



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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In this month's issue:

- [The third eye](#)
- [Healthy skepticism](#)
- [How to kill a Sunday afternoon with psychic fare](#)

The third eye

News and Commentary from the Weird World of the Media

By Pat Reeder

Still too swamped to think very deeply, so I'll just recap all the most important news items. And since people are always complaining that the media won't cover religion, let's start with religion news.

Apparently, W. V. Grant is going to prison. The local Dallas- area televangelist, known far and wide for lengthening legs (or at least pulling them), has reportedly cut a deal with the feds to plead guilty to felony tax evasion charges. WFAA- TV Channel 8 News broke the story. They also showed tape of Grant on his TV show, telling his followers that God had suggested to him that perhaps it was time to turn his ministry over to a younger spiritual leader. In fact, by the time of that taping, he had already sold the church and its properties to the other minister for more than \$1 million.

So the Lord works in mysterious ways, and sometimes, He appears as a Realtor. Grant's opulent home in suburban Dallas is also on the market, but I must warn you that it has sustained millions of dollars worth of imaginary tornado damage.

Judging by the news, churches seem to be getting more dangerous. A Cleveland woman was found innocent by reason of insanity after she killed her minister, thinking he had put a voodoo curse on her. I know how she feels: I've sat through some sermons that made me feel like there were needles sticking in my rear end, too. Meanwhile, a woman in Lafayette Parish, Louisiana, received the Holy Spirit at a tent revival meeting, passed out on the floor, and while she was prone, another woman received the Holy Spirit and fell on top of her, breaking three of her ribs. She is suing the church because their ushers didn't move fast enough to catch the woman who fell on her. You'd think someone who was filled with the Holy Spirit would be lighter than that.

Lest you think I only make fun of Christians, I must also point out that we sure are growing a weird crop of atheists these days. For decades in San Diego, Christians have gathered early on Easter morning in the Soledad Natural Park for a sunrise service. But this year, a group of atheists called The Park Is For Everyone beat them to the punch and signed up first, so they could drag themselves out of bed at 6 a.m. on a Sunday to stand around in a damp park to celebrate the

concept of a pluralistic society (believe it or not, I haven't gotten to the idiotic part yet).

These so-called "atheists" included covens of witches, various incense burners and tambourine shakers, and such local mavens of logical thought as a woman who described herself as a member of the Irachne Circles, worshippers of Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt. She said she would like to see a giant egg take the place of the cross. A scrambled egg would be appropriate. What better way to celebrate pluralism and intellectual enlightenment than by driving away all the Christians with paganism?

But wacky atheists are not confined to San Diego. Texas's own Madalyn Murray O'Hare is still missing, and rumors continue to circulate that she is in failing health and has gone into hiding to prevent Christians from praying for her. Do you have to know where someone is in order to pray for them? Is she hiding from God? If she really is an atheist and thinks praying is a waste of breath, why should she care that her mortal enemies are wasting their breath? If this sort of irrational, superstitious behavior keeps up, I shall have no other choice than to declare that I no longer believe in the existence of atheists.

A few months ago, I wrote about Robert Joe Moody, an Arizona man found guilty of murdering and robbing two women. He claimed that space aliens had taken control of his brain and forced him to murder the women so that he could get the death penalty, then the aliens could resurrect him and prove their existence. Well, we'd better get ready to hand over that check for proof of the supernatural, because he got his request and has been given the death penalty. Luckily, with our judicial system, we probably won't have to pay up for another 25 years.

Moody must be nuts or a liar, because everyone knows that space aliens don't go to Arizona. They go to Nevada! Hundreds of people converged on the tiny town of Rachel, Nevada, in April for the official dedication of the "Extraterrestrial Highway," a stretch of desert road near Area 51 where sleepy travelers often see lights in the sky. Such famous extraterrestrials as Brent "Data" Spiner and Jeff Goldblum were on hand, along with impersonators of Darth Vader and Elvis (at least, I assume they were impersonators) and a local character who calls himself Ambassador Merlin II. He proclaimed that Rachel will be a "destination point for intergalactic tourists" who will be here in three years. Governor Bob Miller concurred, declaring, "If E.T. comes back, we'd like it to be here in Nevada. Most people, when they look to the skies, see friend or foe. Not me. I see intergalactic tourists."

So not only do space aliens spend 30 years conducting millions of cursory physical exams of humans, when they could learn much more by just beaming up an anatomy textbook, but now, they're going to travel thousands of light years across the galaxy to take a vacation in Rachel, Nevada? So much for the theory that UFOs are controlled by intelligent beings.

When it comes to hosting conventions of oddballs, Rachel had quite a bit of competition in April. Several hundred saucer chasers were in Gulf Breeze, Florida, for the 4th annual Gulf Breeze UFO Conference, to the embarrassment of a number of local residents. The usual suspects showed up: MUFON, Whitley Streiber, people trying to connect UFOs with Biblical prophecy, and of course, the man who started it all, Mr. Polaroid himself, Ed Walters, who continues to insist that evil skeptics framed him to make him look like a phony-baloney.

Yes, I well remember the day that the shadowy underground of skeptics hit me up for a \$10 contribution to buy a model of a flying saucer and hide it in Ed's attic, then take the leftover money and pay off the kid who lives next door to make up that obviously bogus story about helping Ed fake his UFO photographs. We also used our massive power over the media to get ABC-TV to cancel plans to make a made-for-TV movie about Ed's extraordinary experiences.

(By the way, for those of you who think The X-Files is a documentary, I'm being sarcastic. If skeptics had any power over the media, you wouldn't be seeing so many commercials for psychic hotlines).

Another big supernatural confab took place in London in April, this one being the 23rd annual "Unconvention" held by the British Fortean Times magazine. About 1,200 scholars of hooey sat through lectures on mermaids, ghosts, reincarnation, and "the evolution of the vampire" (so evolution continues even after you're dead, which I guess Charles Darwin knows by now, although he hasn't written much lately).

The Reuters story included a classic example of that species identified in this very column, the "Skeptic But." After a presentation by David Percy, who believes the Apollo moon landings were faked on a movie set, one photographer proclaimed, "I'm a SKEPTIC, BUT now I do believe there was a cover-up." But at least one real skeptic was in attendance. During a big-screen showing of the Alien Autopsy film, one British man left halfway through, grumbling, "I can't believe 1,000 people are sitting in silence watching this rubbish." I remember feeling the same way when Fire In The Sky came out.

Speaking of Alien Autopsy, in last month's column, I made reference to a new show on the paranormal starring Autopsy host Jonathan Frakes, of Star Trek: The Next Generation (Brent Spiner must be snapping up all the really prestigious gigs, like highway openings in Rachel, Nevada). At the time I didn't know the name of the show, but I can now confirm that it is appropriately entitled Paranormal Borderline. I'm also happy to report, for the good of both the aggregate I.Q. of America and the career of Mr. Frakes, that it airs on UPN (the Unemployed Psychics Network) opposite both Frasier and Home Improvement, so chances are that absolutely nobody will ever see it.

Finally, I wish to end with a blatant plug. By the time you receive this, a brilliant new book, Hollywood Hi-Fi: Over 100 of the Most Outrageous Celebrity Recordings of All Time, should be arriving in stores. It is written by George Gimarc and little ol' me, and it includes reviews of the song stylings of everyone from William Shatner to Uri Geller. St. Martin's Press was kind enough to include several horrid typos and printing errors in the initial printing run, which makes them valuable collectors' items, so you'd best snap up them up fast. And not only will I sign them for you, I'll even sign them, "Jackie Kennedy Onassis." Then they'll be really valuable!

Healthy Skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

"All Natural" Products Can Kill

It's been a long time coming, but the tragic death of college student Peter Schlendorf caused by an "all natural" herbal product is finally focusing national attention on the dangers posed by these preparations. In Schlendorf's case, the culprit was "ULTIMATE Xphoria," one of several products promoted as a "safe" and legal recreational drug.

But this needs to be qualified. For here in the United States we have the distinction of enjoying the benefits of legislation introduced by Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), shepherded through Congress by the billion-dollar health food industry, and signed into law by President Clinton just a few years ago. That measure, the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA), legally designates all vitamin, mineral, and herbal products, including the "ULTIMATE Xphoria" and scores of others with the same or similar ingredients which are promoted for weight loss, "energy enhancement" and all manner of disease prevention and cure, as "foods."

In fact, they are "foods" according to the DSHEA law even if the form the herbal ingredient takes is actually an *extract*. Never mind why anyone would want to use an herbal extract since that would necessarily be throwing away some vital part of the herb. And never mind that what's thrown away does *not* contain the bulk of the pharmacologically active substances found in the original material. One wonders how long it will be before someone realizes that *Erythroxylon coca* and *Papaver somniferum* (the sources of cocaine and morphine, respectively) are simply "all natural" herbs and that, under DSHEA, they and their extracts are simply "foods" that can be legally sold over-the-counter to anyone.

The herb in question in the case of Peter Schlendorf's death and the deaths of several other people is *Ephedra Sinica*, commonly known as Ma huang but also by the names Sida cordifolia, Mormon tea, teamster's tea, squaw tea, popotillo, and yellow horse. Ephedrine is the active chemical substance commonly found in many species of this genus, though related alkaloids including phenylpropanolamine and pseudoephedrine (used in many over-the-counter cold remedies

and/or diet aids) are often found as well. This class of substances are chemically similar to the body's own "fight or flight" hormone, adrenalin. And ephedrine, in particular, has potent adrenalin-like effects.

There are a great many "nutritional supplements" which contain *Ephedra* extracts, including Metabolift, HerbTrim, MiniThins, Blasting Caps, Ripped Fuel, ThermoLift, Trichromaleane, and scores of others sold as pills, teas, soft drinks, and in other forms. Most contain a variety of other ingredients and some include a source of caffeine such as kola nut, mat, and/or guarana which can intensify the action of the ephedrine alkaloids. The most notorious of these products locally is "Nature's Nutrition Formula One" which is promoted as a weight-loss aid and "energy enhancer." Perhaps most problematic is that the use of these ephedrine-containing "nutritional supplements" is even being promoted as a "natural" alternative to Ritalin^{<191>} for children with attention-deficit disorders.

Manufacturers typically claim that they receive no complaints of problems with their products. Yet a lawsuit by the Texas Department of Health against the Alliance Company, makers of the Formula One product, turned up hundreds of complaints that accompanied product returns along with demands for payment of medical bills for emergency room services due to adverse effects. One of these was from an individual who complained of having to be on long-term medication because of a seizure experienced after taking the "nutritional supplement." Authorities have collected nearly a thousand such accounts and suspect that many more have not been reported or may have gone unrecognized.

Although the package labeling of these products is sometimes extensive, the medical conditions which contraindicate their use, including prostatic enlargement, congenital vascular defects, and heart disease are not easily self-diagnosed. Moreover, as in the case of Peter Schlendorf, even good health is no protection from serious adverse effects.

Another reason that labeling is ineffective is that consumers tend to interpret product warnings as meaningless gestures on the part of manufacturers aimed at reducing the risk of lawsuits. In many cases, untrained multi-level marketers of the preparations instruct users to disregard the precautions and even to increase the dosage when adverse effects are experienced. Some products, particularly a line of beverages aimed at adolescents that contain ephedrine alkaloids, render precautions meaningless when they, for example, make use of the skull and cross-bones as a marketing tool and bear labeling such as "D.O.A."

Although federal regulators are permitted to act against products which are unsafe, DSHEA puts the burden of proof on the government to prove a danger. Manufacturers, meanwhile, are not required to share any safety information and are even exempt from post-marketing surveillance as is required for the makers of conventional pharmaceuticals. And, since most "nutritional supplements" contain multiple ingredients, a manufacturer can always simply change its formulation and continue to market their product, as Alliance did with its Formula One

As of now, DSHEA does not supersede state regulation of these "nutritional supplement" preparations, though there are efforts underway to change this. Last year, the Texas Department of Health recommended that all ephedrine-containing products be restricted to prescription-only availability, but allowed the proposal to lapse after encountering fierce opposition from industry and its lobbyists.

Proponents of these ephedrine-containing preparations marketed as "nutritional supplements," "legal stimulants," and the like say that the Chinese have used *Ephedra Sinica* for centuries. Yet even today, in the Orient, the herb is not available over-the-counter but only from practitioners who prescribe it as a part of their traditional medicine. Nor are preparations containing ephedrine alkaloids used in those countries for weight loss, as stimulants, to "get high" or for more than very short periods of time.

There are scientific studies which have examined the use of ephedrine, with and without caffeine, as an adjunct to weight loss programs. An acceptable rate of adverse effects have been claimed in published reports of these. But this research obviously involved the careful selection and monitoring of study participants as well as known doses of drug, which is not the case with the "nutritional supplement" products which are promoted indiscriminately and contain active ingredients which are not standardized.

The case of Peter Schlendorf, and others where death or severe adverse effects followed the use of herbal preparations containing ephedrine alkaloids, while tragic, are not surprising. In fact, they were bound to happen given DSHEA and the successful campaign of the health food industry to persuade the public that if something is "all natural" that it's

perfectly safe. It's too bad that people have to die and families have to suffer before the truth can have a hearing.

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.

How to kill a Sunday afternoon with psychic fare

By Virginia Vaughn

Danny Barnett and I experienced a bit of brain death after a night of a bit of Harp and too many Irish Drinking Songs, so we went to a Psychic Fair at the Park Central Hotel. I've never been to one, so I figured it would be interesting-nay, my duty!-to check it out.

I had a photo made of my aura, although the guy doesn't let you see the camera inside the box. I tried to sit a bit off center in the chair, but he wouldn't let me. He wouldn't photograph the blank screen either. He also wouldn't let me put my hands in view-gee, I wanted to know if they had auras too. My aura cut the top of my head off. I hope that's not significant in the psychic realm.

I suspect that he either gets psychic party film like the Polaroid film with balloons around the edge, only his has auras. Or, he has LEDs or some other colored light source (or a rotating filter) to expose the aura. He might even double expose the film, but he seemed to have no problem pulling the film. Auras come in a variety of colors, but regardless of the shape of someone's head or upper body, the aura shape is remarkably consistent.

My aura is orange and red-a double whammy exactly like some of the photos he had posted. Here's the significance of these colors along with my hopefully untrue commentary which is between the ():

Red: This color is hot-high energy-strong passion, mind and will-can reflect anger or love (I'm passionless, my brain is dead and gee, anger or love? Make up your mind!)-indicates unexpected changes-in healing it grounds, calms and is good for energizing and good circulation in the body. Red is the urge to achieve results, success and desire. (Nah, I never want results, success or desire.) You work to push the limits and live life to the fullest. (I want to coast through life and live badly.) Desire, excitability, domination and sexuality are the qualities most important to you. (I have no basic human needs.) The world sees you as alive, outgoing, sexual and powerful. (Well, they are wrong. I am dead, introverted, a cold fish and feckless.) Fun is ahead of you.

Orange: This is the color of warmth-energy with mental direction, creativity and emotions-courage, joy and pride (Excuse me, but I have no energy nor mental direction, I'm mud dumb in creative efforts and I have no emotions. I certainly have no courage, I'm joyless and have no pride.)-reflects an opening of new awareness-can sometimes indicate emotional imbalances, (Well, okay, one hit.) agitation, worry and vanity. In healing it stimulates optimism, hope and is good for exhaustion and weakness. Orange is activity generating. You are alive, artistic, perceptive and creative. Constructive self-expression is important to you. (No, it is not. I don't want anyone to understand me.) People see you as happy and willing to work. You like to get out and have fun. (I want to get out of work, stay in the house and be bored.) There is an opportunity to enjoy the sensual pleasures. (Right. I'm gonna eat a cookie.) Now is the time to go for it. (Okay!)

Psychics never seem to give you news that is bad. Who would ever admit to a reading that said, "You hate children, you can't find your way out of a paper sack, you'll never amount to anything and you have gas" ?

I move now to Santiago, the only psychic with an open appointment, who's an American Indian and performer of Ceremonial Rituals. Here's what he had to say about me and my loved ones:

Santiago insisted that he had met Danny and I while doing a psychic fair in Cedar Hill. When we denied being

acquainted with him, he said, "Well, I've seen you around at these things." Like I said, we've never been to one of these things. We appeared to be off to a bang-up start. He had literature about a cruise for psychics that will happen this summer. I think I will go, and my psychic vibrations tell me that the most frequent phrase used on the vessel will be, "Man overboard!"

Santiago began by giving me white sage which smelled great, but I have no idea what it was supposed to do. He prayed over me while assaulting me with a long, blue birdie feather (a "bird of pray," I guess). He then went into the requisite trance state to get a bead on me. Good luck.

He told me that I have been in a mental prison, surrounded by walls, etc. "Nope," I said. He continued his psychic reading in the same vein and I kept denying it. He said he would put that one aside and looked a bit shaken. He did tell me that I love liberty. I'm sure it had nothing to do with the stars and stripes shirt I was wearing. He proceeded to go into another trance.

He then prompted me to ask questions so he could tune in to my spiritual self. Okay, but I'm a very, very bad girl. I asked him what kind of job my little sister will get since she has been fruitlessly looking for some time. He didn't know that my little sister has been dead for 5 years. It seems that despite this handicap, she is getting a job helping people. Care is a motivating factor for her-perhaps something to do with children. He asked if she has children. "No, not yet," I replied. (I probably should have said that she can't have any. It would have been a bit more honest.) She will have kids, though, according to Santiago.

I asked him whether my brother will reunite with his girlfriend. Santiago wasn't told that my brother has been dead for 35 years. Phillip has had a deep rift with "Marsha" and roots have been pulled up like an onion. The best thing for Phillip and Marsha is to start over, and Phillip is going to have two more marriages. See? There's life after death!

Santiago advised me to avoid the "job offer" I had in Nairobi. (Okay, I fed him this drool.) He said it would upset my tummy to go there. Hmmmm: a foreign country with unfamiliar food and strange water causing intestinal upsets? Wow! What insight! Imagine this scenario: I am a believer in psychic ability. I go to this man for advice about a great job opportunity and am told to forget it. I don't take the job and regret it the rest of my life. A little sickening, isn't it?

He also gave me an exercise to perform. I'm supposed to touch some kind of bump on the crown of my head and wait for the spectral fingers to advise me. I have to obey these spirits. If the finger is in the center, I am okay to proceed with whatever decision I need to make. If it is to either side of my head, I should heed the spirit's wisdom and back off my decision. Let's see, shall I take my blood pressure medicine today? Well, the spirit world gave me the finger, so I shouldn't take the medicine. Great idea.

He asked me how I come to decisions about my life. I said that I rely on rationality which is apparently very bad. I am supposed to listen to the spirit world, eschew rational thought, and proceed according to the whim of the spirit world. Like President Reagan used to do.

There isn't much human contact in the modern world. These psychics do fill a need for many people in that they are sympathetic to their customers and provide a willing ear for a fee. They could, however, prevent people from relying on themselves or prevent them from seeking professional help in some cases. All in all, it was pretty creepy hanging out with the loonies and listening to Yawni-like music.

Hearing all the bizarre NewAge (pronounced like "sewage") explanations was more than I could bear and I had a heck of a time keeping a straight face. Many attendees need to wear medic alert bracelets saying, "I am a loony. If found in a trance state, call a witch doctor."