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## Healthy Skepticism

Review Of Susan Powter's "Stop The Insanity" Program

By **Neva H. Cochran, M.S., R.D., L.D.**

**Special Guest Columnist**

### *Special to The Skeptic*

*[Editor's note: Dallas fitness guru Susan Powter has gained celebrity status with recent appearances on national television shows and through her own series of infomercials promoting her "Stop the Insanity" diet and exercise regimen. She has claimed sales of her wellness kits that amount to annual revenue of over \$68 million, and her new book has just been published by Simon and Schuster, reportedly with a \$500,000 advance to the author. Claiming to have once been a 260-pound housewife from Garland, Texas, with 43% body fat and so unfit that she could barely climb stairs, the 35-year old Powter now charges hundreds of women for her advice on diet, exercise and motivation. But all may not be as it seems. In an 11-page cover story for the September 28 edition of the Dallas Observer, Observer reporter Rebecca Sherman explores evidence that Powter never was the obese housewife shown in publicity pictures Powter claims are her "before" her re-making through diet and exercise. Sherman also interviewed former employers and friends of Powter in Dallas who say the exercise diva once worked as a topless dancer and aerobics instructor. As this issue of The Skeptic goes to press, Powter was scheduled to appear on the CBS television program Eye to Eye with Connie Chung. Chung may ask Powter about some of those reports, or about the results obtained by the overweight women who pack her North Dallas studio in search of a sleek, fit body. Registered dietitian and nutrition consultant Neva Cochran reviewed Powter's eating program based on its scientific and practical merits and wrote this special report for The Skeptic.]*

In preparing this evaluation of "Stop the Insanity," the following resources were reviewed: Infomercial, "Moving" videotape, "Abs and Oils" videotape, "Give Me A Minute" audiotape, two one-hour "Eating" audiotapes and the printed booklets entitled "Stop the Insanity" and "Eating."

Susan Powter's "Stop the Insanity" program includes some positive aspects: 1) It encourages regular exercise. 2) It promotes a low-fat eating plan without severe caloric restriction. 3) Her comedic, encouraging, "I've been there, I've done it and you can too" style would no doubt be motivational for some people.

While the theory of high volume, low-fat eating promoted in this program is a good concept which registered dietitians are certainly encouraging, Ms. Powter's interpretation would seem to be a little too high volume and too low-fat. Leading health authorities (American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, American Dietetic Association, National Cholesterol Education Program) recommend that fat intake be no more than 30% of total calorie intake. Ms. Powter recommends a diet of no more than 20% of calories as fat but, in fact, her sample menus are much lower than this.

In analyzing Day 1 and Day 2 menus in her "Eating" booklet, I found the percent of calories from fat to be 9% and 10%, respectively. This results from her misuse of the percent fat formula by applying it to individual foods and admonishing people to consume only those foods that contain 20% or less of calories from fat. The 30% of calories from fat (or 20% in her case) recommendation is intended to apply to the diet as a whole, not to individual foods.

Because many of the foods that she promotes are essentially fat-free (beans, grains, vegetables), the overall result is a diet much lower in fat than is necessary. While this will not cause any deleterious health effects in the short term, it does serve to eliminate a number of nutritious foods which could be eaten in a healthy weight control diet.

### **The Homer Simpson Low-Fat Diet**

For example, she discourages consumption of low-fat turkey luncheon meat (1 gram fat and 25 calories, but 36% calories as fat), low-fat cheese (5 grams fat and 80 calories, but 56% calories from fat), and light microwave popcorn (2 grams fat and 35 calories, but 51% calories from fat) because they all exceed 20% of calories from fat. These low-fat foods could very easily be eaten within the context of a low-fat diet, even one with only 20% calories from fat. However, with her method of using the fat formula, the following foods would be acceptable on the eating plan:

- 2 oz. fruit chews candy (4.9 grams fat, 234 calories, 19% calories from fat)
- 1.6 oz. milk caramel candies (2 grams fat, 180 calories, 10% calories from fat)
- 1 piece Boston cream pie (6 grams fat, 270 calories, 20% calories from fat)
- 1/4 cup chocolate syrup (.6 grams fat, 164 calories, 3% calories from fat)
- 10 small gumdrops (0 grams fat, 135 calories, 0% calories from fat)
- 10 large jellybeans (.1 gram fat, 104 calories, 1% calories from fat)
- 12 oz. cola (0 grams fat, 154 calories, 0% calories from fat)
- 12 oz. wine cooler (0 grams fat, 215 calories, 0% calories from fat)
- 12 oz. beer (0 grams fat, 140 calories, 0% calories from fat)

There is a trend in the scientific nutrition community to move away from an emphasis on structured dieting and obsessive calorie counting to that of healthy low-fat eating. The American Dietetic Association recommends that people build their diets on a base of grains, fruits and vegetables adding moderate amounts of lean meats and low-fat dairy products and limiting (but not eliminating) intake of fats and sweets. Since fat is the most concentrated source of calories (9 calories per gram as compared to 4 calories per gram for protein and carbohydrate), cutting back on the fat in the diet should also result in a lower calorie intake and weight loss for those who need it. However, calories do count. It is possible to consume excess calories and gain weight while eating a low-fat diet.

If a person eats 2000 calories a day and only burns 1500 calories, they will gain weight. On her audiotape, Ms. Powter states that 1/2 a roasted chicken breast is equivalent in fat content to 3 cups pasta, 15 baked potatoes, 3 1/2 cups beans, 3 1/2 cups vegetables or 2 1/2 cups brown rice. The facts are that the chicken breast has 142 calories (and 3 grams of fat) while 3 cups pasta have 522 calories, 15 baked potatoes have 3300 calories, 3 1/2 cup beans have 760 calories, 3 1/2 cups vegetables (broccoli) have 154 calories and 2 1/2 cups brown rice have 540 calories.

While she does say that she's not recommending that anyone eat 15 potatoes at a meal, the implication is left that you can eat as much fat-free food as you want and still lose weight. You can see from some of the low-fat/higher calorie foods listed earlier that it wouldn't be hard to pack on the calories if these foods were eaten every day!

### **Veggie-Fest**

Ms. Powter says, "No one needs to tell you what to eat every day." While a structured eating plan isn't always necessary for successful weight loss, she provides a lot of technical information about fat and very little guidance about what to actually eat. If I were on this program I wouldn't know if I could ever eat anything other than beans, grains and vegetables! Hardly any reference is made about the meat and milk groups and when there is, it is usually negative. Lean meats and low-fat

dairy products contribute valuable nutrients that are not plentiful in other food groups like calcium, iron, complete protein, riboflavin, thiamin and zinc. They also are available in low-fat and fat-free varieties that can fit well into a low-fat, weight loss program. In addition, they add variety to the diet which helps people to stay with a program longer.

Ms. Powter admits that she is a vegetarian and it seems that this is what she is encouraging in her program. While a vegetarian diet can be nutritionally adequate, it is difficult for the average person to plan one that provides all of the nutrients needed on a consistent, long-term basis. She gives no advice on how to insure adequate protein, vitamin A and mineral intake if following a vegetarian diet.

### **Polysyllabic Phobia**

She also seems overly concerned about the chemicals in food and spends a significant amount of time addressing this in her tapes, advising people to avoid foods that have ingredients they cannot pronounce.

In fact, all "natural" foods are made up of chemicals with long, technical sounding names! Polysaccharides, amino acids, ascorbic acid, cyanocobalamin, 3-dehydroretinol, alpha-tocopherol and 1, 25 dihydrocholecalciferol are simply the scientific names for complex carbohydrate, simple proteins, vitamin C, vitamin B 12, vitamin A, vitamin E and vitamin D, respectively. The preservatives she is referring to are thoroughly tested and approved food additives used to ensure safe, healthy food products. There is no need for undue concern about these ingredients which diverts attention from the more important issue of lowering fat, eating healthy and losing weight.

In conclusion, body weight is a matter of arithmetic. If you eat more calories than your body needs, you will gain weight. If you eat fewer calories than your body uses, you will lose weight. Many weight control plans and programs are successful in the short term and, like this one, they have people who can give testimonials to their effectiveness. What we never see are the people who fail to lose weight or those who lose weight and then gain it back in a year or so. More important than just losing weight is keeping it off. People who are successful in losing weight and maintaining it are those who change their lifestyle habits permanently. They exercise regularly and have a low-fat diet which includes a variety of foods eaten in moderation.

*Neva Cochran is a registered dietitian and private nutritional consultant and is the Secretary of the D/FW Area Council Against Health Fraud.*

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## **Laws of Nature and The Law**

**Physicist and skeptic Vic Stenger posted this note on a computer bulletin board recently:**

From *Physics and Society*, Vol. 22, Oct. 1993, p.6, "Improving Courtroom Presentations of Scientific Evidence" by Edward Gerjuoy: "Arthur Damask, a physicist who frequently testifies in automobile accident cases, tells the following sad story in a 1987 paper about accident reconstruction published in *Physics Today*. In one of his cases, after having testified convincingly and dispositively, as he thought, he went home, only to find later that his side had actually lost. Apparently the other side's lawyer was allowed to tell the jury that 'the laws of physics are obeyed in the laboratory, but not in rural New Jersey.'"

*John Blanton*

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## **The third eye**

**By Pat Reeder**

Normally, I fill this space with bizarre news items, and believe me, there's plenty of material this month: the end of Robert Tilton's TV show, the IRS recognizing Scientology as a tax-exempt religion, a radio astrologer in Bradenton, Florida, who specializes in advising small businesses (which shall surely remain small businesses, if that's where they get their advice), a

Newport, Kentucky, man who's suing a bar because he claims he was punched by a ghost in the men's room, and a group of babies in Boston who were recalled for faulty baptisms after their priest admitted he changed some of the words in the ceremony to make them non-gender-specific. But all this, fascinating as it is, must wait, because I want to use this column to respond to an excellent letter from Deborah Boak of Arlington.

Ms. Boak's letter ran in the last issue of *The Skeptic*, but I did not see it before press time. She asked NTS members to comment on the touchy subject of religion, i.e., where do we draw the line between legitimate skeptical inquiry and attacks on people's personal beliefs? She also wondered if the "political correctness" movement had caused skeptics to steer clear of issues such as doomsday environmentalism, which are based on bad science but have lots of well-financed and vocal adherents just waiting to denounce anyone who questions their claims. I think this letter deserves a thoughtful response, so I'll give it a try ... and remember, I am speaking solely for myself, and not for NTS or *The Skeptic*.

To begin with, on the subject of religion: my rule of thumb, which is admittedly subjective, is that I do not attack anyone's personal religious faith. You will not find arguments in my column against the divinity of Christ, for example. While some make a specialty of examining such issues, I prefer to consider them as matters of faith, and therefore, quite properly within the province of religion.

I do allow myself to question religion when people take their religious beliefs out of the realm of faith and into other territories, such as medicine or natural history. If you are going to play in the ballpark of science, you must be willing to follow the rules and submit to the same rigorous standards of proof that scientists must meet. In these cases, I believe that I am not "crossing the line" when I question the claims of religious people ... rather, they have crossed the line into my territory.

For example, if someone asks his pastor to say a prayer for a child who is in the hospital for an appendectomy, I would never dream of questioning him. But if that same person insists that the pastor's prayers can cure appendicitis without medical treatment, then in my view, he has left the realm of religion and is meddling about in medicine, which makes him fair game. Another example: if parents want schools to teach kids about the world's religions, I think they should be free to do so ... in elective classes clearly labeled "Religion." But if they want to teach religion in science class, then they had better be prepared to prove the scientific validity of creationism. Good luck.

Finally, I allow myself broad latitude to josh good-naturedly about religious subjects when they are just blatantly silly (say, the face of the Virgin Mary appearing in the hood of a Chevy Camaro, or anything involving Robert Tilton).

And now, on to "political correctness" ... a term which has irked me since I first noticed it popping up over ten years ago in record reviews in "Rolling Stone" magazine. Back then, it usually meant that the lyrics were very left-wing and the music utterly unlistenable. It annoyed me because it was almost an oxymoron: "politics" connotes the exchange of conflicting opinions, and I get very antsy when anyone claims the power to declare a particular opinion to be officially "correct."

Today, "political correctness" has become a hot topic in America, and it is a subject that must be addressed by anyone who believes in freedom of speech. I honestly believe that it poses a greater threat to free inquiry than the old "religious right" villains we have been fighting for so long. Whereas the religious right tends to make a lot of noise about some issue, but then loses the battle by appearing ridiculous to the public at large, the "religious left" (Fran Liebowitz's term) is defining the political and social agenda in America, and is very effective at getting its way, particularly in universities, which should be a haven of free inquiry and open discussion. The old religious right wants equal time with science in the classroom, while the religious left wants to be the only viewpoint allowed in the classroom. The religious right just claims to have all the answers ... the religious left wants to make it illegal even to ask the questions.

"Political correctness" is no longer simply a matter of good manners and showing respect for people who are different. In its most extreme forms, it manifests itself in an attitude of "I'm Okay-You Must Die!" that is almost indistinguishable from the most fanatical fundamentalist cults. I can say this with some authority, not just because I read and write news for a living, but from firsthand experience.

Environmentalism is an important issue to me, and I think the more radical environmentalist groups undermine legitimate efforts to help clean up the earth and save endangered species, both through their confrontational tactics and their trumpeting of unfounded scare scenarios. I have questioned their claims repeatedly in this column, and the response has led me to believe that, to the people who are most deeply involved in these groups, environmentalism is not science. It is a

religion.

I have never gotten a single complaint about any comment I made on Christian churches ... but you should see the response I get when I poke fun at one of Jeremy Rifkin's idiotic theories (that should be good for a couple of hate letters right there!). For these "Environmentarians," it is not enough to clean up the earth ... the earth must be worshipped. When you look into the literature put out by some of these groups, you would think you were reading proselytizing literature from the Church of the Druids. And if you question their science, you are not simply an interested observer engaging in debate ... you're a heretic! You WANT the air to be poisoned, and the oceans to boil! They'd burn you at the stake, except it might cause air pollution. Besides, they'd have to chop down a tree to make the stake.

And it is not just in the field of environmentalism that ignorance is revered and New Age religious blather is being wedded with politics. Recently, certain feminist leaders have begun denouncing rational thought and scientific logic as "Western linear masculinism" which must be rejected by women in favor of "female intuition" (it is beyond me how this attitude differs from that of a piggish boss who pats his secretary's head and says, "You're a woman, honey, you're not supposed to think"). Marie Curie would be appalled, as is author Florence King, who recently described an invitation she received to a feminist weekend retreat which actually included a campfire ceremony celebrating the "Earth Goddess."

And again, we find the same hostility toward free inquiry. On a recent episode of the CBS television show *60 Minutes*, a reporter tried to ask Gloria Steinem a question about the writings of Camille Paglia at a public meeting, and Steinem told her to sit down and shut up, then ordered the reporter's microphone turned off. In a similar episode at a California university, a male student signed up for a feminist studies class, in which the teacher declared that it had been proven lesbians are better mothers than heterosexual married women. The male student asked her where she got that statistic. She said it came from the Census Bureau. He pointed out that the Census Bureau only counts people, it does not make value judgements as to who is a good mother. The result of this exchange: the student was told that he would have to transfer out of the class or be charged with harassing the teacher ... for asking her a question!

Of course, there are many other touchy subjects. On some university campuses, students' heads are being filled with utter nonsense under the label of "Afro-Centrist" history, which blatantly disregards all known facts about the history of Egypt and the African continent. There are "experts" of dubious credentials making the claim that the black race is superior because melanin (the darkening agent in skin) somehow increases intelligence (if you tried to make the opposite case, that the lack of melanin increases intelligence, you would quite rightly be condemned as a racist moron). So where are the historians and the medical researchers brave enough to stand up and say, "Show us your proof?!" There is some opposition, but it should be a loud chorus, instead of a few brave, lonely voices.

And I haven't even touched on AIDS, a virus that has become so politicized that the very thought of blunt, honest talk about its methods of transmission and actual infection rates can bring down shrill attacks from both the right and the left.

One of the most effective tactics of the political correctness crowd is to so demonize critics that they are afraid to question even patently ridiculous claims. I will admit, it's no fun getting hate mail and being called names that are not true. But the free marketplace of ideas was designed to provide hard scrutiny to all viewpoints so that good ideas could be sorted out from bad ones ... it was never meant to guarantee that all ideas, the crackpot as well as the valid, be accorded equal respect. If we do not stand up and ask questions, if we do not protect free and open debate, if we excuse some claims from the burden of proof just because we're afraid to hurt someone's feelings or risk being hit with some bogus epithet, then we might as well just fold up our tents and hand over civilization to the irrational, the superstitious, and whoever yells the loudest.

Fortunately, there are signs of hope. The most vocal of these groups have become so petty, outrageous and unreasonable (the current flap over "oppressive" college mascots comes to mind), it is no longer possible for them simply to label their critics as "sexist, racist homophobic tools of the military-industrial complex" and have it stick. The New York Times recently ran a five-part series on the false claims of some of the radical environmental groups, and even the reliably liberal New Yorker magazine has run two articles in the past month condemning the assaults on logic and history by the P.C. crowd.

In addition, the absurdity of the movement is becoming apparent to people all across the political spectrum, and is now drawing plenty of welcome ridicule. A good example is the new book, *The Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* by Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf. It juxtaposes actual linguistic demands by the P.C.'ers with satirical jokes, and dares

you to tell the difference (like the word "menstruation" must be replaced with the word "femstruation." Nope, that's not a joke, that's one of the actual demands!).

I say that if the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* aren't afraid to question this nonsense, why should we be? After all, asking questions is our job. We're skeptics!

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## Steve Allen on The Bible, Religion and Morality

**Reviewed by Charles L. Caperton**

Yes, the same Steve Allen that is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as having written 4,000 songs. In his 35th book, Allen focuses his talents and critical intelligence on the Bible. Allen's book was planned to be published posthumously because of the problems that the author knew would be encountered by its content if it were published at this time. But because of his deep concern for the fanatical religious zeal of biblical literalists and fundamentalists in this country, he sought its immediate release.

American's dean of intelligent comedy doesn't think the Bible is a laughing matter. Allen asserts that there remains an extensive degree of common ignorance about the Bible though it has been consulted for more than 20 centuries. Noting that most people today rarely read the Bible, Allen is convinced that millions who do read it are not able to understand certain passages at all. He urges through his own exploration of the Bible, marking passages that struck him as extraordinarily beautiful, and others that were confoundingly confusing, that all Americans be conversant with the Bible, partly because of those who would use Scripture as an irrational weapon to force their views on others.

Allen presents his ideas as a series of alphabetically-arranged essays on characters, events and books of the Scriptures, as well as on such controversial topics as abortion, anti-Semitism, capital punishment, death, evolution, and original sin. He draws on the expertise of biblical scholars, theologians and philosophers to demonstrate that fundamentalist religious views and assumptions about the reliability and authenticity of the Bible as an inviolable Word of God simply have no factual basis.

Allen highlights the errors, inconsistencies and self-contradictions of the Bible, finding so much in Scripture at variance with western ideals of morality and common decency that an objective observer cannot help but judge the Bible as a fascinating, important, but all-to-fallible book.

While not denying the value of many biblical passages, Allen argues that Americans can and should critique the Bible as they would any other historical document. While Allen finds much in the Bible with which one can take issue, his examination also reveals much that is meaningful. Allen's goal to make people think reasonably about Scripture is achieved through remarkably clear, readable, and insightful prose.

For those recovering from families of religious abuse, guilt and fear, and others whose intellectual curiosity often got them in trouble with their families and churches, it is a welcome and fresh look at the "Word."

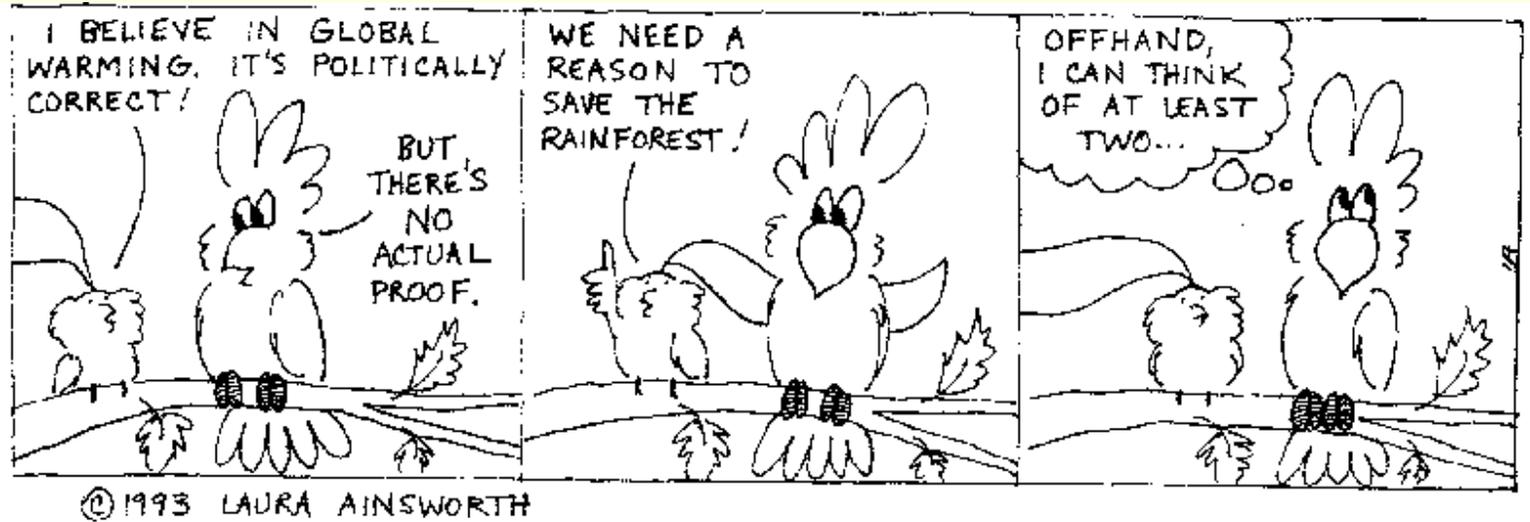
*Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion and Morality*; 428 pages with foreword by Martin Gardner; Prometheus Books; \$24.95 cloth. Also available from Prometheus: *More Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion and Morality*; 400 pages; \$24.95 cloth.

*Charles L. Caperton is a practicing trial lawyer in Dallas and a member of the Texas Association for Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors. Mr. Caperton will present the February program of the North Texas Skeptics on the subject of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Transcendental Meditation movement.*

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## Up a tree

## A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth



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