



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

I'm still working on a book deadline, but Mike Sullivan's pathetic pleas for space filler have touched my heart, so I'll slap together ... er, "carefully craft," another column of various odds and ends.

Since my last column was run, we have finally gotten some reputable scientists weighing in on the "pro" side of global warming. A group of meteorologists brought together by the U.N. agreed (not unanimously, but in a majority, anyway) that man-made pollutants have altered the Earth's temperature (I'm assuming here that the U.N. picks meteorologists more carefully than they pick military strategists). It's not quite the Apocalypse that many environmental alarmists would like: the consensus was that the Earth's temperature has risen, on the average, one degree Fahrenheit since 1900 ... but what the heck, it's something!

Of course, this could be connected to changing rainfall patterns, etc., but it seems a stretch to blame Chicago's killer heat wave on that one degree uptick. Having lived for awhile in the northeast, I think I have an idea of why so many people died from the heat in Chicago, and the concerned citizens in the environmental movement have it in their power right now to prevent it from happening again. They don't even have to lobby Congress or drive one of those dorky electric cars.

Most of the victims of the Chicago heat wave were elderly people in poor health, living alone, without air conditioners or the money to buy them. They weren't acclimated to the heat, they weren't able to overcome it, and they had nobody to look in and help them (many of the victims were buried by the city because nobody claimed the bodies). It wasn't so much ozone breakdown that killed them as it was societal breakdown.

When we lived in Connecticut, there was an elderly lady in our apartment house who had lived there for decades. Years before, everyone had known and looked out for everyone else, but by the late '80's, it was a building full of strangers, all living separate lives. I would see this lady in the elevator or laundry room, and she would always talk to me about how times had changed and all her friends and family were gone. I spent as much time with her as I could, because I got the distinct impression that on many days, I was the only person she had to talk to. I told her that if she ever had an emergency, she could come to our door. It's been six years since we moved away, and I still think about her, and hope that whoever moved into our old apartment also made time to check up on her.

Steve Blow wrote an excellent column recently in the Dallas *Morning News* about people who keep tabs on the living conditions of seniors by volunteering for Meals On Wheels and other programs. Maybe if there had been more such volunteers in Chicago, some of those heat stroke victims would still be alive. So here's my solution, if environmental activists are really interested in preventing further deaths from "global warming": skip a few Earth First rallies (we know about CO₂ emissions already, you don't have to get on the evening news EVERY night to remind us), and instead, spend some time delivering Meals on Wheels. The seniors won't even mind if you drive over in a dorky electric car. But they'd probably prefer that you keep the vegan meals for yourself.

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By now, you've probably seen the "alien autopsy" film, deemed so important it was shown not once, but twice, during prime time by the Fox Network (earning a Jeer from TV Guide for its public service). To show how open minded I am, the first time it ran, I thought, "Son of a gun! Maybe the government really HAS been engaged in a 50-year conspiracy to hush up a flying saucer crash" (no, this wouldn't shatter my belief system, because I don't have one ... although it might revive my long-dead faith in the government's ability to keep a secret). Of course, the first time, I had it on in the background while working and wasn't really watching closely. The second time through, I actually looked at the screen, and decided it was most likely a load of spinach.

I might as well confess right now that my father was a lifelong professional photographer who was a sergeant in the Army Photo Corps in Korea (that's right: I'm connected to the Pentagon and am part of the conspiracy! You can stop reading now!). I've also been a photographer, film buff and old movie collector since I was about 12. So I know a bit about what newsreel and military footage of the late '40s looks like. And it don't look like this. Here are just a very few of the many questions that went through my head while watching the "alien autopsy" footage:

Where were the lights? The scene was so brightly lit, there was little contrast and almost no shadows (which made it look more like B&W studio-shot video than any '40s military footage I've ever seen), yet the film stock it was supposedly shot on was (I believe) ASA 50. In a closed room, that would require a lot of hot lights. So where were they? I couldn't even see reflections of the lights on the glass window ...

I could be wrong, but I believe the producer claimed there were no splices in the film. Considering that a 24 minute reel of that film would be about 400 feet, and it came in 100 foot magazines, how is it possible that there were no splices? Wouldn't there be at least three? ...

Considering that this is the only record of the most important event in the history of mankind, how come EVERY close-up of the internal organs is wildly out of focus? My dad used to hang out of helicopters and photograph North Korean soldiers' positions as they shot at him, but somehow, most of his photos were in focus. Any military photographer who screwed up that badly on such an important assignment in a closed room from three feet away wouldn't just be busted, he'd be taken out and shot ...

And speaking of record keeping, how come nobody was taking flash photos? They even took still photos during the JFK autopsy, despite the huge conspiracy to suppress that! The doctors also seemed to buzz through the autopsy in less than half an hour, just yanking out alien organs without so much as a poke or prod, as if they were in a hurry to get to the golf course and would pay closer attention to the next alien.

The narration of the show (courtesy of <M>Star Trek's Jonathan Frakes, so it must be true) also had logical holes you could pilot a flying saucer through. We are to believe that the military was so worried about this being made public that an officer threatened a 10-year-old girl (whom nobody would believe, anyway) with death if she told about seeing aliens, yet when the photographer who allegedly shot this autopsy footage called the Pentagon to tell them he still had it sitting in a box in his closet, they replied, in effect, "Eh, why don't you just keep it?" Much was also made of the lack of motivation for a hoax: "Why would anyone go to so much trouble to fake such a thing?" Considering that the producer went the syndication route, sold pieces of the footage in over 20 different countries, earning six figures in each and every one of them, and already has it out on home video for sale or rent ... eh, why don't you just figure out the

motivation?



Speaking of otherworldly visitors, about 1,500 people gathered at an airstrip in Bulgaria last month, after three local women who claimed to be psychic mediums announced that eight spaceships would be landing there precisely at 11 a.m., and the aliens would pay off Bulgaria's national debt. When 11:30 rolled around with no sign of the intergalactic sugar daddies, the women said that nearby aircraft were frightening them away. By noon, they started blaming Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelev for insulting the aliens by refusing to meet them at the airport. Police finally had to escort the three "psychics" away from the angry mob before they ended up seeing stars for real.

Third World nations looking for some quick foreign aid from the skies should not be discouraged, however, for a UFO has been sighted at least four times since September in the central state of Selangor in Malaysia. According to the *New Straits Times*, those who claim to have seen it say it was as big as a football field, and encircled by flashing red, orange and green lights (must've looked like a huge, flying traffic light). Witnesses also claim to have spotted aliens with long ears and little red eyes. Apparently, they haven't sold the alien autopsy special in Malaysia yet, or they would know that aliens have no ears and big, black eyes.

Still, nobody really cares about the ears or eyes. The important question is: "Did they bring the money?"

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Bulletin: Skeptic gets a word in on talk show

Strange But True: Audience Also Fairly Skeptical

By John Thomas

On Tuesday, October 17, I participated in the monthly talk show hosted by WFAA-TV Channel 8 newsman John McCaa at Cedar Valley College in Lancaster. Well, the format is talk show, although nothing is actually broadcast. I appeared with McCaa, psychic and astrologer Nevada Hudson, and about 75 students and faculty from the college. The theme was to be: "Psychics: Are They Legit?"

Hudson is a professional astrologer who has been in the business for many years. She was a pleasant, well-dressed woman with the easy, friendly manner so useful in this line of work. McCaa conducted the show even-handedly and took many questions from the audience.

I was pleasantly surprised to find most of the audience taking a very skeptical view of Hudson's claims and the entire idea of psychic powers and predictions. Although I never feel I talk all I want in this sort of show, I did get to make my major points:

It's not important whether psychics are "legitimate." The important questions are whether they can really do what they claim, and, if not, why people believe anyway.

There is no scientific support for the claims of astrology.

Like all fortune-telling systems, astrology chooses random events (e.g., the position of the planets in the sky at the time and place of birth), and uses those events to launch into a psychological reading with the client.

There are techniques, well-known to stage magicians and psychologists, for making people think you know all about them. Psychic powers aren't necessary.

If you're measuring success in predictions, you have to count the hits as well as the misses to know if you're doing any better than chance. Psychics only count the hits.

The NTS \$6,000 challenge is still open to interested claimants.

A "debate" like this will not end with anything really concluded. Skeptics and psychics are simply talking about different things, and the psychics (the smart ones anyway) have no interest whatever in holding their claims up to scientific scrutiny. Still, it's valuable for anyone holding some doubts on these issues to see a reasonable, respectable person advocating the skeptical position. We can hope that some will pause to think, and decide to check out these extraordinary claims before investing time and money in them. Although I believe most of this audience would indeed stop and think, I saw Hudson chatting with several prospective clients as soon as the show ended.

John Thomas is one of the co-founders of The North Texas Skeptics and now serves as a Technical Advisor and Director Emeritus.

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NTS challenge still intact

by John Blanton

It has been some time since we reported on the status of the NTS "challenge." For those who are new to the group and for those just picking up a copy of The Skeptic for the first time, here is an update.

Several years ago three members of the North Texas Skeptics agreed to underwrite a \$6000 prize for any person "who can demonstrate any psychic or paranormal power or ability under scientifically valid observing conditions. So far we have only had a couple of nibbles and no real "bites."

The first nibble came from a lady who claimed the ability to perform "map dowsing," that is, she could work over a map of an area and pick out the location of some lost or otherwise missing object. This sounded like an interesting proposition, so we pressed for a commitment. This is where we began to encounter the denouements. First of all, such an activity as participating in our "game" was beneath the dignity of the dowser. However, she would volunteer her nine-year-old daughter, who also possessed these powers, to demonstrate for us.

This turn of events had an obvious down side for us. If the daughter successfully claimed the prize the headlines would blaze "Skeptics defeated by mere child." In the other eventuality we would look like bullies. Sort of a lose-lose situation. It went downhill from there.

We said "fine," we would go along with the plan. Just what would she suggest for a test. Our claimant suggested we bury something in a field, and the daughter would locate the object by map dowsing. Call me skeptical, but I believe that if someone dug a hole and buried something in a vacant lot, I would not need map dowsing to find it. I would just go look for the freshly turned dirt. Or else I would just watch while that person dug the hole. An alternative was suggested. Suppose we dig ten holes and bury the object in one of them. Now my natural laziness kicked in. First of all, I'm not going to dig ten holes and give someone a one shot in ten of getting the \$6000 by guessing which hole contained the prize. If this were the experiment I would want to repeat it ten times just to eliminate chance occurrences. That's a hundred holes, guys. Nah. I suggested this: How about if we have ten or a hundred containers, and we hide the object in one of them. And we repeat the experiment ten times. I could go for that. By this time the dialog had been going on for some time by mail, and it was the turn for the claimant to say "nah." There it stands for this episode.

A later challenge came from a guy who claimed that the FBI (or list your own favorite government agency) had planted a computer chip in his head. That's as far as this one got. Although there seemed a willingness for others to take this gentleman up on his challenge, I demurred. I may be a skeptic, but I have my limits. His claim seemed entirely reasonable to me, and I am willing to just take his word for it.

There we stand to date. Not a lot of people flooding our mail box with claims for the prize. It could be our paltry \$6000 is not enough to attract the attention. After all, James Randi, our competition, offers \$10,000. It's obvious to me the psychics, astrologers, and dowsers out there are doing some comparison shopping. We have considered upping the ante to \$10,000. Each of us three could pledge \$3333.33, but that would leave us a penny short when it came time to pay the prize. What a stink it would be if we had to send a successful claimant home with only \$9,999.99. We would look like real pikers. Of course, that would be the day when pigs learned to fly, so our shame would be buried on the back pages of most newspapers.

For an overview of the challenge protocol, see the side bar. Note, as well, that this is not an offer to pay, it is only a set of conditions for conducting such a test. We, the underwriters, retain the right to offer or not offer the prize depending on whether we think the enterprise qualifies. Here are some claims that might not make the cut:

There's a colony of aliens (Perot supporters, substitute you own species) living on the back side of the moon. We can't test that. Besides, it's probably true.

A man says he can balance a grand piano on his forehead. This is not a paranormal ability under our definition. Although I would like to see this done, I would not pay \$6000.

- A person knows who really killed O.J. Simpson's ex-wife and Ronald Goldman and can prove it. This is not the business of the Skeptics. This person should go to the police.
- A "psychic" claims to be able to predict the results of the year 2000 elections. Although this would be a demonstration of real paranormal powers, we don't want to drag something out for five years. Sorry.
- A faith healer claims he can bring somebody back from the dead. We won't touch that. In order for us to test this somebody has to die first. After that there are legal restrictions that would prevent a test.
- A person claims to be able to prove that Congress is controlled by Satanists. We won't dispute this.

So what do we accept in the way of a claim? Here are some starters:

- The ability to transmit thoughts over a distance (with no help from MCI).
- Spoon bending (no touching allowed).
- Predicting the future (1996 presidential election not included).
- Map dowsing (we are still willing if you are).
- Aliens in UFOs (we want a ride in the space ship for our \$6000).

If you know any astrologers, faith healers, "psychics," or others we haven't thought of, pass this along to them. Official inquiries should be addressed to the P.O. Box listed in the [side bar](#), but for those who can't wait, I can be reached at 972-306-3187.

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The ICR's Impact series

A principal outlet for ICR's philosophies is its monthly "Impact" series of pamphlets. Subtitled "Vital Articles on Science/Creation," the pamphlets are written in the main by the ICR's resident scientists (see accompanying article).

"Impact" is about as close as the ICR comes to real scientific publication. Even so, some of the issues are outright religious treatises, such as No. 161, "The Christian World View of Science and Technology." Each issue is a single monograph by one or more authors, covering four to eight pages in loose-leaf, pocketbook format. Those papers holding forth on the ICR's view of science include a list of references, just as a real scientific paper might.

Assuming a monthly publication schedule, "Impact" should be up to No. 268 by now. Titles include "Origin of Limestone Caves" by Steven A. Austin, "Noah and Human Etymology" by Bengt Sage, and "Dragons in Paradise" by Henry Morris. Even Scopes prosecutor William Jennings Bryan writes on evolution in No. 213.

You can order individual copies of "Impact" from the Institute for Creation Research, P.O. Box 2667, El Cajon,

California, 92021, for \$ 0.10 each. There is possibly a volume discount and a subscription service. Contact the North Texas Skeptics if you are interested in additional information on specific "Impact" issues. We have several titles in our library.

-- J. B.

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Up A Tree

