest much of their argument on anecdotes, such as that "Durk has found it [para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA), which they also falsely claim is a vitamin] to be a safe and effective treatment for his own personal case of male pattern baldness." They also claim that "in self experiments, we have found that our experimental antioxidant mixture roughly triples the x-ray dosage required to cause our skin to redden and burn." I can only guess what this could mean. But if the whole book's being riddled with anecdote isn't enough, an appendix of 58 pages lists even more.

Factual errors abound, and I've mentioned a few in passing. Others that stand out are the assertion that Talwin is not a narcotic (it is), that tuberculosis "is caused by a poor T-cell immune system response" (it's caused by a bacterium), that human white blood cells "often live a couple of years in the body" (it's very much less a few weeks at most), that "arthritis is usually an autoimmune disease" (rheumatoid arthritis is; the much more common osteoarthritis, or degenerative joint disease, is not) and that higher growth hormone levels in teenagers allow them to eat more without gaining weight.

(To be continued next month.)

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000.

Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and a North Texas Skeptics Technical Advisor.

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To the editor

I very much enjoy Dr. Tim Gorski's contributions to the newsletter. In his most recent column (April 1993), Gorski dismisses alternate cancer treatment, advising that "reliable information about effective cancer treatment can be had for less [than the alternate care example cited]." There is a clear implication that orthodox medicine can prevent death from cancer. In fact, almost a half-million Americans die each year from cancer; for these, the efficacy of therapy is less than desirable. Therein lies one of the powerful stimulants to the search for and adoption of alternate care methods, which in many cases are much cheaper than the orthodox ones, and to those whose cases end fatally, the results can be just as good.

William C. Harvey, M.D.
Dallas

Dr. Gorski replies:

I agree with Dr. Harvey's assessment up until the last clause of his last sentence, which puzzles me.

If by "results" Dr. Harvey means improved survival or quality of life, there is no evidence with which to support such a belief. In fact, one published study (See note) showed that although scientific medical intervention fared no better at improving survival among those terminally ill with cancer, their quality of life was superior to those who sought "alternative" methods. It's arguable that unconventional methods are better for some people for whose desperate conditions medical science has little or nothing to offer in that they may thereby go on with a greater sense of hope. But the fact is, there is always some reason for hope anyway, however small. And there's nothing "cheaper" than not wasting money on quackery in the first place.

The attitude that those who are desperately ill and cannot be helped by proven methods should be abandoned to the quacks may seem charitable, but it is not. It is always wrong for anyone assuming the role of the physician to sell false hope and false cures, at any price. In addition, there are safety concerns. An unproven method, if it can help, can also hurt, a fact that quacks rarely if ever discuss with their victims.

Note: Cassileth, B.R., et. al, "Survival and Quality of Life Among Patients Receiving Unproven as Compared with Conventional Cancer Therapy," *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 324:1180, 1991.

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

I have said before in this column that I try to avoid politics, religion, and other areas of blind faith, and concentrate on media coverage of pseudoscience and the occult. But somehow, pseudoscience and the occult keep getting mixed up with politics and religion, and like Al Pacino in *Godfather III*, no matter how much I try to avoid those topics, "they just keep PULLIN' ME BACK!"

First example: the Branch Davidian fire and the rush to lay blame for it on the FBI, the ATF, Janet Reno, Bill Clinton, David Koresh ... and no doubt, some sharp lawyer will soon think to blame the manufacturer of those kerosene lamps and file a product liability suit on behalf of the survivors. Well, I would suggest that all the energy put into finger-pointing could be better expended in pondering the lessons learned from the handling or mishandling of the Waco tragedy, and considering how to apply them to the *next* armed cult standoff. That's right, the *next* one.

As I mentioned here recently, we are approaching both the end of a century and the end of a millennium, and these calendar dates tend to attract wacko doomsday cults like a picnic draws ants. One positive thing to come out of the whole Waco disaster could be an enhanced awareness of this on the part of the media, the public, and law enforcement officials.

Fortunately, this is beginning to happen. In an Associated Press wire story filed after the fire, Cynthia Kissler of the Cult Awareness Network paged through a fat, yellow binder filled with information on over 1,500 doomsday religious cults and told the reporter, "Somewhere in here is another Waco waiting to happen." And TV's *Inside Edition* joined the speculation on "who's next" with a profile of "The Church Universal and Triumphant," a sect headed by Elizabeth Clare Prophet. Again, there are allegations of mind control, the stockpiling of weapons and food in preparation for some coming global disaster, a large complex complete with extensive bomb shelter, adherents severing ties with their families, etc.

Of course, that group claims it is a mainstream religion, posing no threat to its members nor to society. Three deprogrammers hired by the mother of one member to remove her from the group are now facing trial for kidnaping, and from the *Inside Edition* report, their prospects for acquittal do not look good. Another frightening prospect is that this group supposedly has a stockpile of food that could last SEVEN YEARS! Imagine having to sit through seven years' worth of hourly cult standoff updates!

The biggest problem is the thorny issue of balancing the Constitutional protection for freedom of religion with protecting the public safety from lunatic cults. It's sometimes difficult even to draw a definite line between a legitimate religion and a cult. In fact, one of the best descriptions of a cult (a charismatic leader who claims to speak for God, encourages his believers to give up their material possessions and follow him) is also a pretty good description of Jesus Christ himself. Thus, the current fury from many mainstream churchgoers over the treatment of David Koresh.

At this writing, however, it's been more than three days since the fire, and Koresh has yet to rise from the ashes. I think we're safe to assume it was a cult.

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Another big news story that has DRAGGED ME BACK again into the realm of the political is the by-now mandatory flapdoodle surrounding Earth Day. How did such a good idea ... setting aside a day to consider how humans fit into the ecosystem and what we can do to preserve it ... degenerate into an annual orgy of media coverage for pseudoscientists spouting unchallenged tommyrot and doomsday scenarios designed specifically to frighten children? When did Earth Day turn into Halloween?

This past Earth Day, television brought us two particularly egregious examples of environmental scare tactics. First, CBS broadcast *The Fire Next Time*, in which Craig T. Nelson and Bonnie Bedelia slogged through the smoky, sweltering hell that our planet has become in just a couple of decades, due to the greenhouse effect. For the most part, it was a rehash of *The Day After*, with lots of second-rate TV actors walking aimlessly around with soot on their faces, mouthing outrageously stupid dialogue, and pondering how those white male businessmen could have been so insensitive as to invent hair spray and air conditioners and do this horrible thing to Mother Earth. Unlike *The Day After*, it didn't even offer the guilty pleasure of seeing an atom bomb dropped on Steve Guttenberg.

Meanwhile, over on HBO, we had a "documentary" called *Earth and the American Dream*. One Associated Press critic noted the relentlessly simplistic and one-sided approach, then summed it up so succinctly, I'll just quote his assessment: "Birds and trees, GOOD! Light bulbs and refrigerators, BAD!"

This stuff annoys me on a number of levels. First, there's the annoyance factor of watching hypocritical, boneheaded Hollywood actors lecturing the rest of us on the damage we do to the environment with our selfish, wasteful ways ... when you know that the vast majority of these people live in houses that are at least five times larger than their needs require, drive expensive cars that burn high octane fuel, make movies filled with car chases and explosions that waste resources and fill the air with smoke and exhaust fumes, and often refuse to show up on the set until they have an air-

conditioned trailer hauled in by semi-truck and filled with all the latest electronic luxury gadgets. On top of this, the closest most of them have ever come to a science lab was 20 years ago, when they made a Frankenstein movie for Roger Corman.

Secondly, I resent the deliberate way in which scary doomsday scenarios are being force-fed to children. Both the aforementioned TV programs (which seemed pitched to an 8-year old mentality) and many publications aimed at school children, such as a recent "Saving the Planet" insert in *Newsweek*, seem designed solely to frighten the wits out of children and to convince them that their future is going to be bleak and horrible. Good idea, considering the rising teen suicide rate!

The science editor of *Newsweek* made a short (and obviously uncomfortable) appearance recently on David Gold's talk show on KLIF, where Gold grilled her on why that children's insert was so one-sided and downbeat? He asked her why they presented global warming as a *fait accompli*, when there is growing evidence to the contrary? Why the section did not mention the conclusions of the French government's study on global warming ("we are convinced it is a fraud") or any other opposing views on the subject, such as those of former Atomic Energy Commission head, Dr. Dixie Lee Ray?

Her response was that Dr. Ray is an atomic scientist, not an environmental scientist. Gold asked why, then, did they select Al Gore to answer children's questions about the environment, when he is a second-generation politician with no science training at all (and a man who, as I have pointed out before, relies on discredited futurists such as Paul Erlich and Jeremy Rifkin for guidance, and who has already called skeptical scientists a threat to humanity for questioning his figures and predictions)? She replied that schoolchildren everywhere, apparently in a spontaneous outburst, insisted on talking to Al Gore! Right ... I'll bet they asked for seconds on Brussels sprouts at the school cafeteria, too.

As skeptics, it is part of our stated purpose to encourage good science education for young people. Well, we'd better get on the stick, because this environmentalist propaganda is one of the biggest threats to good science education to come along in years. These unsubstantiated apocalyptic visions of the future are a political pill wrapped in a candy coating of pseudoscience, and they are being presented to students as genuine science. What are kids really being taught by this gobbledegook? Here's an 8-year old boy, quoted in an AP wire story, on what he learned from watching one of these environmental baloney sessions for schoolchildren: "My parents voted for Bush, but next time, I hope I can convince them to vote for Clinton and Gore." Yep, he got the message, all right.

Finally, the reason I am most outraged by this garbage is that I am a REAL environmentalist myself. My wife and I both are particularly involved with groups that work to preserve endangered species. But I don't believe you can win the public over permanently by lying to them, by stirring up fear and paranoia over doomsday fairy tales with no basis in fact. Eventually, lies always catch up with you. When they do, the public trust is gone, and you've hurt that which you most sought to help. It's the Chicken Little Effect: if you lied to me about one thing being an emergency, why should I believe you next time ... when perhaps, it really IS an emergency?

You say you don't believe that these people are deliberately lying to you and to your children in order to advance their agenda? I close this topic with a 1989 quote from one of the writers of *The Fire Next Time*, Stephen Schneider (he had a cameo in the film and is quoted as a source in Al Gore's book):

"To get some broad-based support, to capture the public's imagination, we environmentalists have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we have. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest."

I guess by 1993, he'd decided that just being effective is good enough.

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Finally, I know this month's column is a bit downbeat, so let me assure you that next month's will be jovial and light of heart! I'll tell you about an amazing new book called *Quantum Politics*, which asserts that your congressman will soon be able to take political junkets through astral projection! I'll introduce you to a New York doctor who thinks he was

repeatedly abducted by space aliens, and who is so irritatingly delusional that even Bud Hopkins complained to the authorities about his phone calls ... and yes, he's still practicing medicine! I love New York!

And I leave you with glad tidings: *The Dallas Morning News* reports that Robert Tilton's ratings have dropped 80 percent since the exposé by *PrimeTime Live!*

Now, let's hope all those gullible people didn't simply switch the channel to CBS and watch *The Fire Next Time*.

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