



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Skeptics host young-earth creationist

By Virginia Vaughn

If you missed the March public meeting of The North Texas Skeptics, you missed a very interesting presentation by a Grand Poobah of Creationism, er, I mean Creation Science. Dr. Don Patton is a colleague of Carl Baugh of Paluxy River "man track" fame and is a leader of the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS). Patton had a Ph.D. from Queensland Christian University (QCU) in Australia.

QCU is not accredited in any field of science from the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee, the Queensland Board of Education or the Federal Department of Employment, Education and Training. QCU has no formal curriculum, classes, research facilities, calendar, campus or academic staff, according to an article in NCSE Reports.¹ Dr. Patton reportedly had to write a paper and received his Ph.D. in the mail. After he graduated *magna cum postage*, he began carrying business cards inscribed "consulting geologist," which may be a bit misleading.

Okay. Fair is fair, so here is my educational background: I have a Bachelor's degree in biological sciences from Tarleton State University and was a member in good standing in the Tri-Beta Biological Society. I minored in geology with particular interest in geomorphology and paleontology. I am certified by the state of Texas to teach biology/geology in secondary schools and, as part of my senior level biological training, I was required to teach high school biology, college freshman biology and microbiology which I did for one year. I have been involved in medical research for 11 years and have constant access to the latest in medical theory. I'm certainly not an expert, but this is basic, easy stuff.

Constructing a strawman

I must give credit where credit is due. It must have been rather intimidating for Dr. Patton to address a group of self proclaimed skeptics, and we appreciated his willingness to discuss creationism with us. Not everyone in NTS is familiar with the particulars of evidence associated with creation science. Unfortunately, none of this was presented.

Dr. Patton attempted to borrow credibility by placing a big, fat strawman before us. In a carefully-prepared slide show, quotes by well-known scientists were used, most often Stephen Jay Gould, to bolster Dr. Patton's contention that even well-known scientists say evolution is full of holes, *proving* that creationism is a fact. Four problems immediately jump out at me:

- Stephen Jay Gould is an ethical scientist who, as do most scientists, points out areas in evolutionary process that we do not yet understand.
- Quotes were taken out of context.
- Because an answer has not yet been found, one does not leap to a polar conclusion, and
- Science does not begin with a conclusion as does "creation science."

The famous pepper moth story was mentioned. Pepper moths are speckled and come in a dark variety and light variety. Before the industrial revolution in England, light pepper moths blended into the ashen bark of trees. Dark moths were spotted by birds and became lunch. Natural selection favored the light moths and they were left alive to reproduce thus passing along the light moth genes. Light moths predominated until the industrial revolution choked the air with soot. Soot covered the trees darkening the bark. Suddenly, dark moths had the selective advantage and lived to reproduce. Within a decade, dark moths predominated.

Dr. Patton's answer to this remarkable example of natural selection (only one process by which evolution occurs) was, "But they were still moths." Well, yes they were. It was only a few years, they weren't isolated and there was no adaptive pressure for them to be anything else.

Questions and answers following the presentation were most telling. We were very polite to Dr. Patton, bending over backwards to avoid sounding confrontational. I asked Dr. Patton why fossils the world over were consistently laid down in sedimentary strata with the oldest at the bottom of the column and becoming progressively younger as you move up the column. Dr. Patton replied that carbon-14 dating is inaccurate. Of course.

He also gave a strange description of how the Grand Canyon has no fossil record. This is simply not true. Patton also told me that there are nine places in the world where the fossils are not stratified. I asked where those nine places are located, but he didn't (or wouldn't) answer me. According to Dr. Patton, all the critters in the world died in the Great Flood and it doesn't seem to matter that the vast majority of fossils in the fossil record were aquatic organisms. Next time you see a nice, highly fossilized Cretaceous limestone, notice that you do not find people skeletons, or tools, or jewelry in it.

Vestigial organs became a Q&A issue as well. Patton blames the teaching of evolution for the large number of appendectomies performed. Dr. Patton claims that doctors have now "learned" that removing the appendix regularly is the wrong thing to do because we need them to produce antibodies. First off, the appendix does not now nor has it ever in our evolutionary past produced antibodies. It pretty much just hangs around (the Kato Kaelin of organs), debris makes its way inside and the appendix becomes inflamed.

I suggested that since we now have better antibiotics, these organs are no longer routinely removed unless chronically infected. Patton said this wasn't true and that I was at the wrong medical school and should look up "appendix" in my encyclopedia. UT Southwestern, the medical school where I work, has had three Nobel Prizes awarded to four Laureates and I haven't used encyclopedias since I was in high school. I was forced to look through two general biology textbooks, three physiology textbooks, and a medical physiology textbook I happen to have at home. General biology says about the appendix, "frequently becomes infected and must be removed surgically." My physiology textbooks don't even bother with it since it contributes nothing to the physiological processes (unless it's infected and has to be surgically removed). I had the impression that peritonitis must be God's will.

Beginning with a question

So, here's my post game wrap up analogy of Dr. Patton's presentation: You are in the market for a good toaster. Consumer Reports did a great deal of research on Brand X Toasters and highly recommends them. At the toaster store, only one Brand X Toaster remains and it has a crack in the handle, but all the working parts function as Consumer Reports predicted. Upon seeing the cracked handle, you decide to get another toaster.

A preacher tells you that Consumer Reports doesn't know what they are talking about. Brand Y is worthwhile and although you must take it sight unseen, the Brand X handle crack should tell you that Brand Y is superior. You are now the proud owner of a Brand Y toaster, so you take it home, plug it in and the coils self destruct. In retrospect, you realize that with a Brand X toaster, you could have taken the toaster with the cracked handle and repaired it, or sent it back to Brand X factory for repair. Even if you kept the cracked handle, it would be better than Brand Y. Brand Y turns out to be just another loony toaster in a world full of loony toasters.

Evolution passes the *prima facie* test as a scientific theory because it begins with a question. In learning the answer to the question, new questions are discovered. Legitimate scientific theories are tentative since they require evidence to back them up. Existing theory is overturned after enough evidence exists to refute that theory. There are some legitimate questions about the processes by which evolution occurs, but questions are the nature of science itself. To date, rigorous testing and evaluation has not been able to undermine the basic theory of evolution. Even so, it is not yet as solid and dependable as the theory of gravity, and only more rigorous testing will decide whether evolutionary theory is solid enough to remain the prevailing scientific viewpoint.

Creationism fails the *prima facie* test as a scientific theory because it starts with a conclusion rather than a question. It is non-falsifiable, untestable and non-predictive. Creationists like to draw attention to the questions remaining in evolutionary theory in order to draw attention away from the massive problems in their so-called "alternative theory." In doing so, creationists violate the scientific method.

As I was browsing through *Putnam's Geology*, I ran across an interesting passage:

"The appeal to uniformitarianism (processes we find in evidence in the world today probably existed in the past) is only a reaffirmation that the natural laws have prevailed on our planet continuously and in an unchanging way through the ages. The idea is basic not only to geology but to all other sciences. The alternative view is that all that surrounds us has no connection with the past. Such a view leads to chaos and confusion, a world in which there is no continuity, each age characterized by processes and events never seen before and never to be seen again. All evidence seems to indicate, fortunately, that such is not the case." 1 Glen J. Kuban. A Matter of Degree: An Examination of Carl Baugh's Credentials. *NCSE Reports* 9(6):15-20, 1989.

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Healthy Skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

Paper tiger FDA issues warning

Nature's Nutrition Formula One has been the target of Texas law enforcement authorities for at least a year now. The product, distributed by Alliance, U.S.A., of Richardson, Texas, contains the herb *Ma Huang*, a source of an amphetamine-like substance called ephedrine, as well as the caffeine-containing kola nut. Promotional materials tout Formula One as a weight loss and energy-enhancer "nutritional supplement."

Finally, after receiving over a hundred complaints of adverse reactions, some of them life-threatening, including heart rate irregularities and heart attacks, strokes, seizures, hepatitis and psychosis, and even several deaths, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on February 28th issued a warning concerning the product. In its warning, the FDA cited an "inadequate response" by Alliance U.S.A. and the company's adamant refusal to recall the product, although Alliance has said that it is no longer including the kola nut ingredient. Nevertheless, unknown quantities of the original formulation remain in circulation which remain a threat to the unwary public.

Meanwhile, other products making similar claims are also said to contain the worrisome combination of *Ma Huang* and kola nut. These include Twinlab's "Metabolift" and KAL's "Super DietMax."

Reached by telephone, an FDA spokesman confirmed that due to recent legislation signed into law by President Clinton, the agency will confine itself to taking action only when it accumulates definitive evidence of probable danger from products designated as "nutritional supplements." This is a radical and completely unpublicized change from the FDA's mission with respect to all other products claimed to have health and/or nutritional benefits in which case safety and efficacy must be established before marketing.

This well accounts for the astonishing explosion of mass media marketing of all manner of "natural," herbal, homeopathic, and other "nutritional" remedies for which outrageous claims are made. Earnest-sounding ad voice-overs insist that these "miracle breakthrough" products can alter metabolism, promote longevity, grow hair on bald heads, and even eliminate bad breath.

Unfortunately, the public has few reliable sources of information about these products. And now, it has no regulatory protection either.

Weightlifter reinstated

In related news, Canadian weight lifter Jim Dan Corbett was reinstated after an investigation backed up the athlete's insistence that he had not been taking any illegal stimulants, but only a vitamin supplement which had been approved by team officials on the basis of its listed ingredients. Last August, Corbett took three bronze medals in competition in Victoria, Canada, and was then stripped of his awards after testing positive for banned stimulants. Corbett also faced a four-year ban from further competition and a lifetime ban from receiving any government funding. This past November, he was exonerated (though he was not given back his medals) after analysis of the supplement showed that it contained the three banned stimulants that were detected in Corbett's urine, though they were not listed on the bottle. The supplement in question: Nature's Nutrition Formula One. The Canadian distributor, Alliance Canada, refused to comment, according to the news report that appeared concerning the matter in the *Toronto Star*.

This information is provided by the Dallas/Fort Worth Council Against Health Fraud. For further information, or to report instances of suspected quackery and health fraud, please contact the Council's President, Tim Gorski, M.D., at (817) 792-2000 or write P.O.B. 202577, Arlington, TX 76006.

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The poop from down under

The following letter to the editor appeared in Skeptic, the magazine of The Skeptics Society. We reprint it here as proof that the difference between genius and credulity is that there are limits to genius. — Ed.

I think the following clipping from my local newspaper, the *Manly Daily*, here in St. James, NSW, Australia, may appeal to your readers:

"One occasionally hears of someone who used to be a skeptic until they had an inexplicable experience-I never thought it would happen to me and I hasten to tell the world.

"I have a pet chicken that answers to its name, cheeps like a canary and perches on my shoulder like a parrot. Inevitably, while observing the world from its perch, it leaves a calling card on my shoulder which, according to a meticulously-kept record and collation with subsequent events, has proved to be a precursor of good luck. Over the past few weeks, I have won the lotto, had money returned to me that I had completely forgotten about and received a large order for my recently published books.

"My son, whose shoulder the chicken also uses as a perch, has had similar luck. On two occasions he has found wallets containing sums of money which he has returned to owners and received rewards, on another a wristwatch, an unused phone card, a pensioner's card and a clock.

"Believing that this extremely unusual run of good luck had to be more than mere coincidence, I had the chicken's feathers read by a palmist, checked its horoscope and consulted a past lives readers who confirmed that it was a reincarnated philanthropist and that I should spread the good luck around by selling the product.

"Anyone interested in purchasing my lucky chicken crap at \$10 for 5 grams plus instructions on where it should be applied, should send me a money order together with a SASE as soon as possible. I don't know how long this will last and constipation could ruin everything.

As a firm believer that one can sell anything as long as it is associated with "good luck," I wrote the letter to our local newspaper and, believe it or not, received two orders and \$20 for my "lucky chicken crap!"

Harry Edwards
Australian Skeptics
New South Wales, Australia

From Skeptic, Volume 3, Number 2. Michael Shermer, publisher and editor-in-chief. P.O. Box 338, Altadena, CA 91001. Phone 818/794-3119.

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O. J. did it and evolution is true

A comparison of two questionable defense strategies

By Laura Ainsworth

At the March meeting of the North Texas Skeptics, Don Patton, chairman of the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS), gave a presentation filled with carefully-chosen quotes and colorful slide graphics, outlining a number of problems that Creationists like himself have with the theory of evolution. Though he apparently has no academic credentials other than those from Creationist "diploma mills," he emphasized several times during his talk that he was acting in the name of science and not as a proponent of any religion. Indeed, as I sat there listening to his well-prepared and narrowly focused spiel, I was reminded much less of a wild-eyed preacher than of a polished defense lawyer for O. J. Simpson.

As the slides kept changing and Mr. Patton kept talking, careful to keep the discussion on evolution and not on any problems with his own theory, the analogy grew in my mind. This could be F. Lee Bailey or Johnnie Cochran, trying to dent the prosecution's theory that O. J. did it. He doesn't have to prove anything himself; the burden of proof is placed squarely on the other side. Any problem or unanswered question on the other side is viewed only as a boost for his side.

Let's take a look at the similarities between these two theories:

- **THEORY A:** O. J. Simpson brutally murdered his ex-wife Nicole and her friend Ron Goldman.
- **THEORY B:** The Theory of Evolution.

First of all, both theories relate to an event that happened at some time in the past. In the case of Theory A, it is a bloody murder; in the case of Theory B, it is the origin of life on Earth. Because of the nature of these two events, there are definite challenges in studying them. We don't know exactly when either event occurred, but we can use evidence to narrow the time frame. As far as we know, there were no eyewitnesses to either event. And, of course, there is no way to study either event in progress or to duplicate it under controlled conditions for observation and experimentation.

There is, however, evidence that can help us piece together what must have happened at the time of the event and afterward, and both detectives and scientists routinely study evidence to determine the cause of past events. In the case of Theory A, for example, there is the DNA-tested blood, claimed by the prosecution to be genetically linked to O. J. Simpson, at the scene of the crime and at various points between it and his home. In the case of Theory B, there is a record of strata-ordered rocks and fossils that can be dated by a variety of reliable techniques. Neither trail is complete; however, each time additional evidence has been found and confirmed to be authentic (blood on Nicole's gate, lumps remaining in completely melted ice cream, a new form of prehistoric man), it has appeared to be consistent with the pertinent theory.

To illustrate, if even one drop of blood that didn't match O. J. or either victim had been found at the scene, the detectives would have come up with other theories. Perhaps there had been two killers, or another victim who had escaped. Similarly, if even one modern-day horse or elephant or human being were found in the same strata as a T-rex or pterodactyl, or if, say, the Paluxy River "mantracks" could be authenticated (they haven't been) evolutionists would have to re-evaluate their theory to accommodate such a find. This sort of discovery would not in itself prove a sudden, supernatural Creation, and to say it would is a logical fallacy, but it might lend at least some credence to such Creationist notions as hydrodynamic sorting.

100% innocent until proven guilty

At the start of the Simpson trial, it was the wise observer who accepted the idea that O. J. was not to be thought guilty unless proven so beyond a reasonable doubt. Like other true skeptics, I formed an opinion — one way or the other — only gradually, as the evidence was presented and analyzed.

Likewise, I contend that belief in evolution is usually a carefully weighed decision based on evidence. Those who want to believe in a Creation (or in the innocence of a popular sports hero, role model and celebrity) have a lot at stake if they take a hard, honest look at the evidence pointing away from it. But many of us, in the tradition of good jurors, just want to find out what is true, whatever that might be. Mr. Patton claimed to be promoting scientific thinking; indeed, he characterized himself as perhaps even more "skeptical" (meaning more open to possibilities and alternative explanations?) than the card-carrying skeptics in his audience. Perhaps he hasn't taken into account that many of us who live here in the "buckle on the Bible Belt" grew up hearing all about God's Creation in Sunday School — the proper place for such a presentation — and even believed it before they became aware of all the evidence to the contrary.

Mr. Patton's depiction of evolutionists as closed-minded reminds me of the argument voiced by Johnnie Cochran in the Simpson trial: O. J. appears guilty only because the detectives allowed their investigation to be guided by a presumption of his guilt, and in a "rush to judgment" they ignored any evidence to the contrary. But according to the chief investigator at the scene, Det. Philip Vannatter, there was no such presumption at the outset; it was only after he encountered strong evidence that O. J. became the primary suspect. Much evidence was found and tested later that

supported the theory; no hard evidence was found, by either the prosecution or the defense, that could shoot it down.

To weaken the case against O. J.'s guilt (and evolution), the defense team (and Mr. Patton) must try to discredit this evidence. DNA testing is not an exact science, mistakes can be made, and perhaps there is a Colombian drug lord whose blood contains the exact same genetic material as that of O. J. Simpson. Reasonable doubt! It's up to the prosecution to show that even with the limitations of DNA testing, the DNA evidence is compelling — and it is.

Likewise, young-earth Creationists like Mr. Patton try to ignore or discredit evidence derived from scientific dating techniques. Reasonable doubt! But scientists have demonstrated that these techniques can be relied upon to provide independent corroboration.

Facts, don't fail me now!

There are other ways to try to knock down existing evidence. One way is to fabricate evidence yourself in order to deliberately mislead. Simpson's lawyers presented an out-of-context "photo" of police walking through blood at the crime scene, though later examination revealed it to be a still-frame from a video shot very obviously after the investigation was complete. Mr. Patton showed us out-of-context quotes from members of the scientific community, like Stephen Jay Gould, who would no doubt be nonplused — though hardly surprised — that his words were being used in an attempt to support Creation theory. To quote Gould myself, "Debate is an art form. It is about the winning of arguments. It is not about the discovery of truth."

Another way to chip away at the other side is to create an alternative hypothesis to account for the nature of the evidence; such a hypothesis can be as wild as necessary and doesn't have to be substantiated. Mark Fuhrman planted the evidence. There was a monstrous conspiracy to frame O. J. Simpson. Never mind all the logistical problems with this idea, including the fact that any blood planted after the crime was discovered — unless O. J.'s blood was indeed found at the murder scene — would have been infused with preservative.

Here's another wild hypothesis: God punished sinners with a catastrophic flood that destroyed all life except for a minimum of 30,000 species, and, more realistically, millions of species — one male and one female of each — which were housed for over a year on a really big, filthy, and increasingly disgusting boat. Never mind the logistical problems with that!

To continue the analogy further . . . defense lawyers and Creationists must try to avoid troublesome subject matter. The 911 phone calls . . . inadmissible, your Honor! Likewise any other evidence that can be kept out. Mr. Patton seemed self-assured when giving his presentation, but flustered when questioned about the plausibility of a supernatural Creation. This was an area he wanted to keep "out of court." Of course, anyone who was curious was free to buy his tape for \$39.95.

And what about evidence that one might expect to find, but that still hasn't turned up? Detectives have found no murder weapon, no bloody clothes (besides the gloves and hat that were dropped, and the bloody sock), no unbroken trail of blood, and no blood in the area where the second glove was dropped. Likewise, there are gaps in the fossil record. And where are all those fossils of transitional forms, the lack of which Darwin lamented?

First of all, there are many plausible explanations for missing evidence. Who would expect a murderer to make no attempt to hide or destroy evidence? Who would expect a very small cut to "bleed" a perfect, unbroken trail for detectives to follow? And who would expect to find, in little more than a century of scientific study, a complete fossil record of every life form that ever existed on this planet? The progress that has been made is truly astounding, considering that fossilization is a rare occurrence. And transitional forms have indeed been found since Darwin's time. So, regardless of the remaining gaps, any believable theory must be consistent with the evidence that has been found.

Mr. Patton and the O. J. defense team have one last crucial thing in common, something that will keep their arguments going forever, whether it's a call to teach the Creation in science class or an endless round of appeals for O. J. if he is indeed found guilty. The fact remains that if there are problems with their explanations (lack of evidence that would suggest any other suspect, the necessity of breaking the laws of physics), well, they don't have to prove anything! All they have to do is keep trying to chip away. In our system of justice, this method is appropriate when trying a suspect in a murder case. But it is not appropriate when weighing "scientific" theories.

At the time of this writing, the Los Angeles prosecution team is still in the middle of presenting its case against O. J. Simpson; the defense has been limited to cross-examination. I'd be willing to bet — though I'd have few takers — that the trial will still be going on when these words appear in print. But the evidence is pointing me in the direction of O. J.'s guilt. If that evidence is truly discredited when the defense presents its case, or if evidence is presented for a credible alternative hypothesis (reasonable doubt, with emphasis on the word "reasonable"), then I will (gasp!) change my mind. The same goes for my opinion on the Theory of Evolution. I would much rather admit I was wrong than go through my whole life believing something that isn't true.

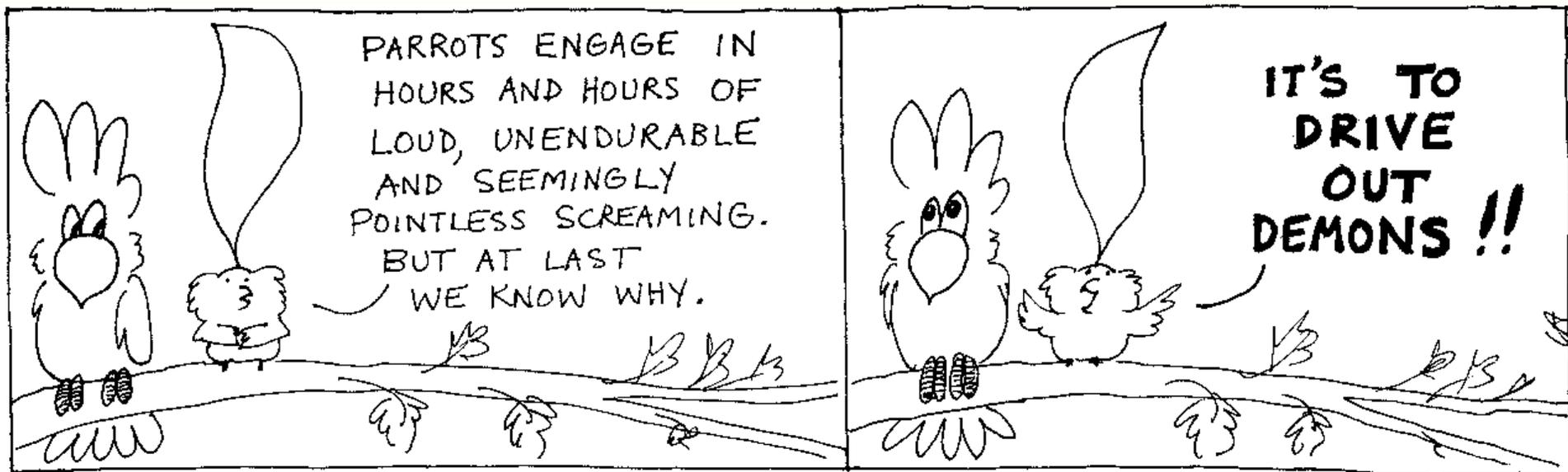
But Johnnie Cochran is going to have to explain how O. J.'s blood got splattered in so many incriminating places. And Don Patton is going to have to explain how Noah was able to sex that pair of badgers before getting them onto the Ark.

Laura Ainsworth is a professional comedy writer and artist. She lives with her writing partner husband, Pat Reeder, in Waxahachie.

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Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth



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