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Science Coming Out of the Closet

By Eric W. Hagen and James J. Worman

Throughout history people have been deluged with warnings that the earth is approaching its final days, and unless some drastic, immediate action is undertaken, it is the end for the human race. In recent years, several scientists have come forth disputing the theories of apocalypse promoters Paul Ehrlich, Barry Commoner, Jeremy Rifkin, and others, attempting to add some common sense and rationality to the confusion and hype that too often surrounds environmental issues. Those who confront the alarmists always run the risk of being demonized by environmental activists and lobbyists, but they also realize the danger of being silent on issues that are crucial to the quality of life, the efficacy of government, and the integrity of science.

A Backlash

Skeptics of the "eco-crisis" are portrayed as a serious threat when an environmental journalist, such as Sharon Begley of *Newsweek*, reports, "If the critics are right, the globe has little to worry about. But if they win the debate and are wrong, it will be too late for repairs."¹ Such a statement is common among alarmists.

Philosopher of science Karl Popper once asserted that for any meaningful scientific statement or theory in the physical sciences to be credible, it must be *falsifiable*. In other words, it must be specific enough to be proven wrong. It need not be false; it can certainly be true, but such a hypothesis requires that it be testable. If the technical means are not available for testing, it must still be able to be tested in principle. With this in mind, it would seem odd that so many of the pseudoscientific claims (ESP, astrology, UFOs, etc.) which can never be proved wrong have so much influence on the public.²

Predictions that humans will soon destroy the earth stand only the test of time. Thus, skeptics are put in the difficult position of defending their ground. Since it is logically impossible to prove a negative (such as UFOs do not exist), one cannot prove that the earth will not end tomorrow. While the onus of proof should be on the one who asserts the positive, this is rarely the case. The results of past eschatological predictions can be revealed. Even so, as far off as many of these projections have been, it seems to make little difference. Original statements are revised to explain why things turned out differently, another dismal forecast is made, and the credibility of those making the initial claims

remains astonishingly intact.

It is a tragedy for the reputation of science when scientific credentials are abused in such a manner. Good scientists do not claim to know anything with absolute certainty. Therefore, one must be wary upon hearing a so-called expert assert that there is no longer any question or debate over a phenomenon that has received only recent attention. All scientific *truth* is provisional. A particular theory may be well supported or perhaps certainly true, but it is still subject to falsification. Of course, presenting all material as provisional is usually avoided; if one is constantly inserting disclaimers, a clumsy presentation results. However, this provisional circumstance certainly does not mean that all different scientific viewpoints are equally valid. According to Dartmouth College Astronomy Professor James Thorstensen, there is "good science, bad science, and crackpot science":

Crackpot science is generally not even internally consistent, and generally makes no useful predictions at all; it is the result of a surprisingly common mental state in which extreme eccentricity shades into a deluded belief in one's own extraordinary genius. Bad science is more respectable, and may even be correct, but it is marred by such things as weak lines of evidence and ill-directed, woolly-minded theorizing. Good science is marked by good evidence, a good understanding of what has come before, technical competence, clear thinking, clean interpretation, and often by the unification of a variety of seemingly separate phenomena.³

In order to determine good science, people would do well to ask the following questions:

Is it "good evidence" when computer models, used to measure climate fluctuations rely on assumptions and simplifications that do not adequately account for the influence of clouds and oceans? These can be tremendously misleading since they are based on data from weather stations that are located near growing cities.⁴

Is it "a good understanding of what has come before" when a demographer proclaims that civilization will come to a halt due to scarcity of a certain resource? Yet history shows us that resource shortages have existed as long as civilization, and never has a nation fallen due to the depletion of a resource.⁵

Is it "technical competence" when a pediatrician is considered an authority on nuclear power, a butterfly specialist is an expert on population growth, and an actress gives congressional testimony on an allegedly carcinogenic growth hormone?

Is it "clear thinking" when a leading proponent of the theory that CFCs are depleting the ozone says, "We have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we may have. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest?"⁶

Is it "clean interpretation" when a global warming advocate argues in a congressional hearing that a warming trend of a half a degree Centigrade over the course of the past century was caused by human-induced carbon emissions, and his evidence shows that the most significant climate change took place before most industrial greenhouse gases entered the atmosphere, not to mention before the big boom of the automobile industry?⁷

Indeed, there is a lot of unsound science being promoted by false prophets. Jonathan Schell, author of *Our Fragile Earth*, once stated: "[T]he reputation of scientific prediction needs to be enhanced. But that can happen, paradoxically, only if scientists disavow the certainty and precision that they normally insist on. Above all, we need to learn to act decisively to forestall predicted perils, even while knowing that they may never materialize. We must take action, in a manner of speaking, to preserve our ignorance. There are perils that we can be certain of avoiding only at the cost of never knowing with certainty that they were real."⁸

Science by Press Release

Perhaps most disturbing is a trend that became popular during the 1980s known as "science by press release." The

situation had gotten so bad that in 1992 the National Academy of Sciences had issued a report demanding that scientists refrain from "questionable research practices," such as presenting conjectures as fact, and releasing results of studies to the popular press before such research has been peer-reviewed and judged valid.⁹

Pre-eminent capitalist Malcolm Forbes once observed, "Edison invented the light bulb, roughly, on his *ten-thousandth* attempt. If we had depended on central planners to direct his experiments, we would all be sitting around in the dark today."¹⁰ It is not enough to point out the follies of the professional doomsayers; an alternative strategy must be articulated. This includes not only a sound understanding of science, but of economics and politics as well. Only when more members of the scientific community come out of the closet to challenge public misinformation will more people come to realize what is at stake in this debate.

Notes:

1. Sharon Begley, "Is the Ozone Hole in Our Heads?" *Newsweek*, October 11, 1993, p. 71.
2. A 1990 Gallup poll revealed that 52 percent of Americans believed in astrology, 46 percent in ESP, 59 percent in clairvoyance, 67 percent in personal experience with psychic phenomena, and 42 percent in communication with the dead.
3. James Thorstensen, Astronomy 2: "Stars and Their Life Histories," Dartmouth College, Fall 1993, p. 25 of lecture notes.
4. Robert C. Balling, Jr., *The Heated Debate: Greenhouse Predictions Versus Climate Reality* (San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, 1992), pp. 33-46.
5. Charles Maurice and Charles W. Smithson, *The Doomsday Myth: 10,000 Years of Economic Crises* (Stanford, Cal.: Hoover Institution Press, 1984).
6. Stephen Schneider, quoted in Dixy Lee Ray's, *Trashing the Planet: How Science Can Help Us Deal with Acid Rain, Depletion of the Ozone, and Nuclear Waste (Among Other Things)* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990), p.167. Also in paperback from Harper Perennial, 1992.
7. Goddard Institute for Space Studies meteorologist James Hansen testified before Congress in June 1988 that he has detected a worldwide warming of approximately 1 degree Fahrenheit since 1880.
8. Johnathan Schell, "Our Fragile Earth," *Discover*, October 1987:47.
9. Ronald Bailey, *Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p.21.
10. Malcolm Forbes, "Three Cheers for Capitalism," *Imprimis*, August, 1993, p. 4.

Mr. Hagen, a graduate of Pepperdine University with a bachelor's degree in biology, recently received master of arts degree in Liberal Studies at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Mr. Hagen is an editor for The Dartmouth Review, a conservative newspaper distributed on campus.

Dr. Worman is a Visiting Professor of Chemistry at Dartmouth College and thesis adviser for Mr. Hagen. Dr. Worman has been involved in teaching and research for twenty-seven years; his recent efforts include communicating scientific choices to the public.

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Healthy skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

Government Pushes Acupuncturists' Cause

Two years ago, the Office of Alternative Medicine was forced onto the National Institutes of Health by Congress. Initially it was supposed to identify and fund worthy scientific work that some might consider on the fringe. And it might even be nice to know more about what causes otherwise sensible people to be gulled into seeking out and undergoing utterly ridiculous treatments and procedures lacking any rational justification. Instead, the OAM has chosen to take an active part in helping acupuncture to gain medical respectability.

U.S. adherents of the practice are seeking, among other things, to have their needles reclassified by the FDA from investigational to Class II devices. What's the significance of such a change? It would allow acupuncturists to freely ply their trade and bill insurance companies and other third party payers, including the government. The only stumbling block is an annoying and, to the needle-twirlers, quite irrelevant matter of the evidence of acupuncture's efficacy. Paradoxically, the line being taken is that the scarcity and dubious quality of such evidence is due to the lack of government regulation of the practice! "The pressure hasn't been there to do studies and present data," said Suzanne Parisian, a physician in the FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health, according to a recent article in *Science* magazine. (264:770, 1994)

Fruits And Vegetables Not The Same As Pills?

Yet another study has now been published which fails to show any beneficial effects of antioxidant vitamins, this time against the occurrence of colorectal adenoma, a precursor of invasive cancer. The multi-center Polyp Prevention Study Group followed 751 subjects at high risk of developing the lesions by dividing them into groups which received either placebo, beta-carotene, vitamins C and E, or all three supplements. The four-year trial found no reduced incidence of adenomas among the treatment groups, causing the authors to suggest that "other dietary factors may make more important contributions to the reduction in the risk of cancer associated with a diet high in vegetables and fruits." [*New England Journal of Medicine*, 331:141, 1994.]

Let Your Fingers Beware!

The National Council Against Health Fraud Task Force on Nutrition Diploma Mills recently completed its study of nutritionist listings in telephone yellow page directories in multiple areas of 32 states. It found that among such listings, almost half of those claiming to be physicians or "nutritionists" were in fact utilizing invalid nutritional methods. The figure for those designating themselves dietitians was 9%. The portion of nutrition listings that were considered reliable were 84% for "dietitians," 40% for "nutritionists" and 32% for those claiming to be physicians.

Homeopathic Quacks Score One On Pediatrics

Pediatrics has now joined the ranks of otherwise respectable medical journals which have lent their reputations to pseudoscientific quackery. It recently published [93:719,1994] the results of an allegedly double-blind placebo-controlled trial of 18 different homeopathic remedies on the duration of diarrhea in 81 Nicaraguan children. In addition to concerns about the reliability of such data, the study was marred by the authors' highly unusual grouping of the results of the 18 different remedies. They also failed to compare the homeopathic remedies with standard oral hydration therapy, which is known to be efficacious. Instead, they chose the ethically questionable alternative of comparing with no treatment. As a result, *Pediatrics* readers were left to ponder uninterpretable data.

General Nutrition Pays Multi-Million Dollar Fine

General Nutrition, Inc., owner of the GNC health food store chain has agreed to pay \$2.4 million to the Federal Trade

Commission. The penalty is in connection with charges that it violated two previous agreed orders with the FTC. The 1970 and 1989 orders involved false claims made for 18 "energy" products, 15 weight loss remedies, 5 preparations for the treatment of baldness, and four other products for which other medical claims had been made.

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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"Psycho"-mantiums and The Shirley Show

By Ginny Vaughn

I watched an amazing program on one of the God-awful talk shows that have experienced exponential growth lately. (This is behavior that bacteria are *supposed* to exhibit!) The show with which I was so fascinated was on *Shirley*, airing September 16, 1994, and the subject was "People who can communicate with the dead." Notice the subtle difference between this title and "Can people communicate with the dead?"

Okay, let's look at this critically, shall we? Dr. Raymond Moody, the author of the book *Reunions* and the proprietor of a "psychomantium" was on the panel. Psychomantiums are basically closets three feet wide and six feet long with a four-foot by four-foot mirror at one end with a black velvet curtain surrounding it. At the other end is a comfy chair. The bereaved client is asked to sit quietly in the comfy chair and stare into the mirror while soothing music is played. Hmmmm. Maybe I should try this next time I'm having trouble sleeping. Anyway, deceased relatives appear and offer a promise of reunion. Please bear in mind that this is precisely what the client expected would happen when he or she paid their hard-earned money to Dr. Moody.

An audience member, anxious to add his two cents to the scintillating discussion, piped up and said that these apparitions are demons. Well, whatever. Dr. Moody claims to have "proof" of an afterlife using Near Death Experience anecdotes. He said, "Scientific evidence is an absurdity the way science is articulated today." I happen to agree that scientific evidence is an absurdity when one is dealing with an unfalsifiable claim. But that's just me.

Now, if I get this dude right, he's saying that since science can't answer near death experiences yet with authority, the only other possibility is that ghosts exist. If I were to visit a doctor with an illness, and the doctor was unable to pinpoint the exact cause of the illness right away, I suppose Dr. Moody would have me think that this was proof that I was possessed. Well, maybe I am, but it's none of his business. Questions can only validate what he says if what he says is, in fact, true. As Nietzsche said, "Faith is not wanting to know the truth."

Moody also claims that the psychomantium process is therapeutic for the grieving process. Perhaps so, if you don't believe that people should accept natural occurrences in life and keep living. One guest on the show, Scott Degenhardt, said that his dear old dead dad hovered by his bed. Oh yes, Scott was hovering as well. Scott and his dad communicated telepathically, which according to Scott, is more common when you're asleep because you're more open to the experience. Now, far be it from me to rain on Scott's little parade, but this dude was sawing logs. If he wants to dream about dead relatives again, my suggestion would be to remember what he had for dinner that night.

An audience member asked, "Why do some people have these experiences while others don't?" Panel member Lori O'Donohue said that you have to be open to the experience in order for the psychomantium experience to happen. How close that sounds to the old crystal ball starrer's lament of "my magic will not work with a skeptic in the room." I'll bet.

Moody continued to explain that two-thirds of all people have these experiences. Why? He doesn't know. Shirley polled the audience of roughly 200 people and asked for a show of hands from people who have had 'reunions.' Three audience

members raised their hands and Shirley rightly pointed out that three out of 200 is not two-thirds. "Well," said Dr. Moody, "they are afraid to admit it." How convenient.

The lone skeptic on the panel, bless his pointy little haid, was Dr. Gordon Stein. He attempted to explain that these experiences were most likely dreams. Since this explanation wasn't nearly as entertaining as spooky relatives, he was given very little time. I'm more than happy to step in and provide a bit of equal time. Rational skepticism isn't nearly as flashy as ghosts and goblins, but as a philosophy it is hard to beat.

Virginia Read Vaughn is a member of the North Texas Skeptics. She has worked in cardiac research and now works at UT-Southwestern Medical Center in medical graphics technology.

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

First, a couple of notes on last month's column:

- I erroneously wrote that *Roswell* was an HBO movie. In fact, it was a Showtime movie. HBO is the home of *The Larry Sanders Show*, the best thing on TV, so I feel terrible about inadvertently slandering them by saying they produced *Roswell*. My apologies.
- Due to the fact that the publisher of this newsletter insists on using cheap staples made in communist China by slave labor, most of you didn't receive any more of last month's issue than the last page with the address label on it. The rest separated and was lost in the mail. This means you probably didn't see the announcement of my "You Be The Psychic" contest, in which you can send me a postcard or contact me by E-Mail (via Prodigy at MJTT27A or via Compuserve at 71371,375) with your prediction as to whether there will be an "October Surprise" ... a big news event initiated by the White House and/or Democrats in Congress to knock election news off the front pages ... and if so, what it will be. Many political pundits are saying there will be one, so here's your chance to prove your psychic abilities by predicting it. No fair predicting that we'll invade Haiti.

Winners will be mentioned in this column (Whoopee!) and will receive a colorful, slightly misprinted North Texas Skeptics T-shirt. Prizes will be awarded for most accurate prediction and for most creative. Ties will be broken by dowsing rod. Because of last month's tragic staple screw-up, the deadline for entries is being extended to October 15th, so get cracking!

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Now, to new business. This whole staple thing has put me in a foul mood, which, combined with a lot of annoying media antics and attacks on skeptics in the past month, has hardened into a deep misanthropy. Ordinarily, I am the very soul of kindness ... a baby bird fallen from the nest has only to make his way to my door to be assured safe haven, and all the neighborhood children know me for a soft touch at Girl Scout Cookie time ... but even I have my limits!

It all started a few weeks ago when I was asked to appear on my friends', Ron Stevens and Joy Grdnic's, national radio show to discuss the latest news about Roswell (the Pentagon, after an exhaustive, eight-month investigation, announced that no flying saucer crashed in New Mexico in the 1940s ... it was a super secret spy balloon sent up to monitor the atmosphere for traces of nuclear tests by Russia, which at that time was not thought by the general public to have a bomb).

I had to share time on Ron & Joy's show with a man who has spent his entire life promoting the crashed UFO saucer tale

and who now works at the UFO museum in Roswell. He wrote one of the original press releases for the Army Air Force when the story first broke. Now, following my own advice, I tried to be a nice guy, because I don't believe skeptics make any converts by being combative and confrontational and coming across as close-minded. Instead of dismissing Roswell as the unfounded legend it is, I politely pointed out some of the many holes in the story and said that while I, personally, did not believe it, I would encourage people who are interested to read about it for themselves ... but especially to read Phil Klass' books (incidentally, under Ron's deft questioning, the other guy admitted that he had never actually SEEN a flying saucer, nor an alien, nor a picture of a flying saucer or alien, nor had the Army ever told him specifically that a flying saucer had crashed).

Afterward, Ron and Joy told me they thought my polite style came across very well on radio. Still, I felt a bit conflicted. All that niceness was persuasive, but it left me with a huge reserve of unexpressed bile and sarcasm. So for this column, I'm dispensing with diplomacy and the wry bon mot. Instead, I'll just buzz through all the things and people who have ticked me off in the past month, and as I do, I shall bring my tire iron of logic down sharply upon their thick, empty skulls, in hopes that it will knock some sense into them. You will know that they have been dispatched when you hear the sound, "BONG!!!" Let's get started ...

On a recent *Late Night with Conan O'Brian*, actress Joelly Fisher espoused her beliefs in all things occult, particularly reincarnation. She told Conan all about her past life during the French Revolution, to which he replied, "Were French waiters rude back then, too?" Joelly, isn't being the daughter of Eddie Fisher and Connie Stevens enough excitement to hold you for eternity without plagiarizing Charles Dickens? "BONG!!!"

On one recent Sunday evening, NBC presented two back-to-back specials. The first was promoted as a scientific examination of the "mysteries" of the Bermuda Triangle. It turned out that their "scientific" experts included such luminaries as Charles Berlitz, a man who has never heard a tall tale he didn't believe. Sample piece of narration, while showing underwater shots of natural rock formations on the ocean floor: "Many people believe these stones were part of a road that once led to the lost continent of Atlantis." Yes, and many people believe there are gnomes living under the staircase. To the producers: "BONG!" I'll spare Charles Berlitz, because his brain is scrambled enough already.

This incredible tommyrot was followed by a "very special edition" of *Unsolved Mysteries*, this one focusing on aliens and flying saucers. As usual, skeptics and scientists were virtually ignored. In the segment on Roswell, a skeptical investigator was given 31 seconds (I keep a stop watch on my desk) to comment, while the rest of the report was completely pro-wacko. I was particularly appalled by the show's direct attack on skeptics. Following the skeptic's highly abbreviated remarks, narrator Robert Stack ponderously intoned that we should remember, it was "skeptics who once told Columbus the world was flat ... "

I've made my living rewriting bad scripts into good ones, so allow me to correct that line. Try this version, NBC: "Some foolish people will believe anything they are told, without bothering to check the facts. Such people once believed the world was flat. But Columbus was skeptical of that view, and set out to disprove it scientifically." There, isn't that better?

Wags used to refer to NBC as the "Nothing But *Cheers*" network. Well, now that *Cheers* is gone, I guess they're trying to make it the "Nothing But Crap" network. To NBC, who inflicted these two hours of unrelenting drivel on the American public (or on the 2% of the public who watch NBC on Sunday nights): "Bong! ... BONG! ... Bong!" Hum that along to the tune of the NBC chimes.

A special note to Robert Stack: I sympathize with the desire to pick up a fat paycheck by doing voiceover work on *Unsolved Mysteries*. It's easy money, and you can do it in your tennis clothes. But you're taking whatever respect and credibility you've earned over the years and tossing it away. What's next, infomercials for impotence cures? Your stentorian baritone is reminding us less and less of Elliot Ness and more and more of Ted Baxter. Mr. Stack, consider this your wake-up alarm: "BONG!!!"

Speaking of attacks on skeptics, *The Dallas Morning News* reports that some police officers in Gilmer, Texas, not only took those infamous yet erroneous claims of Satanic ritual abuse seriously, but they tried to undermine the careers and credibility of officers who were skeptical of them. The officer who was himself accused of heinous, Satanically-inspired crimes says that even though he's been completely cleared, some people who have known him all his life still cross the

street to avoid talking to him. Perhaps Gilmer should replace its entire police force with an exorcist, a clove of garlic and a rabbit's foot. To those officers who attacked the skeptics and to the people who crossed the street, try avoiding this: "BONG!"

This month, *Inside Edition*, which can be tough on faith healers, proved itself to be easy on other purveyors of nonsense. Their story on the Pentagon investigation of Roswell was ten full minutes worth of pro-UFO hooey. Their sole "expert" on the subject was the notorious Stanton Friedman, a man who's turned this whopper into a career. Naturally, according to Friedman, the fact that the government claims to have found no evidence at all of a UFO crash is just further proof that the massive, 46-year long coverup is continuing! By the way, this happened the same week that the Pentagon's top secret plan for invading Haiti was published in detail in *USA Today*, a week prior to the invasion deadline. There was a little chart and everything!

To the producers of *Inside Edition*: "BONG!" To Stanton Friedman: "BONG!" And to the *Inside Edition* reporter who made my headache even worse by shouting into the microphone throughout the entire story: "BONG! BONG! BONG!" Now, how's *your* head feel, pal?!

According to an article syndicated by Knight-Ridder Newspapers, Transcendental Meditation is getting a lot more expensive. Learning TM cost \$35 in the 1960s. In the '70s, a mantra and TM instruction set you back \$125. Last summer, it was \$400. Now, the fee is \$1,000 (these are all adult prices ... apparently, kids under 12 levitate free).

Franchisees of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi warn that if you pay less for meditation lessons, then you are not dealing with a genuine, certified guru, and might end up stranded halfway to nirvana without a boarding pass. You see, the hefty new price is necessary because it weeds out curiosity seekers and leaves only the most serious suckers ... sorry, I mean, "students!" If you are actually considering paying these people one thousand smackeroos for a mantra, then please allow me to save you some money. Here's your mantra, free of charge: "BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONG!!!"

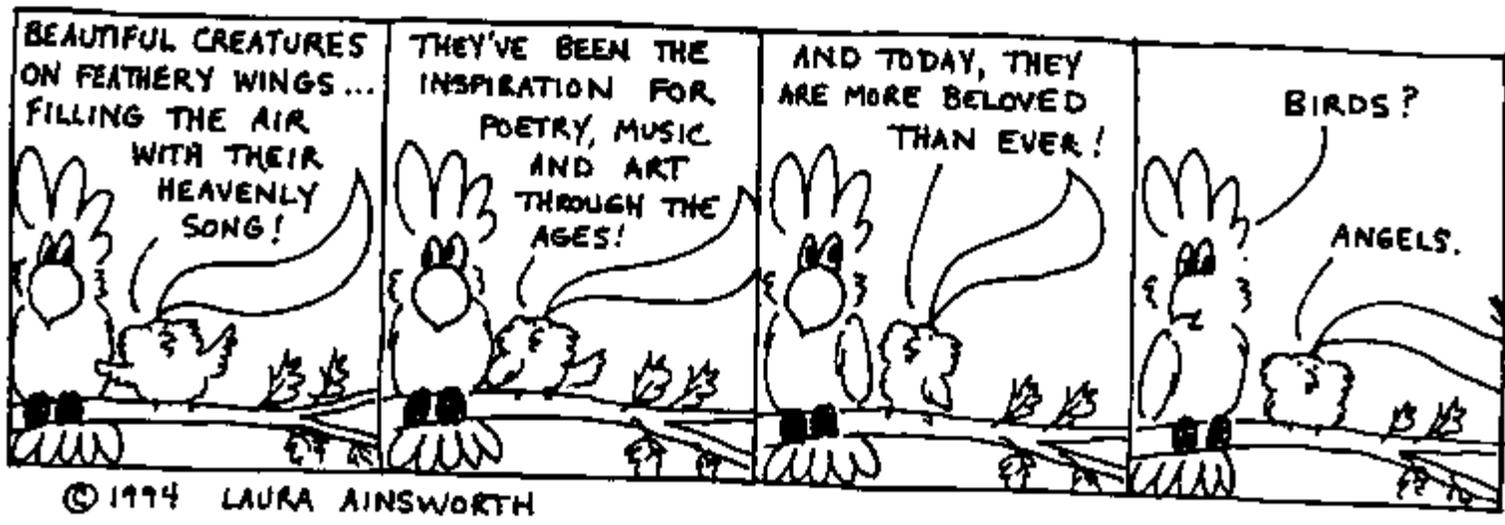
Finally, to the two sisters who removed a third sister's eyeballs because they thought she was possessed by demons: "BONG! BONG!" To *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition*, for suggesting that perhaps voodoo really did have something to do with this, or that it will magically undermine our troops in Haiti by turning them into mindless zombies (something more likely to happen to habitual viewers of *Hard Copy*): "BONG! BONG!" And to the people who keep sending me catalogs filled with angel and cherub paraphernalia, which really creeps my wife out: "BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!"

Well, I don't know about you, but I feel better already!

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Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by **Laura Ainsworth**



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