



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

Volume 10 Number 3

www.ntskeptics.org

March 1996

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The third eye

News and Commentary from the Weird World of the Media

By Pat Reeder

As I sit cooped up in my dank office writing this column, it is sunny and 71 degrees outside, no doubt due to global warming. I know what you're thinking: "Hey, Reeder! Last month, you said the environmentalists were claiming that global warming was to blame for the cold weather!" Yes, but now it seems that global warming is to blame for the "variability" of the weather. You see, Texas weather was never variable until global warming came along. But lo! I just saw on the news that the record low temperature for this date was set in 1932, and the record high in 1933!

Of course none of this light-hearted joshing means that global warming is NOT on its way to turning the Earth into a blazing fireball. It's just to say that having spent 37 summers in Texas, I'm hardly frightened of that prospect.

Speaking of things that make me hot under the collar, Paramount's new UPN Network, which was founded so there would be something on TV worse than the Fox Network, is planning to launch a new show called Psychic Connections. This was ballyhooed on a recent episode of Entertainment Tonight (also produced by Paramount - surprise!). The hostess will be Margaret Wendt, a self-proclaimed "sensitive" who can speak to the dead, although she is so sensitive, she refuses to call them that (apparently, political correctness has now extended to the point that we must refer to corpses as the "living-challenged"). Among the stories previewed by ET were a Chinese doctor who performs miracle cures by wiggling his fingers over a cold, damp cloth. The powerful "t'chi" emanating from his digits heats the cloth until it is so hot, it's steaming. He then touches people's achy parts with this boiling hot rag, and they are cured (hope nobody comes to him complaining of impotence!). Tapping into my psychic powers, I already know what you're thinking: "What kind of chemicals does he put on the cloth to make it heat up?" Oh, you cynical skeptics! You're so insensitive! You probably call dead people "worm food!" And to their faces, too! Or what's left of their faces!

Wendt also revealed that the show sent tarot card readers and psychics into the inner cities to do readings for gang members and show them what bleak futures await them if they do not mend their ways. She said that they received a hostile welcome at first, but by the end of the readings, the gangstas had decided that they no longer wanted to kill the tarot readers or each other. Which is good news, I suppose. At least, the latter is good news.

Sure, the American military is engaged in an Orwellian conspiracy to destroy anyone who discovers that they are conducting frightening experiments with extraterrestrials at a top secret Nevada installation known as Area 51 . . . but that's no reason why the place can't be a tourist attraction! The wily residents of Rachel, Nevada, ever on the lookout for both UFOs and tourist bucks, have persuaded the state to designate their stretch of road as "The Extraterrestrial Highway." Tourists, as well as homesick E.T.s, can spend the night scanning the skies, then drop by the Little A'Le'Inn for a hearty breakfast, pick up a T- shirt or bumper sticker reading, "I survived the loneliest road in America," and have their photos taken beside one of the new, official "Extraterrestrial Highway" road signs. You might even be abducted in mid-shot! Talk about a Kodak Moment!

In announcing the new highway designation, Nevada Gov. Bob Miller quipped that some of the signs should be placed flat on the ground, "So aliens can land there." Better yet, lay down a sign pointing the way to Las Vegas: that's where aliens would feel at home! But they'd better bring plenty of money.

For some reason, February was an especially good month for skeptics on TV (perhaps it was the alignment of the stars). The PBS series, Nova, presented two of its best episodes ever: one was a repeat of their profile of James Randi, as he busted psychics and faith healers both here and in Russia (this is a couple of years old, and I believe NTS has a copy of it on video if you haven't seen it yet). The other was a look at alien abductions that was brilliant in its format. For the first 15 minutes or so, you might have mistaken it for something off the Fox Network, as they "dramatically reenacted" Betty and Barney Hill's early abduction tale, interviewed Dr. John Mack and Bud Hopkins, followed Hopkins as he "retrieved" memories via hypnosis, showed the obviously sincere believers meeting in their alien abductee support groups, etc. But then, after presenting the most convincing case the abduction proponents could muster, the show began to dissect their arguments as neatly and methodically as one of those alleged alien abductors dissects a hillbilly.

With help from Carl Sagan and other real scientists, they pointed out the lack of any material evidence of UFO landings and abductions. They showed a clip of the episode of Outer Limits watched by the Hills just days before their "abduction," and noted that the aliens on the show matched their descriptions to the letter. They talked to sleep experts about common feelings of dread and helplessness in half-sleep states, and cited similar abduction tales going back centuries, attributed to fairies or evil spirits. They showed Dr. Mack being hoaxed by a skeptic, then refusing to believe that she had not been a real abductee (he says perhaps she had been abducted, and was just repressing it!). And most damning of all, they videotaped Bud Hopkins (who is untrained in either hypnosis or psychology) as he "uncovered" yet another family of abductees, and showed that tape to a trained hypnotherapist, who was appalled by what she saw. As the tape rolled, she pointed out example after example of Hopkins encouraging his subject to create the details that he wanted her to "remember" . . . which wasn't difficult, since she had contacted him after reading books by him and Whitley Streiber. And remember, all of these abduction tales, since and including the Hills', have been "recovered memories" obtained via hypnosis.

Anyone inclined to believe in alien abduction stories should see this show. It's like watching an elaborate house of cards being built before your eyes, then carefully disassembled. And it will save you a lot of time, grief and money.

A newer profile of James Randi also made it onto the air in February, on Dateline NBC. On the whole, it was an excellent piece, covering such familiar topics as Uri Geller and Peter Popov; although being a commercial network, NBC had to drag in a spokesman for the Rhine Center for parapsychological studies in Durham, North Carolina, to present "the opposing view." He flatly declared that there are such things as ESP and psychokinesis (J.B. Rhine went to a lot of trouble erasing and rewriting his experiment records to convince us of this, so the least we can do is believe him) and that Randi is not qualified to judge parapsychology's veracity, since he is not scientifically trained in the field.

NBC let this statement go unchallenged, but personally, I would have brought up the name Susan J. Blackmore. A trained parapsychologist, she worked in the field for years, even meeting such icons as Rhine, until gradually, bit by bit, it dawned on her that she had devoted her entire life to wishful thinking. She chronicled her journey from true believer to disillusioned skeptic in a wonderful book, *The Adventures of a Parapsychologist* (1986, Prometheus Books). Wonder what excuse the Rhine Center would offer for dismissing her evaluation of their work?

Finally, I should mention that the Scientologists have responded to one of the articles cited in last month's column, the one in *Spy* magazine in which a reporter went undercover and reported on their intimidation tactics. The April issue of *Spy* contains a full page letter denying all the charges and touting the amazing accomplishments of L. Ron Hubbard (she doesn't even mention his most impressive feat: he continues to crank out bad sci-fi novels, even after his death!). The letter is written by Leisa Goodman, identified by the impressive job title, "Media Relations Director of the Church of Scientology International, the mother church of the Scientology religion." Despite her obvious high rank among Scientologists, she somehow managed to write the letter in English, at least up until the end, when she closes her indignant missive with a quote from the living-challenged ubergenius himself, L. Ron Hubbard:

"What is true for you is what you have observed yourself. And when you lose that you have lost everything. What is personal integrity? Personal integrity is knowing what you know."

Well, I think we all know what we know about Scientology. And I'm happy to hear that they agree it's all true.

Healthy skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

"Pregnancy Suspension" Is Science Fiction

In late January of 1996, material was posted on the Internet and many physicians and health care facilities received a promotional mailing of a similar nature from a Houston company called Cryogenics Solutions, Inc. (CSI). Included in the mailing was a "fact sheet" on a new medical service being offered by the firm, and a brochure intended for patients.

These materials proposed that CSI would cryopreserve the tissues obtained from elective abortions and "maintain its vital potential in cryostorage indefinitely" with the idea of later being "able to re-animate [it, and] . . . regenerate embryogenesis and re-implant the embryo for gestation and birth."

While admitting that the technology to accomplish such an astounding feat (on tissues from 10-11 week pregnancies, which are typically thoroughly disrupted) does not now exist, the mailing named Fuller Bazer, Ph.D., Director of the Albert B. Alkek Institute of Biosciences and Technology at Texas A&M University, as "leading the CSI research effort . . . backed up by a highly qualified team of research scientists."

Meanwhile, the brochure intended for patients only referred to "expanding, improving, refining, and finally perfecting re-implantation technology," as if it already existed in some form. "In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) embryos are regularly frozen for future implantation," the company's literature blithely states, as if this were at all comparable to reconstituting the disrupted tissues obtained with a first trimester pregnancy termination and restoring them to the status of an intact intrauterine pregnancy.

Malcolm Skolnick, Ph.D., J.D., Director of the Office of Technology Management of the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, who is also named in CSI's "fact sheet" as "helping [to] direct [research] activities," was unaware that the company had initiated promotional efforts. Skolnick also denied that he had given CSI permission to use his name and said that his role had been limited to some discussions with representatives of the firm concerning its possible financial support of basic cryogenic research. He also agreed that the technology suggested by the company was not at all likely to be feasible within the lifetime, let alone the reproductive lifetime, of any of the company's prospective clients. "It's four to eight orders of magnitude beyond" current technology, said Skolnick.

Dr. Fuller Bazer was also taken by surprise on learning of CSI's claims. He denied that he was associated in any way with the sort of research effort mentioned in the company's literature. An attorney for Texas A&M subsequently wrote to demand that CSI cease using Dr. Bazer's name and that of the university in its materials.

It is questionable, to say the least, as to what CSI is actually up to, as it seems doubtful that any intelligent and informed person could seriously offer "pregnancy suspension" services. The company address which appears in the promotional materials sent out also happens to be a mail drop. But perhaps one clue is offered by a statement in CSI's "fact sheet" which asserts that "anti-abortion advocates . . . would consider withdrawing active opposition to those clinics and physicians offering cryogenic suspension."

Perhaps this has something to do with the unaccountable focus on women who are deliberately seeking to terminate their pregnancies, rather than on more likely candidates for "pregnancy suspension" such as women suffering the involuntary loss of desired pregnancies. It wouldn't be the first time that a mischievous prank was perpetrated for the purpose of muddying the waters of the abortion rights controversy.

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.

Up A Tree

