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## The third eye

### News and Commentary from the Weird World of the Media

By Pat Reeder

I promised last month to reply to Dr. Tim Gorski's letter about the atheist brouhaha in San Diego. The letter is too long to reprint, so you might want to haul last month's issue of *The Skeptic* out from under your canary and refresh your memory. Generally, it took exception to my poking a bit of fun at a San Diego atheist group for signing up to use a local park on Easter morning, at a time when it was normally used by Christians for sunrise worship services, and inviting absolutely everyone to come celebrate the wonderful mosaic that is America, the result of which was that a lot of crystal gazers showed up and clashed with the Christians, and the ensuing wire reports made everyone involved look like idiots. Anyway, here is my response:

As I said, I gladly yield to Dr. Gorski's wider knowledge of the background of this story. But his details reinforce my belief that the San Diego atheists took careful aim at their own feet and blasted away.

I have over 20 years experience in advertising and the media, and if it is true that someone took out that park permit in the atheist group's name without permission, then here is what I would have advised them to do: Call a press conference and announce that they did not apply for the permit to use the park on Easter morning, but since it was taken out in their name, they will gladly yield that time to local Christians. They would have looked incredibly magnanimous, made the point that they were tolerant of other viewpoints, even those of people who are hostile to them, disarmed their critics and accrued goodwill in the community, which would have come in handy when fighting much more important battles, such as keeping creationism out of science classes.

Instead, they just made themselves look petty. I know, the story I quoted didn't have all the details that Dr. Gorski provided, but that is precisely my point: No news story would include all that background, only the end result, and the result was an inevitable, predictable public relations disaster.

Dr. Gorski also asked "which side" I am on. Like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, I am on neither side in this

argument. The Christians were wrong in assuming they didn't have to reserve the park officially and in being combative toward the people who did have it. On the other hand, maybe my threshold of shock is a bit higher than some people's, but I confess my eyebrows did not elevate at the news that city officials just assumed Christians would be using the park at sunrise on Easter morning, seeing as how they had been doing so every Easter for over 70 years.

Why should they have assumed that anyone other than Christians would want to be in the park at sunrise on any Sunday, much less Easter? (I saw a sunrise once; they're highly overrated.) Isn't sleeping in on Sunday one of the major advantages of being an atheist? And was anybody truly dismayed at the thought that Christians might be a tad grumpy when told that they could hold their Easter services in the park, but they'd have to share their meadow with a coven of witches and shout their prayers so God could hear them over all the invocations to Lucifer? Those prigs!

"The Park Is For Everyone" sounds like a noble concept, but no place should have to be for everyone, all at the same time. This sort of forced togetherness almost always backfires and breeds animosity, as witness the shouting matches that occurred on Easter morning. Would the San Diego atheists be shocked that African-Americans might not take kindly to being told they'd have to share the park with a Klan rally on Martin Luther King's birthday because "The Park Is For EVERYONE?" Seems to me the city is doing people a favor by allowing certain groups to have the park at certain times; it lets you know when you can avoid people you disagree with and therefore keep our glorious American mosaic from getting ripped to shreds.

Frankly, the only part of the letter that alarmed me was the reference to the *five year* legal battle over a cross-shaped hunk of concrete in a public park. How many millions of tax dollars have flowed down the drain to pay all the lawyers for this vitally important crusade? Has anybody ever walked into that park an atheist, gazed upon that cross, and (ZAP!) miraculously transmogrified into a Presbyterian? Chances are, most parkgoers who aren't already religious just use it for picnic shade.

There are two issues here that need to be separated. One is the implied constitutional guarantee of separation of church and state, and the other is the expressed guarantee of freedom of speech, religion and assembly. As a writer, if I have to take any side, I'll pick the latter. While I don't cotton to enforced prayer in schools any more than the San Diego atheists do, there is a difference between state establishment of religion and state acknowledgment of the existence of religion. I get very nervous when the "Freedom >From Religion" crowd, or any other group of professional do-gooders, starts demanding that the coercive power of the government be exercised to tell people what thoughts they are and are not allowed to express in public places.

Let's examine that concrete cross that has the San Diego atheists so lathered up. It's a block of concrete in a crosslike shape, mounted vertically. Therefore it is a religious symbol and must be removed from public property. Suppose I take two steel girders, weld them into a crosslike shape, mount them horizontally in a public park, and give it a title like, say, "Untitled #8." Now, it is art, and I can not only put it in the public park, I can apply to the NEA for a grant and make the taxpayers pay for it. Think this is silly? Then why is it unconstitutional to have a crucifix in a public park, but public money can be paid to Andre Serrano to submerge a crucifix in urine and take a photo of it? Are crucifixes only protected by the state when they are soaked in urine? In that case, the one in the park probably applies.

Or take another recent case from the news: A teenager claimed he was an atheist and that a painting of Jesus in his school was preventing him from doing his work (sounds to me like a feeble excuse for blowing his math final, but never mind). The school argued that the painting of Jesus was part of a gallery of paintings of historical figures of great influence, from Jesus to Gandhi. The freedom from religion types naturally backed the student and agreed that all religious icons must be removed from public schools, regardless of context.

But how can you teach the history of the world without reference to Christianity, Buddhism, or other religions? (Rip that chapter on the Crusades out of your history book!) Gandhi was a religious figure as well as a political figure, so must his portrait be removed, too? And after all, these are paintings we are removing. So can the argument be extended to bar all art of a religious nature from public school art classes? (Good-bye, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, etc., etc.).

You can see that this crusade to remove all religious references from public places opens up a whole new can of little censorship worms that I'm not interested in releasing. Personally, rather than go down this road, I'd rather leave the crucifix in the park, trust the citizenry to be smart enough to make up their own minds about religion, and spend the

time and money that's been squandered in San Diego on more important things, like building more jail cells for the park's muggers.

In summation, I would say to the San Diego atheists: 1. Pick your battles more wisely. Learn to prioritize. 2. Use calm reason, gentle persuasion, and good media coverage to win converts, not lawyers and bullhorns. 3. Develop a sense of humor. Remember, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." Or am I allowed to say that here?

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Moving on at last to other subjects, this month's big news from the frontiers of dippyness comes to us courtesy of Bob Woodward's new book, *The Choice*, which set off a media ballyhoo by revealing that Hillary Clinton had consulted "spiritual advisor" Jean Houston, who encouraged the first lady to seek guidance by holding imaginary conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi.

On NBC's *Dateline*, Woodward described Houston as being "very much on the fringe." However, he neglected to mention that he himself has been known to hold imaginary conversations with dead, or at least comatose, CIA heads, so his opinion is suspect; therefore I shall personally assure you that she is, indeed, very much on the fringe.

As is their wont, the White House began spinning the story furiously, insisting that despite what Hillary's ex-employees might say, she is not a witch, and her chats with the departed were not seances, but therapeutic exercises. For her part, Houston pointed to her psychological credentials (some a bit suspect), noted her many best-selling books (try slogging through a few pages of her gobbledygook sometime when you feel a masochistic urge for a migraine), and reminded reporters that people pay thousands of dollars to attend her seminars (but then, the same could be said of Shirley MacLaine).

The widespread hooting over this story gave me hope that there was still a bit of rationality left in the American media. But those hopes were tempered when the Clinton defenders in the press chimed in, declaring that it's okay for the first lady to practice New Agey psychobabble because a majority of Americans believe in it (a new poll shows more than half also believe the government is hiding info about UFOs, but that's another column), so Hillary's dabbings put her squarely in the mainstream. They also defended this technique of talking to the dead as simply being a way of making decisions by considering what people you respect might do in your place. Foolishly, I had always thought that to do that, you should read the deceased's writings or consult a scholar who had studied that person's life.

Then, like a flash, I realized the advantage to the Houston method of making up both sides of the conversation: The idols you consult will always say just what you want them to say! (It's no wonder Houston first thought of this technique while watching Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy). For example, suppose I want to eat a Snickers bar, but am afraid it will make me fat. So, I consult the greatest genius of all time, Albert Einstein, for his opinion:

**ME:** "Say, Al, will this Snickers bar make me fat?"

**EINSTEIN:** (Actually me in a German accent) "Vot, are you kiddink? Off course not! Zee Snickers bar iss matter, vich vill be converted into enerchee! Eat up!"

**ME:** "That's incredible, Al! That's exactly what I was hoping you would tell me to do!" (Chomp!)

What could be more enlightening than consulting yourself? It reminds me of the brilliant film, *The Ruling Class*, starring Peter O'Toole as a dotty member of the British aristocracy who thinks he is Jesus. When asked how he arrived at this conclusion, he answers with perfect, Jean Houston logic: "Simple. I found that whenever I prayed to Him, I was talking to myself."

(Ernest Hemingway suggested that I mention that George Gimarc and I will be signing our new book and CD, *Hollywood Hi-Fi*, at Border's Books on Preston in Dallas, 7 p.m. July 11; Barnes & Noble in Grapevine, 2-4 p.m. July 20; and Barnes & Noble in North Arlington on I-30, 2-4 p.m. Aug. 24).

*[Dr. Gorski's letter in last month's Skeptic also evoked a lengthy response from NTS Vice President Joe Voelkering. Joe's thoughts on the matter will be published in next month's issue, after which your editor will declare a truce in the*

*hope that our newsletter can return to abnormal. -- Ed.]*

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# Healthy skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

## Quacks' Criticism of Medicine Unfounded

For years, opponents of science and reason-based medicine have cited a 1978 Office of Technology Assessment report that stated that "only 10 to 20 percent of procedures currently used in medical practice have been shown to be efficacious by controlled trial." This, say the quacks, means that current medical practice is guilty of all the things that "alternative" practitioners are accused of. But how was the 10-20% figure arrived at?

It turns out, according to the newsletter of the National Council Against Health Fraud [P.O. Box 1276, Loma Linda, CA 92354; Web: <http://www.ncahf.org>] that this statistic was the result of an "armchair" assessment by one Kerr L. White, who explained his methods by way of responding to a published study in *Lancet* which reached quite a different result. The British study showed that 82% of the management of 109 patients during April of last year were evidence-based. Kerr's numbers, by contrast, were estimated from a report published in 1963 in which the prescribing habits of 19 family doctors in one town in the northern U.K. were considered for two weeks in 1960 and 1961.

That survey was intended to assess how specific the prescribed drugs were for the condition stated with a view towards cost control, and had nothing to do with an assessment of medical practice. Given that more than 30 years have elapsed since then and that Great Britain's regulatory situation with respect to medications has never been comparable to that in America, the 10-20% figure has essentially no relevance for modern medicine as it now practiced in the United States.

## Lies For Sale

The National Council Against Health Fraud reports [March/April 1996 Newsletter] that renegade veterinarian Joel Wallach is now selling tapes and videos titled "Dead Doctors Don't Lie!" Wallach is apparently claiming that physicians are themselves among the most unhealthy of Americans because they rely on conventional medical ideas and practices.

In fact, studies of physicians' longevity in the 20th Century have consistently shown that they are among the longest-lived of Americans. Even a random sample of 17 deaths listed in the July issue of the Texas Medical Association's *Texas Medicine*, for example, gives an average age at death of 77.3 years. Wallach also claims to be a Nobel-Prize nominee, as can anyone who either nominates themselves or has someone else send a letter of recommendation to the Nobel Committee, which does not release any lists of people being considered for the awards.

## Aids Quack Charged

Lazare Industries Inc. of Marshalls Creek, PA, and its CEO, Richard J. Harley, have been charged by the Securities Exchange Commission with scheming to defraud scores of investors. U.S. District Judge Thomas Vanaskie ordered the assets of the firm frozen in connection with the SEC charges.

Lazare is in the business of treating AIDS patients with "ozone-oxygen enemas" which it falsely claims have been patented and shown to be effective. FDA had previously seized records and equipment from the operation in January of this year. Quacks, it seems, are just as careless generally as they are with their outrageous claims. And like Al Capone, they may find that this is what will get them into trouble even if they can buy relief from government scrutiny of their health claims.

## Dental Amalgam Foe's License Revoked

Hall Huggins, the Colorado Springs dentist who has long championed the fiction that mercury amalgam fillings are a serious health threat, has had his license to practice revoked. In an eye-opening 71-page statement issued by Administrative Law Judge Nancy Connick on February 29th of this year, Huggins' bizarre claims and practices are detailed. These include his victimization of sufferers of Multiple Sclerosis, even to the extent of falsely telling such people that he had had MS himself and cured it, and that he had performed research which substantiated his ideas.

Huggins, who explained his eccentric beliefs in his book, *It's All in Your Head: The Link Between Mercury Amalgams and Illness*, is said to have treated up to 250 patients a year, charging each of them \$6,000 *in addition* to their dental services. He even went so far as to treat many people with EDTA, apparently intending to remove mercury from their bodies, even though EDTA does not bind the metal.

Judge Connick concluded that Huggins was so unalterably convinced of his ideas in the face of overwhelming facts and evidence to the contrary that nothing less than the revocation of his license could be considered. No challenges to the judge's decision were filed in the 30 days permitted and the Colorado State Board of Dental Examiners subsequently voted on May 1st to accept Connick's decision and revoke Huggins' license.

*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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## Jupiter Effect Redux

**By James Rusk**

Many readers of this newsletter remember the so-called Jupiter Effect. According to those promoting it, the Jupiter Effect was an alignment of the planets on March 10, 1982, that would cause a chain of events ending with a massive earthquake in California. Of course, March 10, 1982, came and went and nothing happened.

But get ready for "Son of the Jupiter Effect": the planets will line up again on May 5, 2000. This will be too good an opportunity for any psychic, astrologer, New Age believer, or any other fuzzy thinker to pass up. Once again massive earthquakes are predicted. Doom at the end of the millennium!

In fact, according to a New Age book, *5/5/2000: Ice, the Ultimate Disaster*, the alignment of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn with the Earth will cause the ice that has been building up at the South Pole to upset the Earth's axis, resulting in massive floods and earthquakes. At least that seems to be what the author, Richard W. Noone, says. Since the book is a confusing mishmash of bizarre ideas, it's hard to make sense of any of it.

Of course, the truth is much more complicated, and not as sensational. The year 2000 features a series of alignments, and many times during the year various planets will appear to be very close together in the night sky. On April 6, 2000, at around 7 PM, for example, the moon, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn will be all grouped very close together, and, weather permitting, it should be a spectacular sight.

On May 5, 2000, itself, there will be no spectacular alignment visible from Earth. From high about the sun, however, six planets will be in a line: Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus and Earth.

May 17, 2000, will feature an alignment of Venus and Jupiter. Although the two planets will be too close to the sun to be visible from Earth, religious fundamentalists may exploit the fact that this pairing is a close duplicate of the 2 BCE alignment that some identify as the star the Magi followed.

**Why Nothing Will Happen**

What physical effect will the May 5, 2000, alignment have? If all the planets were to line up perfectly, their total gravitational force would raise the ocean tides by only one twenty-fifth of a millimeter. This is because gravitational force depends on both mass and distance. Jupiter is certainly a massive object compared to the Earth, but it is so far away that the tidal force it exerts on the Earth is only 0.0000131 times that of the sun!

Besides physics, history is on our side. As recently as February 4, 1962, the planets were as well-aligned as they will be in the year 2000. In fact, on February 4, 1962, all five visible planets and the moon were very close in the sky (there was also an eclipse of the sun that day). However, a check of any history book will prove that nothing particularly unusual happened on that date.

Furthermore, one scientist has searched for a correlation between planetary alignments and earthquakes. Using Chinese records since the year 1000, W. H. Ip found that the planets appeared to have no effect on earthquakes (*Icarus*, 29, pp. 435-6, 1976).

### **How Often Do Planets Align?**

It is impossible to give a short, accurate answer to the question of how often the planets line up. First, no particular alignment will repeat itself exactly. Second, it is difficult in three-dimensional space to accurately define what we mean by "lined up," since the planets' orbits are in different planes.

One possible answer to the question, according to the astronomer John Mosley, is that the planets come into reasonable (but not perfect) alignment about once every 125 years. Using computers, astronomers have calculated alignments with great accuracy.

The closest alignment of the planets as viewed from Earth during the last few thousand years occurred on February 27, 1953, BCE. The last two such groupings before the one in 2000 were on April 30, 1821, and February 5, 1962. The next time the planets will be so close together again will be on September 8, 2040.

Alignments viewed from high above the solar system reveal a different pattern. The next time the five planets, the moon, and the sun will be lined up (as they will be on May 5, 2000) will not be until March 20, 2675.

### **Coming Out of the Woodwork**

The end of the millennium will be a field day for psychics, astrologers, and their ilk, as well as the religious fundamentalists. It is unfortunate that nature has given these groups such a spectacular alignment to bolster their predictions of doom and gloom. Even though the millennium doesn't actually end until December 31, 2000, no one will care that the May alignment is seven months early. Aided and abetted by the news media, exaggerated and fanciful claims of disaster in the year 2000, combined with the natural feeling of the importance of the ending of the millennium, will frighten many people unnecessarily.

**Bibliography** "Cosmic Disaster in 2000!," John Mosley, *Planetarian*, pp. 6-23, March, 1996. "Doomsday: The May 2000 Prediction," Jean Meeus, *Skeptical Inquirer*, pp. 290-92, Spring, 1988. "On the Trail of the Jupiter Effect," L. G. Thompson, *Sky and Telescope*, p. 220, September, 1981. *James Rusk is the Director of the Russell Planetarium in Mesquite, Texas, and is a Technical Advisor to NTS.*

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# **Planetary Alignment FAQ**

**By James Rusk**

1. *How often do the planets align?* It varies greatly, but the average is every 125 years.
2. *When was the last alignment?* The last time the planets were as aligned as they will be in 2000 was February 5,

1962. Nothing catastrophic happened.
3. *When will the next alignment take place after 2000?* September 8, 2040.
  4. *How do you know that the May 5, 2000, alignment won't cause earthquakes and floods?* First, the previous alignment in 1962 caused no problems. Second, the only force the planets can exert on the earth is gravitational, and they are so far away that even the combined pull of all the other planets as they line up will not affect the earth. Even a perfect lining up of the planets would only raise the tides 1/1000th of an inch!
  5. *Weren't scientists wrong about the Jupiter Effect in 1982?* Only a handful of scientists supported the idea that the planetary alignment in 1982 would cause problems on the earth. The vast majority of astronomers, including Carl Sagan, predicted correctly that nothing disastrous would happen.
  6. *Didn't Nostradamus predict a disastrous planetary alignment in the year 2000?* No. Quatrain 10-72, the only remaining quatrain with a date in the future, mentions July, 1999. The quatrain does not say anything about planets lining up.

*James Rusk is the Director of the Russell Planetarium in Mesquite, Texas, and is a Technical Advisor to NTS.*

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## They're Everywhere!

### Book Review by John Blanton

I know the UFO crowd has been taking its licks of late, but here's some more. It comes from Tom McHugh, who *claims* to be a computer programmer out of Sacramento, California. You can believe that if you want, but I retain my doubts.

Actually, it's all you ever heard about flying saucers and more. What's here? "Wheelbarrows of the Gods" for starters. That's the title of the first chapter. If by now you're thinking a lot of this is going to be tongue-in-cheek then head for the front of the class. If you are accustomed to Phillip Klass' cynical journalistic style, get ready for a ride of a different kind. McHugh is out to have fun with UFOs and their camp followers, and facts don't get in the way. Sometimes I think he doesn't take UFOs seriously enough. What if they really *are* aliens. This guy is going to tick them off, and we're going to be in *real* trouble. Here are some samples:

He interviews a UFO victim: "George told me that none of his animals appeared to be harmed but that his chickens were acting unusually aggressive. For the next few days, in fact, George's chickens were seen terrorizing the larger animals by flapping their wings at them and squawking loudly. The bizarre behavior finally stopped after one of his pigs grew tired of the harassment and bit one of the chicken's heads off. `After that,' said George, `things pretty much settled down to normal.'" I'll bet.

For those who have ever been intrigued by movies of the Steven Spielberg kind, McHugh explains some of the technical details:

- **A Close Encounter of the First Kind** is defined as a UFO sighting by a man and a woman while they are kissing in a remote, wooded area. Sixty-seven percent of all UFO sightings fall into this category.
- **A Close Encounter of the Second Kind** is when the UFO is sighted by a couple engaged in light foreplay. Twelve and a half percent of all sightings fall into this category.
- **A Close Encounter of the Third Kind** is when a UFO sighting causes the lovers to become obsessed with a mountain of mashed potatoes. This category accounts for about 2 percent of all sightings and can be quite messy.
- The final category, a **Close Encounter of the Fourth Kind**, is when a UFO is not seen by the passionate couple at all; or if it is, the couple doesn't care. It is impossible to determine how many sightings of this type occur, but these are said to be the most inspiring.

The John Kloss illustrations are equally sacrilegious: Richard Nixon at the podium declaring in vain, "I am not an alien." If sacred cows are not slaughtered here, they are at least smitten upon the hind quarter.

Chances of finding this at Bookstop are slim. Shirley MacLaine is the top seller there. Best send directly to Paul Kurtz

for your copy. Or borrow ours. We have one in the NTS library.

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***Flying Saucers are EVERYWHERE.*** Tom McHugh; illustrated by John Kloss. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, 1995. 135 pages (illustrated). \$12.95.