



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Coincidences most times aren't

By Gina Kolata

Coincidences, those surprising and often eerie confluences of events that are the making of familiar mythology, may not be so unusual, according to university researchers. Two Harvard statisticians have spent more than ten years collecting thousands of tales of coincidences, and subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Their conclusion: that almost all can be explained by simple natural laws.

When a woman won the New Jersey lottery twice in four months, the media reported widely that it was an amazing coincidence that beat odds of 1 in 17 trillion. But when Professors Persi Diaconis and Frederick Mosteller analyzed the probabilities more fully, it turned out that the real probability of such an event happening somewhere in the United States was more like 1 in 30 (0.033).

The "Law of Very Large Numbers," widely recognized in statistics, states (in simplified terms), "If you have a large enough sample, anything is likely to happen." The two statisticians reviewed a large body of calculations and analyses of coincidences performed by other researchers, and devised new techniques for studying the phenomenon under a wide range of circumstances. They define a coincidence as "a surprising concurrence of events, perceived as meaningfully related, with no apparent causal connection." Beginning from the presumption that there are no extraordinary forces outside the realm of known science which act to produce consequences, they also recognized that seeming coincidences are an important source of scientific insight and should not be dismissed out of hand.

The Law of Truly Large Numbers, for example, is that even if something has only a 1 in a million chance of happening ($P=0.000001$), it will happen eventually given enough time and a large enough population. "It's the blade of grass paradox," says Diaconis. "Suppose I'm standing in a large field and I put my finger on a blade of grass. The chance of choosing that particular blade of grass may be one in a million. But the chance that I will choose *a* blade is certain." ($P=1$)

When the woman won the New Jersey lottery twice in a four month period, it was reported as a 1-in-17 trillion long shot. However, 1-in-17 trillion is the odds that one given person who buys only one ticket for exactly two New Jersey lotteries will win both times. The real mathematical basis should be: "What is the chance that some person, of the millions who buy lottery tickets in the United States, hits a lottery twice in a lifetime?" So defined, the event becomes "practically a sure thing," according to statisticians at Purdue University. Over a seven-year period, they concluded, the odds are better than even that there will be a double lottery winner somewhere in the United States. Even over a four-month period, the odds of a double winner somewhere in the country are better than one in 30 ($P \hat{=} 0.033$).

Another principle that demystifies many coincidences is what researchers call "multiple end points," occasions when what might qualify as a coincidence is not defined in advance, and in which many chance events might qualify. For example, this could apply at a party where two people might come from the same city. This might seem to be a coincidence, but for the fact that almost anything two strangers might have in common could be viewed as a coincidence shared given or surnames, birthdays, schools, etc.

A third category of coincidence is those that are close but not exact. Dissimilarity, no matter how slight, drives the probabilities for a "coincidence" up dramatically. For example, when 23 persons are in a room, the chance is even that two will have the same birthday (not necessarily the same year). With 14 persons, the chance is even that two will have been born within a day of each other (still not necessarily the same year). Diaconis recalled a friend whose husband, daughter and son were each born on the 11th day of a month. How many birthdays do we need to know to have three on the same day in a month?

"There are 30 categories; i.e., thirty days of the month. Therefore, you only need to know eighteen people to have an even chance that three will be born on the same day of the month," Diaconis explained. So the "coincidence" is not very unusual.

Examining coincidences with these three principles in mind usually turns what appears unexpected into an explainable pair of events. If so, then why do educated people think there is significance to apparent coincidences? According to Diaconis, no one story is convincing by itself, but taken all together people think that they must mean something. And don't they? Diaconis quotes a fundamental law of logic: "No number of flawed arguments produce a sound conclusion."

Adapted from an article by Gina Kolata in The New York Times, reprinted from the March, 1994 issue of Forum, the journal of the International Society of Air Safety Investigators.

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Creationism's youth kick

By John Blanton

The Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS) is a young-Earth creationist group based in Dallas. They hold monthly meetings on the first Tuesday of each month at the Ridgewood Recreation Center on Fisher Road. MIOS Chairman Don Patton hosts this lecture series, which usually consists of a talk by Patton or some invited speaker. October's topic, however, was a video presentation of a talk given by Russell Humphreys, a Ph.D. physicist working at Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico.

The young-Earth creationists stick to the literal time scale of creation in the Bible, thereby implying the Earth and the universe are in the order of 6000 years old, certainly less than 10,000 years old. Humphreys stated up front in his presentation that Christian fundamentalists need to demonstrate this very elementary tenet of Genesis, or else they will be unable to defend the more subtle biblical principles. Humphreys' talk bore down on five points that he considers severely limit the age of the Earth.

In his pamphlet, "Evidence for a Young World," he cites 100 such examples, but he apparently finds these five the easiest to explain. Some of his examples would be better left in the filing cabinet for the sake of his young-Earth argument, but others raise thorny and quite legitimate issues for mainstream science to answer. I'll go over the main points of these arguments and will just discuss some of the more interesting explanations from mainstream science. For a more thorough discussion of both sides of the issue the reader is referred to Authur Strahler's excellent book *Science and Earth History the Evolution/Creation Controversy*:¹

1. Galaxies Here's the rub. Look into the sky and you see spiral galaxies; clouds consisting of billions of stars spinning about a common center in a pinwheel formation (see Figure 1). Measurement of the rate of motion of the individual stars discloses a troubling concern. The stars near the center of the galaxies are moving at such a rate that they will circle the center more quickly than stars farther out. A quick mathematical analysis will show (and Humphreys has done so) that after a few million years a spiral galaxy gets "wound up" by this process. The spiral shape completely disappears within a half billion years, leaving us to wonder what happens in the remaining fifteen-plus billion years of the universe. Why aren't all galaxies wound into flat disks by now, especially the Milky Way galaxy where we now are and where we have been for over four billion years? Young Earth creationists will assert that these galaxies have been in existence much less than four billion years, maybe even less than 10,000 years. Of course this misses the question of why the galaxies got wound into a spiral in the first place, a process that ought to take at least a million years.

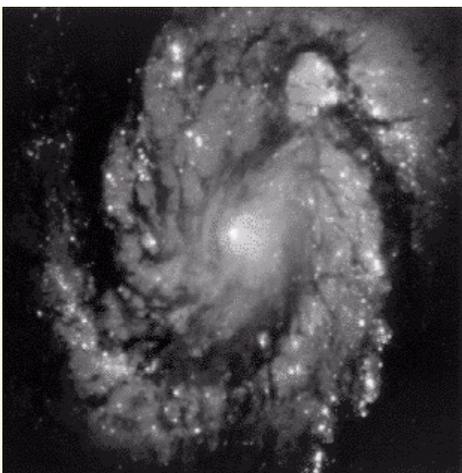


Figure1. Spiral galaxy photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope

Strahler cites a work by Steven Dutch² explaining that even spiral galaxies are approximately flat disks of stars and that the spiral features are bands of new stars that shine more brightly in the blue spectrum, giving the overall galaxy its spiral appearance. Even with this explanation the spiral galaxy argument will continue to provide fuel for the creationists for years to come, since the new star explanation will not be easy to understand by the population at large.

2. Comets are another favorite for creationists. They would like to remind you that a 5-billion year-old solar system should present a very stable structure. It should not look like something that has just been born or that is about to die soon. Roll the clock back a few million years, and you should see the same thing you see now. The problem is that comets always seem to be dying, witness Shoemaker-Levy 9. Why are there still any comets left after five billion years?

Good question, and I wish I had thought of that one. Mainstream science can only postulate mechanisms for the creation of new comets to replace the ones constantly being destroyed. One proposed explanation is the so-called Oort cloud, a region of comet material thought to lie in a region 10,000 to 100,000 astronomical units out from the sun. Needless to say, creationists get a good belly laugh when you try to propose something like this. That's probably how it will stay until mainstream science is able to provide experimental evidence to support either the Oort cloud hypothesis or else some worthy alternative.

3. Erosion Humphreys also likes to talk about erosion of the continents and the sediment that should result from this erosion. He states that with current rates of erosion the North American continent, for example, should be washed flat in fifteen million years. Yet there stand the Rockies (and even Comanche Peak). Humphreys asserts it's safer to believe the continents were formed a few thousands years ago. Then there was a great flood that fairly well shaped the landscape as we see it now. Since the flood erosion has been going on much as we see it today.

4. Salt Humphreys' fourth topic was salt in the sea. This is a classic creationist argument, and it goes something like this: Rivers wash salt into the oceans, but nothing seems to wash salt out of the oceans. Evaporation removes water from the oceans, and some it winds back up on land through rainfall. If this process has been going on for millions of years, then the oceans should be a lot saltier.

5. Population Perhaps Humphreys' weakest argument was the one he finished up with, and it's based on people, or population. Here is what he had to say about that: Mainstream science asserts that the stone age of civilization lasted about 100,000 years. Given the estimated average human population for that period about four billion people should have died during this time. The question Humphreys poses is, "Where are all of their graves?"

..... **O.K.**

Following the video presentation, Don Patton fielded a few questions. He seemed to make some reference to the decaying speed of light conjecture, and I asked him if he was talking about Barry Setterfield, so we got off onto that subject. Setterfield has asserted that the speed of light was much faster in the past than it is now (it's quite fast even today). This provides creationists with a way to explain why we can now see things millions of light years away if the universe is only a few thousands of years old. I cautioned Don against standing behind this thesis, since it is absolutely indefensible, but he still wants to stick with it. If you want to read up this subject some more, once again see Strahler's book.

Patton's lack of scientific acumen on the Setterfield conjecture and other topics seemed to bother others besides me in the audience. Glenn Morton stood up and reminded those in attendance that he is a creationist who once published in favor of the young Earth. He now renounces that position because the evidence is too much against it, and he urged others to abandon the idea. A problem he mentioned is that after you teach this concept to your children and then send them to college where they will learn otherwise, their loyalty to your other teachings will be threatened. One cheerful member of the group offered a solution: "Don't send them." In a subsequent phone conversation, Morton offered to debate against the young Earth argument if the matter comes up. That opportunity may come soon.

Prior to the meeting I had sent Don Patton a letter inviting him to address the NTS early in 1995, and at the meeting Don expressed his willingness to do so. We previously invited MIOS to give a

presentation back in 1990, but Patton declined at that time, saying he didn't think a 45-minute format gave sufficient time to explain the science of creationism. MIOS had initially agreed to the 1990 program, but that was before they consulted with Patton. Since we didn't get word of the MIOS withdrawal until the day of the meeting we were left without a speaker. However, MIOS member Ron Huffman, not knowing of Patton's cancellation, showed up, and we persuaded him to talk on the subject. It was a good presentation, and we had a lively discussion. Hopefully we will have another one this coming February.

MIOS is not the only creationist group based locally, but they are the only group with regular meetings open to the public that I know of. Early in October I received in the mail a notice that Kent Hovind would be presenting a creationism conference over a three day period at the Canyon Creek Baptist Church in Richardson. I took this as an invitation and showed up the first night, sitting in the very front row. This is the first I heard of Hovind, who seems to have a thriving, nationwide creationism conference business. Hovind is quite an interesting piece of work, and I will cover his presentation in the next issue.

References:

1. Strahler, Arthur N., *Science and Earth History - the Evolution/Creation Controversy*, (Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY).
2. Dutch, Steven I., *A critique of creationist cosmology*, Journal of Geological Education, vol. 30, pp. 27-33 as cited in Strahler.

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Ghost story: part I

By Mike Sullivan

It was a dark and stormy night. A cup of tea turned blood-red when stirred. Glasses danced on the table as if animated by unseen hands. Lights flickered. Dollar bills floated in mid-air. All of this happened under the noses of 10 confirmed Skeptics, gathered together inside a haunted house just a few weeks before Halloween.

And *then* things got weird.

The place was the Catfish Plantation Restaurant in Waxahachie, and the North Texas Skeptics were the dinner guests of *The Dallas Morning News* and its feature writer Michael Precker. Mr. Precker had called NTS President Joe Voelkerling and wondered if a few hard-core NTSers would mind attending a dinner in the old house and offering up their thoughts on all the spooky stories told by its owners as the guests of his employer, the A.H. Belo Corporation. Not being skeptical of the value of a free meal, we accepted.

The weather was certainly accommodating that night: a dreary day was followed by steady rain and thunderstorms during the evening of October 15th. We all arrived safely, guided to the out-of-the-way eatery by the billboards leading us from the Interstate. Since the Super Conducting Super Collider project was canceled by Congress earlier this year, Waxahachie needs all the tourism help it can get, and the proprietors of the Catfish Plantation make it a point to steer folks to their business. Each sign for the restaurant notes its claimed status as a "haunted" restaurant, something that one might think one would not want to advertise if indeed it were bad for business.

Soon after we were seated and Mr. Precker took out his reporter's notebook, the spirited shenanigans began (see Virginia Vaughan's story elsewhere in this issue for explanations of all the table magic). Mike Martin, always ready with a deck of cards, a rubber thumb or some invisible thread, entertained with some standard trick-shop magic ... much to the amazement of some credulous restaurant workers. They didn't seem to want to believe that it was Mike making some balled-up U.S. currency levitate in the dining room, and not one of their ephemeral tricksters in residence.

Ginny pulled the old rubber-bulb-under-the-dinnerware trick, right out of Penn & Teller's *How to Play with Your Food*, making a cup of iced tea teeter on its own. As much as we tried to interest Mr. Precker in these little mysteries, he was busy making notes and listening to our suspicion of supernatural explanations for un-mysterious things like flickering lights, cold drafts and leaky pipes in a 100-year old house.

Later on, the owners of the business, Mr. and Mrs. Baker, regaled us with stories reminiscent of Scout camp campfire tales. When I asked her for an example of a purported ghostly antic which left a physical artifact, she said that they discovered a leaky pipe in the attic one day, with the pipe broken in such a way as to be inexplicable, according to Mrs. Baker. If that is true, then I suspect many readers of *The Skeptic* have ghosties in their homes as well, or at least in their plumbing. I wonder if young plumbers are taught ghost-busting as part of their apprenticeship.

Another example she offered was duly recorded in the logbook kept for guests to record their supernatural experiences. An entry from a Robert Dillon of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and dated October 31st (!), 1992, told of his claim that his long-missing driver's license suddenly appeared in his wallet after seeing something weird in the dining room. I checked all the computerized phone listings I could find for Santa Fe and turned up no R. Dillons, and the few R. Dillons I did contact in the state weren't the person in question. If Mr. Dillon could be found, his story would indeed be interesting.

What was interesting about Mr. Dillon's story is Mr. Precker's reaction when I mentioned to him that my initial checking to verify the story turned up nothing. Precker, who is a working reporter at a major metro daily, seemed surprised that a Skeptic would go through the trouble of checking the facts of a story or following up on what could be an interesting lead. I tried to tell him that that is what critical thinking is all about: not believing a thing without good cause, and looking into unusual claims before making a decision on the merits of same.

Mr. Precker's story ran in the *Morning News* as a front-page feature in the *Today* section on October 30th, complete with spooky pictures of the group and Mrs. Baker. Overall, I thought Mr. Precker did both sides a bit of a favor. Both NTS and the restaurant could benefit from some additional publicity, and we were glad to have it. The Bakers certainly got a boost from the additional credibility their tales will get after receiving such high-profile coverage in the big Dallas newspaper. And the photo of the logbook will lead some readers to think that there must be *something* to all of this, to have a whole *book* filled with guest's tales of slamming windows and baby's names written on windows.

The Catfish Plantation is a business, trying hard to pull diners in from the big city to the north and the Interstate a few miles across town. If they need a "gimmick" to pull in customers, selling fried catfish is hardly unique. It's much better for business to claim to be "haunted," and milk the anecdotes about leaky pipes for all they're worth. For their desire to remain in business, the Baker's can hardly be blamed. Anyone who takes the stories told at the Catfish Plantation as evidence of life after life, however, needs a large serving of critical thinking added to their intellectual menu.

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Ghost story: part II

By Virginia Vaughn

Mike Sullivan beat me to the punch with "it was a dark and stormy night," so I won't say it. But it was. Bwah-hah-hah!

The North Texas Skeptics were invited to spend a dark and stormy night in the company of ghosties at the Catfish Plantation restaurant in Waxahachie. Always ready to puff out our chest and charge, clear headed, into the fray, we arrived at the Plantation, which is a charming turn of the century house on Water Street. Accompanying all our negative energy was Michael Precker of *The Dallas Morning News* who set up this meeting of matter and anti-matter.

The house was in full Halloween regalia including, and I have to mention this, a tiny tombstone marked 'baby' with an actual teddy bear sitting atop the mock grave ... in the rain. Well, let's have some catfish!

Inside the restaurant, there were all kinds of spooky consumables to be had. There were a couple of book titles about haunted houses available for purchase. There was an altar of sorts to ghosts, with all manner of corny little ghost figurines surrounding a binder full of diner's ghost anecdotes. A fair amount of these anecdotes appeared to have been recorded by children.

We were quite well behaved and didn't even think about horsing around until we had been seated a good five minutes or so. I think there's a reason we aren't known as the North Texas Skeptical Restrained Persons. We had tea turn to blood (the blood of a fruit bat maybe), tea glasses dancing on the table ('table play' in ghostie vernacular and they danced for free), and flashing lights. Being the skeptics that we are, nobody raised an eyebrow and everybody proceeded to finger the perpetrators.

One NTS stunt gave me pause. Mike Martin began demonstrating his impressive manual dexterity, performing a sleight-of-hand floating dollar bill trick. The trick caused quite a stir among the waitstaff, including a cute, grand motherly waitress who, according to her tales, should be quite used to seeing objects float around the room. "Come in here," she yelled to the other waitresses, "you're not going to believe this!"

Mrs. Baker, one of the restaurant owners, told us the legend of the catfish place, including a story about wanting to get to the bottom of all the trouble. She hired ghost hunters who, of course, have nothing to gain by finding ghosts, except, of course, money and publicity. It took a couple of ghost busting years to get to the bottom of it. The house is haunted, you see, and these poor ghosts were having trouble finding the light. With the benevolent ghost hunters' help (they used a meter to measure 'energy') these poor souls found the light. Why are they still around?

Mr. Baker said that you could probably find an explanation for each individual occurrence but there are "just so darned many" that he's convinced they have ghost infestation. If this sounds familiar to you, it's because this is the same quantity vs. quality argument favored by UFOlogists. Mr. Baker also said that having ghosts split expenses with him has strengthened his religious convictions. What religion says that when you die, you go back and provide free publicity for small businessmen? In Waxahachie!?! And exactly when did the Holy Ghost welcome interlopers in ghost town?

Mike Precker initially expressed his surprise to Joe Voelkering, the NTS President, that we were still skeptical. I think he understands now that we're skeptics, and that's our gig. We're not inclined to take anecdotal evidence as absolute fact even when anecdotes are provided by very charming people in a very charming house.

I would like to point out that the Bakers have a gimmick, one that has been quite successful in providing free publicity by members of the press. It's not hurting anyone except to foster a belief that the metaphysical realm is alive and well with no evidential support. I would like to propose to the Bakers that if they are sincerely wanting to find out what is causing coffee urns to fill up mysteriously with silverware, or any other metaphysical-type panty raids, they should install a security camera. It's simple and probably cheaper than ghost hunters. Plus, the tapes are admissible in a court of law and the prosecution of people who break and enter is much more durable.

The catfish was great! I highly recommend the place, but bring your own gimmicks.

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Healthy skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

An object lesson in weight loss quackery

One's body weight reflects one's body mass: of muscle, bone, blood, and fat. But when most people talk about "losing weight," they're talking about losing fat, even though, other things being equal, an individual with less bodyfat will often have less muscle as well since it takes muscle to haul around the fat.

Fat represents stored food Calories in excess of that needed for the body's energy needs. Therefore, one's bodyfat is directly related to Calories taken in and inversely related to calories expended.

The Caloric values of various food items are readily available: 4 ounces of broiled cod, for example, is 193 Calories. An ounce of cheddar cheese is 115 Calories. An ounce of a *Snickers* bar is 130 Calories. A McDonald's *Big Mac* is 561 Calories. An ounce of pure fat, whether butter, margarine, oil, or fat stored by the body, is 250 Calories.

The Calories normally expended by the body depend on one's age, sex, height and weight, muscular activity, emotional state, the environmental temperature, and other factors. A 70-kilogram (154 pounds) man will burn approximately 77 Calories an hour (1848/day) lying still, but awake. Walking on a level plane at 2.6 mph, the same individual will expend about 200 Calories per hour, while jogging 5.3 mph will consume approximately 570 Calories an hour. Thus, while daily caloric expenditures may vary considerably, even for the same individual from day to day, most people will be burning 2000-3000 Calories on a daily basis.

In conclusion: BODYFAT *equals* CALORIES IN *minus* CALORIES OUT. This is why sensible solutions to the problem of overweight always come down to some combination of reduced-calorie diets and exercise. Furthermore, since dietary fat has twice the calories of protein and carbohydrate, reduced calorie diets are generally low fat diets. These elementary facts, and the kinds of numbers given above, govern the realities of weight loss and weight gain.

Now consider the following, which arrived in my mailbox recently. I've only omitted some of the irrelevant promotional verbiage while preserving the actual claims and enough of the rest to convey the overall tone of the piece—

"I [*Nowhere is anyone's name mentioned!*] GUARANTEE! YOU CAN LOSE 70 POUNDS IN 40 DAYS OR YOUR MONEY BACK ... Discovered by a doctor to help overweight patients without a prescription! The weight-loss program I used was discovered by a cardiologist. This renowned physician devoted the majority of his practice to developing an easy, safe, and permanent solution for those individuals who were found to be incurably obese. ... This doctor's program was formulated to rapidly melt away 30, 60, or even 100 pounds while you eat your favorite high-calorie foods. If you suffer from obesity like I did, then I urge you to try this program now, while it can still be dispensed without a prescription exclusively through V-Cal Labs. Fastest and most permanent weight-loss program known! Simply take one V-Cal tablet each day at breakfast and watch your extra pounds and inches disappear as you follow the doctor's plan.

"Yes, V-Cal is without a doubt the fastest way to lose weight and keep it off. Previously, I must have tried everything I read or heard about. But nothing worked! With V-Cal, I not only lost the weight, but also the unsightly bulges I always thought I'd be plagued with since my childhood. ...<>Customer's Guarantee You can eat up to six meals a day. You will lose as much weight as you wish. You will lose weight faster than ever before. You will look better than you ever dreamed possible. IF YOU ARE NOT SATISFIED WITH THE RESULTS OF THE V-CAL PROGRAM, RETURN THE UNUSED PORTION WITHIN 30 DAYS FOR A FULL AND PROMPT REFUND!"

And, on the reverse of the slick sheet carrying the above—

"Doctor's program lets you eat all you want and still lose 30, 60, or even 100 lbs. in record time! Incredible, but true! I lost 70 pounds of fat in just 40 days. Thanks to the doctor's V-Cal Program, I was able to lose all of this weight without having to change anything in my lifestyle. I ate all I wanted of fatty meats, bacon, pork, ice cream and fattening deserts [*sic*]. I consumed unlimited amounts of cheese and butter. I used all the oil I wanted in salad dressings and plenty of heavy cream in my coffee. In fact, I ate all I wanted of every HIGH CALORIE food I liked!

"But what amazed me most, was while I STUFFED MYSELF EATING AS MUCH AS I WANTED, THE FAT STILL KEPT DISAPPEARING. It has been one year since I lost the 70 pounds that my doctor desperately wanted me to lose. And to this day I have yet to gain one pound back! That's because with V-Cal your weight loss is permanently guaranteed for life!"

It's strictly "CHECK, CASH, *or* MONEY ORDER ONLY!" by the way, to a P.O. Box in Canton, New York. No mention is made of the product's ingredients, but \$21.95 gets you the 30 day plan, while the 120 day plan is \$60.95 postpaid, if you care to test this 40-day (or lifetime?) guarantee for the 30 days you're given.

Now just leave aside the claim of "permanent" weight loss and some of the other trivialities. What would it take to lose 70 pounds of fat in 40 days while eating as much of whatever you wanted? That's 280,000 Calories total, 7000 Calories a day *even if you ate nothing* for that time. If you were that 70 kg man mentioned earlier, you could do it by jogging for 10 hours a day. But if you insisted on ingesting, say, just 2000 food Calories daily, you'd have to increase your jogging time to some 17 hours daily.

I leave it to readers of *The Skeptic* to draw their own conclusions. Mine is that, unless the daily V-Cal tablet induces vomiting and an irresistible compulsion to exercise for the major portion of one's waking hours, the promotional material is an outstanding example of the axiom that if one is going to try and put over a lie, it should be a BIG LIE.

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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Letters to the editor

To The Editor:

I have in the past enjoyed reading Dr. Gorski poke fun at the dogmas of Homeopathy, but I can see that Dr. Gorski has his own dogma: "Progress." He attacks the "agitators" who have concerns with genetic engineered food entering the marketplace quickly and easily without stating their main position. They merely ask that the product be labeled as genetically engineered. I can hardly see this compared to Luddites burning down factories. My opinion is that the non-disclosure of the special nature of this food is an infringement of the rights of the consumer to know what they are buying.

Dr. Gorski goes on to say that injecting cows with abnormally large amounts of hormones is a good thing. Even if there were no side effects, there is little to be gained by increasing milk production. In North America and Europe dairy production is either heavily subsidized or regulated because there is an oversupply of milk.

What I see at the base of these two positions is a religious devotion to the dogma of progress. As skeptics I believe we should promote and exalt science but science has to be differentiated from technological applications. Technological applications such as the genetically altered tomato or the hormone-injected cow have a lot more to do with profits than with science per se.

Gorski defends genetic engineering as if it were dogma that is above questioning. I believe an honest appraisal of genetic engineering would result in the renaming of the venture genetic tinkering. If the gene alterers knew more about the ramifications of their actions, which is difficult considering the complexity of the biological system, I could accept the term engineering. Engineers (the kind that build devices and buildings) are currently attempting to take the name away from software makers. This is in part because the lack of any professional discipline or accountability in the software business (I know this one from the inside and it is true) gives the professional engineer a bad name. Perhaps genetic "engineering" should be the next target.

John Towes
Manitoba Skeptics
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Dr. Gorski replies:

If Mr. Towes appreciated my remarks concerning homeopathy, he may remember my conceding that "in a prescientific era during which effective medical measures were few, using smaller doses instead of larger and waiting patiently to see what would happen instead of immediately turning to more purging or leeches or whatever probably did give better results." Yet there is no denying that modern medical science represents an improvement, which is to say progress over the thinking of 18th Century physicians.

Even the Luddites offered what seemed to them reasonable arguments, though they hadn't thought of allying them with specious ones intended to look scientific. Thus, though there may be a relationship between the government's subsidy of the dairy industry and excess supply (a direct one, I'd suppose), it's certainly irrelevant to the economic reality that getting more for less, or the same thing that you had for less still, is a good thing.

I certainly don't begrudge anyone's individual opposition to some of the concomitants of progress. It's not hard to find people who pine for the days of any number of objects and practices that have or are passing out of use, from vinyl LP recordings to manual typewriters to the horse and buggy. But trying to accommodate such emotional preferences in the case of BST use, the Flav'r Savr tomato, and similar innovations by instituting "genetically engineered" labeling is irrational. We might as well insist that every hamburger come with a detailed description of the cattle's pedigree and national origin, living conditions, veterinary care, age at slaughter, transportation and processing of the carcasses, etc. etc., and including, perhaps, the gender, race, ethnic background, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation of those involved in the whole process, and the same for the other ingredients of the sandwich. Some people would be genuinely concerned to have such information. But the fact is that none of these things bestows any "special nature" on the food item(s), nor do the tinkering, to date, of genetic engineering.

Tim Gorski, M.D.

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

Today is Halloween, which used to be one of my favorite holidays. Unfortunately, the TV networks and newspapers have concocted a new Halloween tradition which is making me start to dread October: the credulous pseudo-documentary/feature story on supernatural topics. In the past three weeks, I can't even begin to count all the ludicrous "very special editions" of *Unsolved Mysteries* focusing on sightings of the ghosts of UFO abductees in the Bermuda Triangle which have numbed my brain, nor all the wire service stories about haunted houses, from ante-bellum mansions in Louisiana to tract houses in Tarzana, California, which I have slogged through.

I am not about to review all of these time wasters, because most of them weren't worth watching the first time, much less thinking about later. But a couple of TV shows on bizarre topics are worthy of note. The first was an *Ancient Mysteries* episode on vampires, which ran on the Arts & Entertainment Network, and which proved to be a model of how such specials should be done. The first half of the show traced the history of vampire myths, complete with gory illustrations and contemporary accounts by vampire hunters from the 17th and 18th centuries. A mountain of evidence was presented for the existence of vampires: people who complained of someone sitting on their chests, then were found dead the next morning with blood on their pillows ... bodies unearthed from graves after more than a month, with no signs of decomposition or rigor mortis ... stakes driven through the hearts of the bodies, accompanied by bleeding and an unearthly groan from the long dead corpse! Why, it must all be true!

Then, the narrator went on to explain that skeptics investigated rationally and figured out how several coincidences had converged to foster the vampire myth. First, there was an epidemic of TB in Eastern Europe at this time, the symptoms of which included a heaviness on the chest and coughing up blood on your pillow. Second, people then were only familiar with the decomposition of bodies above ground ... they didn't realize that a cold, sealed coffin preserves the body. They also did not realize that rigor mortis is temporary, that coagulated blood can liquefy again (explaining the bleeding when the stake was driven through the heart), or that the pounding of the stake was forcing air through the larynx, creating that terrifying groan.

The third coincidence was a lucky outgrowth of the first two. Because people were afraid of vampires, they started burning bodies instead of burying them in shallow graves ... and this helped stop the TB epidemic. So in this case, a superstition proved beneficial ... but in a way that the European peasants never understood! This was an excellent program, and if you have any interest in the bloody subject, I highly recommend catching it when A&E reruns it. It's also available on video.

Another program which deserves mention was a recent *60 Minutes* report on the development of the Stealth Bomber (I originally meant to watch *Encounters* on the Fox Network at that same time ... they had sucked me in with a promo promising to explore the burning question of whether Marilyn Monroe had been killed because she knew too much about UFOs ... but in the end, my interest in space aliens led me to switch over to Morley Safer and Andy Rooney). What made the report on the Stealth Bomber interesting to me was the stuff that was never spoken, but which lurked between the lines.

A scientist who worked on the bomber revealed previously top secret info about where it was developed, how it works, and how it was tested. Turns out it was developed at a top secret air base in Nevada ... a favorite spot for UFO conspiracy theorists who believe that's a flying saucer base, and who go out there to watch the lighted discs zipping around in the night sky. Again, it turns out that, in order to maintain secrecy, the Stealth jet was only flown at night ... and films of the tests shown on CBS revealed that the plane, which is black against the night sky, has three rotating lights on the underside, which give the appearance of a circle of light. The tests also involved making incredible maneuvers: stops, drops, turns on a dime, etc. You know: the type of maneuvers that NO AIRPLANE CAN POSSIBLY PERFORM!!!

Catch where I'm going with this?

Amazingly, despite the known fact that the Pentagon has been studying a crashed flying saucer for over four decades, they spent billions developing a Stealth Bomber that has wings and utilizes the same basic laws of aerodynamics that have been followed since the Wright brothers. The darn thing doesn't even run on dilithium crystals!

Proof that you can learn more from what *60 Minutes* doesn't bother to say than from what *Encounters* takes its entire hour to say. By the way, in a feature story on pseudo-reality shows in the October 22 *TV Guide*, *Encounters* host John Marshall says, "We're looking for truth, and it's difficult to find. We have a lot of bright people who attack this with the same standards ... as the conventional news room or newsmagazine staff. We don't want to do anything to hurt our credibility."

Don't sweat it, John. As a skeptical vampire hunter might say, "You can't kill what ain't there."

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Speaking of chuckleheads camping outside alleged desert UFO bases, Larry King did just that in a recent, over-hyped episode of his CNN talk show. Alas, the government conspiracy of secrecy did not crumble under Larry's notoriously hard-hitting, well-informed questioning. Fortunately, he came back strong the next week with an extremely rare interview with renowned space alien, Jabba the Hutt!

No, wait: that was Marlon Brando. Never mind ...

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Terry Jones, formerly of *Monty Python*, made a memorable appearance on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* recently to promote his new book, which should be of interest to all skeptics. It's called *Lady Cottingly's Book of Pressed Fairies*. A parody of the silly fairy photos that fooled Sir Arthur Conan (everybody's named Conan in this anecdote!) Doyle, the idea is that fairies were appearing to a little girl in Victorian times as she read in her garden. They would land on her book, so she would slam it shut "SPLAT!" and press them flat for posterity! The book is filled with lovely portraits of mashed fairies. Jones even filmed a phony silent movie of himself dressed as a Victorian girl, swatting fairies with a book. Jones' book looks to be the perfect Christmas gift for that certain friend whose house is overflowing with ugly ceramic gnomes.

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Thanks go out this month to sharp-eyed reader Robert M. Craig of Indiana, who wrote to me to explain where FAIR got their accusation that Rush Limbaugh quotes literature from Lyndon LaRouche. Mr. Craig notes that Limbaugh quoted Dixie Lee Ray's book, *Trashing The Planet*, portions of which cite Rogelio Maduro, who is associate editor of *21st Century Science and Technology*, a magazine published by supporters of LaRouche. Good to know, although to use that to accuse Limbaugh of quoting LaRouche seems a bit of a stretch. Incidentally, for those who are keeping track of this debate, Limbaugh has responded in detail to those charges mentioned here a few months back. His response can be downloaded from CompuServe.

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Finally, let's finish off with a wrap-up of religious fanaticism around the world ...

About 23,500 pilgrims from around the world gathered in Conyers, Georgia, last month, to hear a message from the Virgin Mary. For the past four years, Mary has been appearing on the 13th of each month on the ceiling of Nancy Fowler's farmhouse, a successful engagement of a duration rivaling that of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Naturally, nobody has seen Mary except Mrs. Fowler. Mary's message this time was similar to previous messages: follow God or the earth will be plagued with war, famine, and flood (guess those people in southeast Texas better get back to church). At least the Associated Press wire story included several comments from Joe Nickell of CSICOP, who is doubtful, to say the least, about claims of miraculous healings caused by standing in Mrs. Fowler's backyard while Mary is on the ceiling.

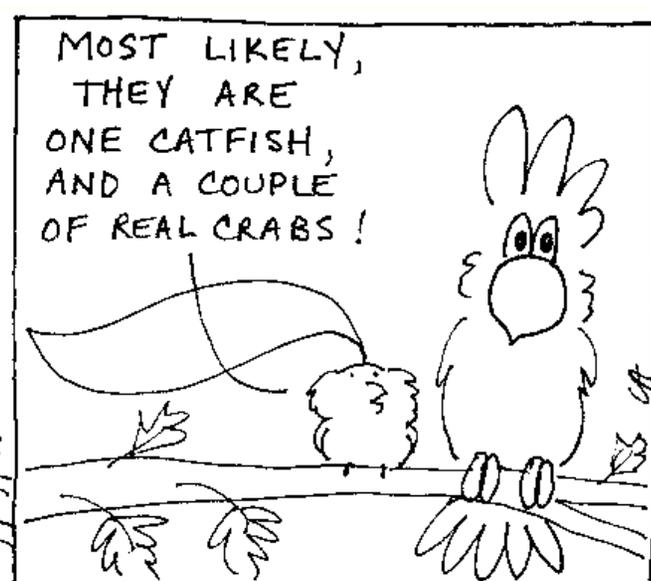
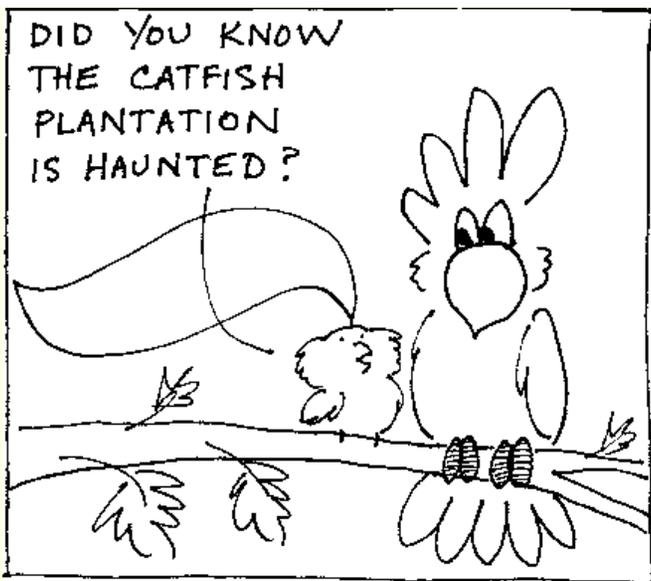
In Singapore, about 1500 Hindus gathered for their annual ceremony in honor of the goddess of energy. It involved a mass firewalk over hot coals, in emulation of Draupadi, a character in the Hindu epic of Mahabharata. She walked on fire for 18 days to demonstrate purity to her five husbands. When you have five husbands, you have to do something pretty drastic to prove your purity. Oddly enough, the Hindu ceremony is for men only ... no women are allowed to trot barefoot over the burning embers. They must be devastated.

And in Denver, U.S. District Judge Edward Nottingham has ruled that a convicted kidnapper does have a First Amendment right to practice Satanic rituals in his prison cell. The judge said banning devil worship is unconstitutional, and "We ought to give the devil his due." Prison officials argued unsuccessfully that the materials he uses, such as candles, candleholders, and a wooden staff, could be used as weapons (they are also annoyed that he keeps turning the warden into a frog). The prisoner says the rituals comfort him by making him feel closer to his dead father. Apparently, believing in Hell gives him the warm feeling that someday, he and dad will again be together in the same place.

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Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth



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