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## Louis L'Amour frontier skeptic

### A Novel Approach To Rational Inquiry

By Joe Voelkering

"... when dealing with what people called the supernatural, some background in legerdemain was essential. A scientist searches for truth and is not skilled in trickery or deception. Many things that might seem miraculous can be duplicated by any working magician, as the marvelous is his professional occupation. Those who wish to find miracles are easily imposed upon, for they come with a mind prepared for belief."

--Louis L'Amour, *The Haunted Mesa*

Looks like a James Randi quote, doesn't it? Yet, *The Haunted Mesa* is among the least skeptical of L'Amour's works. In it he uses a "what if" approach to one of the most controversial issues in quantum mechanics, the concept of "parallel" universes.

That possibility is coupled with a well recognized enigma: the disappearance of the Anasazi, the former cliff-dwellers of the Southwest. One of his characters sets the controlling attitude with a statement: "... certain speculations in contemporary physics (seem) to allow for the possibility ... I'm not buyin' what you say ... but let's suppose what you say is true."

In *A Brief History Of Time* Stephen Hawking speculates: "So, perhaps an astronaut who fell into a black hole would be able to make money at roulette by remembering where the ball went before he placed his bet." Carl Sagan's *Contact* uses a similar speculation about the dimension of time. Both appear to be using L'Amour's "... suppose what you say is true ..." approach. All three admit to a finite possibility that some non-conventional views of time may be valid without claiming they are as skeptics should.

For years I overlooked L'Amour's works. I think it probably was my reaction to the titles and covers. I pictured them as being macho shoot'em-ups. In 1986 I finally bought one of his books, *The Last Of The Breed*, a novel about a U.S. pilot down in Siberia. To my surprise, it seemed technically accurate. More importantly, it addressed many well reasoned philosophical points.

A short time later I learned L'Amour's library contained some 17,000 works, including copies of old, rare volumes translated expressly for his research and that he often read over fifty nonfiction books a year, for enjoyment! Obviously, he was far more complex and learned than my early mental picture of him.

Next, I purchased *The Walking Drum* and became addicted! I discovered that L'Amour was a "frontier" writer, not a "western" writer. By his own description, the book is about "the frontiers of knowledge" along the trade routes of the twelfth century. The major character is a young fellow who travels, seeking knowledge, viewing it as its own reward because of the pleasure it brings. He constantly seeks answers to questions that span a wide range of interests. All potentially reliable sources are given due consideration but, when he comes upon apparent answers, he questions them too. I found it a skeptic's delight.

Subsequently, I've read each L'Amour book currently in print and noted that a theme of self-education, for its own sake, is common to a vast majority of them. Typically, they're semi-narrated by a central figure that has a very modest formal education but a huge appetite for knowledge. In them, generally, good not only triumphs over evil; logical deductive reasoning beats credulity!

*The Walking Drum* remains a personal favorite. Many good ideas and observations on rational inquiry are woven in. Perhaps it's a distillation of ideas from L'Amour's many earlier works; he was in his mid-seventies when it was first published. If you enjoy fun reading that also makes you stop and think, I recommend it!

I also recommend *A Trail Of Memories*, an anthology of quotes from characters in L'Amour's books, as compiled by his daughter Angelique. It's a great single source digest and very useful for previewing the "flavor" of a particular work.

Here are some favorite "skeptic" quotes from L'Amour's books:

"You are your own best teacher. My advice is to question all things. Seek for answers, and when you find what seems to be an answer, question that, too."

"... the spirit of inquiry was alive here, and where it has a free existence, ignorance cannot last."

"It is only the ignorant who can be positive, only the ignorant who can become fanatics, for the more I learned the more I became aware that there are shadings and relationships in all things."

"It is a poor sort of man who is content to be spoon-fed knowledge that has been filtered through the canon of religious or political belief, and it is a poor sort of man who will permit others to dictate what he may or may not learn."

"You asked if I have reverence? I have reverence for truth, but I do not know what truth is. I suspect there are many truths, and therefore, I suspect all who claim to have THE truth."

"I have reverence for all who ask questions and seek honest answers."

"Reading without thinking is as nothing, for a book is less important for what it says than for what it makes you think."

"To me the goal was to learn, to see, to know, to understand."

#### **--The Walking Drum**

"Remember this ... our world is one where the impossible occurs every day, and what we often call the supernatural is simply the misunderstood."

#### **--The Lonesome Gods**

"Sometimes a man's senses will pick up [things] not strong enough to make an impression on him, but they affect his thinking anyway. Maybe that's all there is to instinct ... "

#### **--The Daybreakers**

"Sakim taught me to be wary of evidence given by others, for in all evidence there is some interpretation. The eyes see, the mind explains. But does the mind explain correctly? The mind only has what experience and education have given it, and perhaps that is not enough. Because one has seen does not mean one knows."

#### **--Jubal Sackett**

"Much as I loved reading I was wary of it, for I soon saw that much that passed for thinking was simply a good memory, and many an educated man was merely repeating what he had learned [by rote], not what he had thought out for himself."

#### **--Bendigo Shafter**

"If I were asked what an education should give, I would say it should offer breadth of view, ease of understanding ... a background from which the mind can explore in any direction."

"No one can 'get' an education, for of necessity education is a continuing process. If it does nothing else, it should provide students with tools for learning, acquaint them with methods of study and research, methods of pursuing an idea."

"We are ... all wanderers in search of knowledge."

#### **--Education Of A Wandering Man**

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## **A.S.K and ye shall believe**

**By Larry Sutherland**

Perhaps no murder in history has been investigated as extensively and over so great a length of time as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. And yet it remains for many as much a mystery today as it did on November 22, 1963. Thirty years after Kennedy's death in downtown Dallas, strong doubts remain that alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. A recent USA Today/CNN poll indicated 86 percent of persons 18 to 29 believe there was a conspiracy in the death, decreasing to 59 percent for those 65 and older.

Public opinion polls, of course, do not establish factual validity. A poll in the early 1600s in Italy might well have shown a large percentage of the public condemning Galileo and believing the Earth to be the center of the universe.

Establishing the truth about who killed the president is a daunting task. In 1978, Congress spent \$5.8 million through its House Select Committee on

Assassinations to try to answer the question. It issued a finding that there was, indeed, a conspiracy, but could name no specific suspects other than Oswald. The HSCA's partial answer came under serious dispute in 1982 when a report by the National Academy of Science invalidated a key piece of acoustical evidence. That acoustical evidence revealed a likely shot from the infamous grassy knoll.

### **Still ASKing**

Although a scientific inquiry more than a decade ago failed to conclusively answer who killed Kennedy, efforts continue to this day to find hard evidence of a conspiracy. A recent forum in Dallas, the Assassination Symposium on Kennedy, or A.S.K., brought together several hundred assassination researchers.

Nearly a dozen panels were held to ponder topics such as "Oswald in Mexico City," "New Leads and Revelations," "Cuban Connections," "Eyewitnesses," and photographic and medical evidence. The symposium did offer the viewpoints of a few researchers that there was no conspiracy, but by far the debate offered mostly pro-conspiracy information.

Gerald Posner, a New York attorney and author, came under repeated verbal attack for his new anti-conspiracy book, Case Closed. The author declined an invitation to attend the symposium to defend his work, although he has debated conspiracy theorists on radio and television.

### **Fudged Photos?**

Perhaps the time has come for the North Texas Skeptics to enter the debate and tackle at least a portion of this enormous puzzle. Such an opportunity presents itself with a detailed analysis of the research evidence presented at the symposium. Essentially, what may be studied revolves around photographic evidence pointing to tampering or real photographs that reveal possible conspirators. The following are examples of evidence presented at the symposium that may be feasible for study by the NTS.

Item: Photograph of someone (not Oswald) looking out the far west window of the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building about 15 seconds after the last shots fired at the president. Oswald, according to the Warren Commission, fired at the president and Texas Governor John Connally from a far east corner window.

Robert Groden, a photographic consultant to the HSCA, presented a slide showing a picture taken by Dallas Morning News photographer Tom Dillard of the depository moments after the assassination. Groden greatly enlarged a portion of the west end of the sixth floor seen in the photo. The grainy image of a face does, indeed, show in the enlargement. If the enlargement truly shows a person other than Oswald taken right after the assassination, then that would bring strong evidence of a conspiracy.

### **Or Fudged X-rays?**

Item: A lateral X-ray of the president's head wound may have been faked. Researcher Dr. David Mantik presented a slide showing a purported X-ray of the Kennedy head wound and contended it was altered to incorrectly support a shot coming from the rear, thus from Oswald firing from the sixth floor window. Dr. Mantik suggests there is a "gross violation of physical reality" with far too much variation of white and black areas on the X-ray to be real. Dr. Mantik's optical density measurements reveal the likely fakery, which involves composites and superimposing one image with another. "Making such composite X-rays is easy," Dr. Mantik said.

Item: A multitude of photographic evidence presented by researcher Jack White of Ft. Worth purports to show possible conspirators at Dealy Plaza and the doctoring of some photographs. White contends a real photo is that of convicted hit-man Charles Harrelson, posing as one of the three "tramps" detained by authorities soon after the assassination. White has long maintained that the famous photo of Oswald holding a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle in the back yard of his Oak Cliff residence is faked with Oswald's face superimposed over someone else's body. And White supports a finding that a photo taken by Mary Moorman, when enlarged, reveals an image of someone firing a rifle from the grassy knoll.

These are just some of the areas where independent verification, using solid scientific tools, may help determine what to believe about the JFK assassination.

*Larry Sutherland is a free-lance writer from Arlington.*

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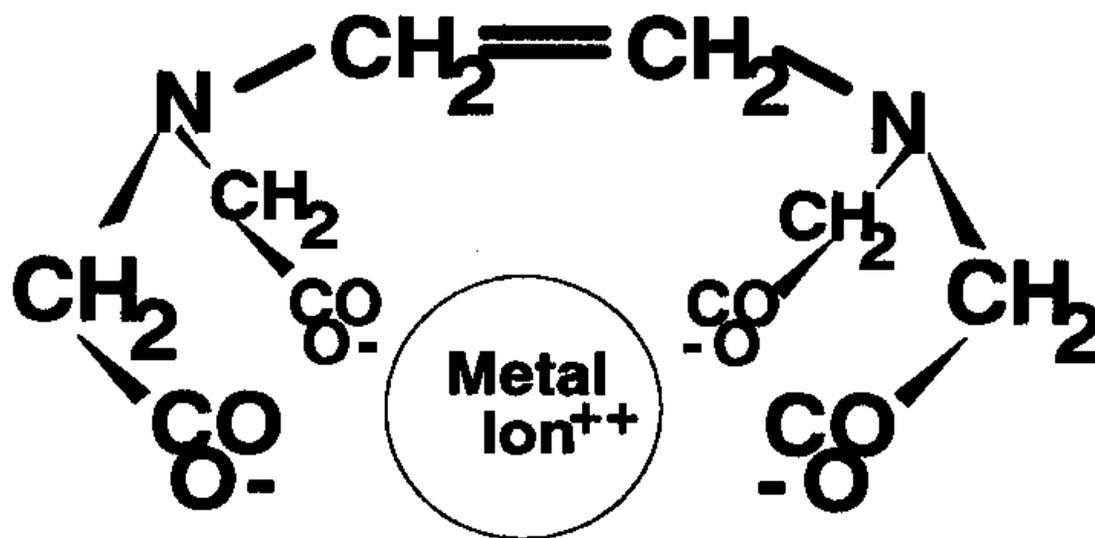
## **Healthy Skepticism**

**by Tim Gorski, M.D.**

### **Chelation Quackery Exposed**

The September/October issue of Nutrition Forum contains an excellent article by Saul Green, Ph.D., concerning Chelation Therapy.

Chelation therapy involves the administration of ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA), an organic molecule that binds the positively-charged ions of various heavy elements including calcium ions. The word "chelate" comes from the presumed claw-like grip with which EDTA binds its target cations (see figure #1).



## Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) chelates a metal ion

**Figure 1. Illustration of "chelation"**

Chelation therapy was first tried as a treatment for coronary artery disease, also known as atherosclerosis, in 1956. Apparently the thinking at that time was that EDTA might be able to soften or otherwise reduce the build-up of atheromatous plaque, the typical artery-blocking lesion of the disease, because these lesions usually contain calcium. At that time, the treatment of the disease could be easily assessed only by patient reports of symptoms, and preliminary trials suggested there might be some benefit to chelation therapy.

It was soon realized, though, that EDTA binds metallic ions even better than calcium, which is why it's used as an additive in products like salad dressing to eliminate the metallic taste that would otherwise be acquired from storage drums and other metal surfaces. This fact, along with the realization that even intravenous EDTA doesn't remove calcium from atheromatous plaque after all, and the lack of demonstrated benefit from additional, more well-designed studies of the therapy, resulted in a loss of interest in chelation therapy by medical researchers. In addition, the safety of chelation therapy began to be questioned when it was found that EDTA was very good at removing other essential trace metals such as zinc, magnesium, and iron from the body, while the calcium that was removed ultimately came from its most abundant store in the bones.

None of these concerns were enough to deter the true-believers, though, who continue to promote chelation therapy as a virtual cure-all. The main organization now promoting chelation is the American College of Advancement in Medicine (ACAM), although many others have been involved as well. Twenty to forty to over one hundred sessions of intravenous infusion of EDTA are recommended by ACAM at a typical cost of \$75-100.

In addition to the unsound and discredited theory that EDTA can remove calcium directly from atheromatous plaque, chelation quacks have devised new theoretical arguments as to how their therapy works. Green's article does an excellent job of exploding each of these in turn, such as the idea that lowered blood calcium levels more slowly leach the calcium from plaque deposits (blood calcium levels are rigidly controlled and there is no reason to suppose that calcium is normally transferred from soft tissues to bone), the claim that EDTA blocks the production of free radicals by iron ions (if EDTA chelates ionic iron, the electronic configuration of the metal still allows it to produce free radicals, and chelated iron will be kept in solution for a longer period of time in which to do so), and the notion that chelation therapy prevents mutations (which are not the cause of atherosclerosis anyway).

Green also discusses the major research findings that have appeared in the literature concerning chelation therapy, the best of which show no benefits of the treatment. In fact, not one scientific study has been able to document reduced arterial obstruction or increased circulation following chelation therapy. Even coronary artery bypass grafting, which has taken considerable fire on other grounds, can be shown to improve blood flow through the grafted vessels. Chelation proponents are currently touting a meta-analysis of some earlier studies that suggests some benefits. But as is true in so many cases, when you put garbage in, you can only expect to get garbage out.

*The DFW Council Against Health Fraud will, for an SASE, provide a copy of the Green article to any interested parties. Write the Council at P.O.B. 202577, Arlington, Texas 76006. It's also been uploaded to the library of the Alternative Health Section of the Health and Fitness Forum on CompuServe.*

*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.*

## OPEN FORUM

# The Third Eye

### NEWS AND COMMENTARY FROM THE WEIRD WORLD OF THE MEDIA

By **Pat Reeder** It's New Year's Eve, and here I sit with a column deadline. So I guess I'll use this space to wrap up old business and kiss 1993 goodbye.

I shall start by responding to some mail generated by a previous column about political correctness dampening skeptical inquiry, mail which I did not see before press time of the last issue. One letter was from Gary Romeo of Dallas, and if you don't have last month's issue, I'll try to summarize his points as quickly as possible:

1. I'm a right wing cynic, and there is no organized political correctness movement on America's campuses.
2. If environmental groups are really hurting their cause through their own empty-headed zealotry, then I should have named them specifically.
3. Gloria Steinem's silencing of a reporter at a meeting was not a pattern of behavior but an isolated incident of her blowing her cool, comparable to George Bush getting angry at some MIA cover-up believers who once interrupted his speech, except I probably believe the MIA cover-up conspiracy theory.
4. P.C. language is not an attempt at thought control, but merely the latest evolution of the English language, and someday even I shall be using terms such as "differently abled" and "companion animal."

My point-by-point response:

1. I write a nationally-syndicated news and topical comedy service for radio stations, five pages a day, five days a week. This requires me to spend at least five hours a day doing nothing but reading news from all over the world. Over the past few years, I have written more jokes about right-leaning subjects (George Bush, Dan Quayle, Pat Robertson, the NRA, etc.) than Jay Leno and David Letterman put together. I also include on the same pages jokes and news items about the left (Jesse Jackson, Bill Clinton, P.C. zealots, etc.). It is a hazard of the business that when I make fun of the stupidities of the right, I am accused by someone of being a left-wing radical, and when I make fun of the stupidities of the left, someone calls me a right-wing radical.

I would like to propose a third hypothesis: both right and left are perfectly capable of coming out with idiotic, unprovable, self-serving, hypocritical blather, and the only thing I'm a radical about is telling the truth about both of them in public.

As for the claim made by many that there is no such thing as a P.C. movement on campus, that it is a figment of the paranoid imaginations of John Birchers, I think it's a bit late in the game to be making that argument. On December 22 (or thereabouts, I don't have the paper in front of me), the Wall Street Journal ran a front-page article about the long-overdue backlash from students who are tired of suffering the wrath of the self-appointed thought police of the P.C. movement, which they described as having raged on America's campuses for the past ten years. I particularly enjoyed their anecdote about the University of California at Riverside, where a couple of administration P.C. zealots revoked the charter of a fraternity because its mascot was a friendly Mexican in a sombrero. The mascot was drawn by a Hispanic frat member who was from Mexico himself, but that didn't matter to the P.C. duo. The frat refused to don sack cloth and ashes; instead, they went to court. Not only did they win their case, but the judge ordered the two administration officials to attend a "sensitivity training" seminar on the First Amendment! Perhaps that should be a required course for everyone at America's universities, including the faculty.

Incidentally, when I went to college, I took 20 hours a semester, plus worked two parttime jobs to pay my way. I don't seem to recall having enough spare time to sit around protesting about the school mascot being too white or too masculine or too whatever. I don't even remember what my school mascot was. Perhaps all these P.C. protests are God's way of telling professors they aren't giving the little brats enough homework.

2. The first draft of my column did name several environmental groups, but I had to cut them because it was running so long. I planned to include them here, but fortunately, U.S. News and World Report saved me the trouble. Look up their December 13 issue, and the article entitled "The Doomsday Myths: By Exaggerating Environmental Dangers, Activists Have Undermined Their Credibility -- And Triggered An Anti-Environmental Backlash." It makes the same argument that I've been making for the past two years: that environmental groups who exaggerate environmental problems in order to gain money and political power eventually undermine public support for solving real environmental problems that desperately need attention (gee, I must be psychic!). The magazine has much more space than I do, and they pack in lots of names and details.

This might be a good place to sneak in some news concerning a couple of my major pet ... sorry, "companion animal" peeves, among the environmental and animal rights crowd. Over the Thanksgiving weekend, the Animal Liberation Front took credit for planting nine incendiary devices in Chicago department stores which sell fur. Eight of them went off. Miraculously, all the fires were contained, and there were no injuries. Now, I could point out the complete and utter blockheadedness of a group of people who show their respect for all life by planting bombs in stores on the most crowded shopping day of the year ... but frankly, that would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Instead, I'll move on to an allegedly more mainstream group, PETA, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I'm such a rightwing cynic, I actually used to be a member of this group! But I had a falling out with them when I found that their goal was not merely humane treatment for animals. These days, PETA seems to be completely dominated by people who believe that a jungle is really a fairy tale Neverland, filled with dancing frogs and happy elves.

They make their lofty philosophical points by throwing pies in the faces of contestants at the Miss Pork Industry beauty contest, and their leader, Ingrid Newkirk, has just published a manifesto demanding that no animal ever be used or owned in any way by a human ... and that includes as pampered pets (sorry, "companion animals"). In their fantasy world, your miniature poodle longs to be placed in a wilderness preserve, where he can scavenge for food in packs and shiver through the freezing winters, and your parakeet would much prefer being swallowed by a free-range kitty cat to sitting on your shoulder and eating honey-biscuits.

Lest you start to think that these people are such obvious loons (and I apologize to the loons) as to be harmless, you should know that they were instrumental in passing the wildly misnamed "Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992," a new law banning importation of most wild-caught exotic birds to America, including those captured humanely and intended for breeding programs. This law does nothing to preserve the birds' dwindling natural habitats, thus it practically guarantees the birds' extinction. You see, in the world of PETA, where you think with your heart instead of your brain, it is much more humane for a parrot species to die out forever than for people to interact with them, even if it is to save them from extinction.

By the way, if anyone is interested in my choice of an environmental group that is truly worthy of support, then I suggest you send a check to The Nature Conservancy in Arlington, Virginia.

3. Gloria Steinem's outburst was not an isolated incident. Camille Paglia told 60 Minutes that Steinem runs her meetings like a fascist, and anyone who mentions Paglia's name is silenced. To test her claim, 60 Minutes conducted an experiment. They went to one of Steinem's meetings and during the open question period, their reporter tried to ask about Paglia. Steinem told her to sit down and shut up, and ordered that her microphone be turned off. That's not "blowing her cool," it was part of an obviously predictable pattern of silencing criticism.

As for Bush's behavior, while it might have been an illchosen response, it was truly an isolated incident. The protesters interrupted his speech and were deliberately provocative. But you won't find me defending Bush too strenuously; he's the one who signed that disastrous bird importation law mentioned above.

I don't necessarily believe the MIA cover-up conspiracy theory, but you must admit, it sure has given us some great movies. Did you see Missing In Action II? Man, what a flick!

4. For a wonderful explanation of what "P.C. language" is all about, I suggest you check out George Carlin's album, "Parental Advisory," and the cut called "They're Only Words/Euphemisms." Carlin does a brilliant job of tracing the efforts to make the English language ever more "sensitive," and thus ever fuzzier, until it can't possibly offend anyone because the words have no meaning whatsoever.

Speaking as a professional writer with a deep love and respect for the English language, I make the following offer: if anyone ever catches me using such gaseous euphemisms as "differently abled" or "companion animal" with any intent other than biting sarcasm, you may stab me with a Bic pen. And that goes for your little companion animal, too!

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I also received another letter relating to that column, from Ed Stoken of Texarkana. It was delivered directly to me and so did not get published. Ed basically agreed with the original column. He said it was "excellent" and "a copy of it should be sent to the National Headquarters of The Skeptical Inquirer."

#### **My point-by-point response:**

Thank you, Ed. You are absolutely right.

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As we bid adieu to 1993, let us relive some of those golden memories we'll always cherish: Princess Diana giving birth to a son fathered by a U.S. senator ... Kathie Lee Gifford replacing Jay Leno as host of The Tonight Show ... and Queen Elizabeth II giving up the throne to join a convent. Who could forget that romantic day when Madonna remarried Sean Penn, then went skiing naked? Or the titillating spectacle of Fergie posing nude for Playboy, and Dolly Parton inadvertently exposing her left breast during a live TV special?

Okay, none of that really happened in 1993 ... but psychics for various tabloids predicted that it would, and that's good enough for me! Apparently, it's good enough for the tabloids, too, since they've hired the same people to make predictions for 1994.

According to science writer Gene Emery, who keeps track of such predictions for The Skeptical Inquirer, the psychics once again missed every major news story of the year, from the World Trade Center bombing to Michael Jackson's problems. We can only hope that some day, they will eventually be right about something, even if it's just Dolly Parton exposing her breast on TV. Maybe by that time, we'll all have big screen TVs and be able to appreciate it.

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The Dallas Morning News reports that Life After Death author Dr. Raymond Moody now claims if you stand in a dim room in front of a mirror long enough, other people (presumably your dead relatives) will appear in the mirror in front of you. The article included dissenting views from Barry Karr of CSICOP and several psychologists, all of whom dismissed Dr. Moody's assertions as simple hypnotic suggestion. Or perhaps they are sharing a medicine cabinet with the guy in the next apartment (I saw this on a TV commercial so many years ago, it perhaps qualifies as a past life experience).

Finally, a research team from the Mid Downs Health Authority in Haywards Heath, England, has discovered that Friday the 13th really is unlucky. They studied traffic reports and found that your chance of being injured in a car accident goes up as much as 52 percent on Friday the 13th. They said it is probably

just a self-fulfilling prophecy, caused by increased nervousness on the part of drivers. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, they suggest you just stay home on Friday the 13th.

I wouldn't recommend going to summer camp on that day, either.

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