

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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Not the Millennium

by John Blanton

In case you were wondering, we did not miss the great anniversary. Recall that the famous Bishop Ussher calculated the first day of Genesis was in 4004 B.C., on October 23 more specifically. I find that easy to remember, since that's my birthday. No, not 4004 B.C. So, naturally the Skeptics were planning a bash to celebrate the 6000th anniversary of the universe, plus my birthday, last October 23. Then I checked the calculations and realized there was no year zero, so the 6000th anniversary falls on 23 October 1997. Besides, I was out of town on October 23 last year, and would have missed the celebration. So, get ready. Save your party hats. Keep your calendar clear. This year we are going to get together on the grand day and toast our creationist friends.

Oh, that reminds me of something else. You have to be blind not to notice that 2000 is approaching. For the moment we will put aside the argument of whether the new millennium begins January 1, 2000, or January 1, 2001, (the real first day of the 21st century). With the coming of the new millennium the crazies are coming out of the woodwork, predicting doom and gloom. Lest you think this is of no consequence, please keep in mind that a recent Secretary of the Interior noted that it was not necessary to practice conservation of our natural resources, since the end was nearly upon us anyhow.

That said, here is an item I picked up from some wag on the Internet. It seems a great way to put off that persistent doom master in the cube next to you. Just offer to pay him \$10,000 for his house, right now in cash. You will not take possession until after the doomsday. Just make sure you get the title up front (and that the \$10,000 is really a bargain).

Wait, there's more. An underwriter in Great Britain has offered to cover you in case you are abducted by aliens and impregnated. I don't think this is restricted to women, but you do have to carry to term to prove your case. This has been called a tax on stupidity, though I thought that's what the lottery was.

There's good news, too. As detailed in a recent editorial in the San Jose Mercury News, science is making a comeback in the courts. "Relying on a panel of neutral scientists, a federal judge in Oregon ruled that plaintiff's lawyers can't present evidence that silicone breast implants cause disease because their evidence is `junk science.'"

According to the story Judge Robert E. Jones "chose an immunologist, a rheumatologist, a toxicologist and a polymer chemist to evaluate the scientific documents submitted by the plaintiffs' witnesses. The judge's panel also questioned

expert witnesses on both sides in a science hearing in which lawyers also participated." The panel determined that the "scientific" testimony submitted by the plaintiffs lacked scientific validity, and the judge did not allow the plaintiffs to present it in the trial.

It gets better. In their 9 p.m. slot on January 9 the American Broadcasting Company ran a full one-hour program all about junk science. Its title was *Junk Science*, and its moderator John Stossel gave an excellent presentation of the whole sordid business in a very direct, but not over-bearing manner. With none of the back pedaling often seen in television documentaries on the paranormal, Stossel named names and described scientific foolishness, both private and governmental, for what it is. He even owned up for the journalistic profession, acknowledging the media often take half-baked conjectures and blow them into full scientific theories. If you know anybody over at ABC, drop them a nice note. It never hurts.

Carl Sagan

by John Blanton

Our science teacher is dead. Carl Sagan died in December after suffering for years from a bone marrow disease. He was 62.

Through the television series *Cosmos* and his numerous writings and lectures, Sagan explained and popularized science for "the masses." That means us. For the past 15 years he has been the best known scientist in this country, and his unequivocal statements about the nature of science have made it clear to those who will listen the difference between science and pseudoscience. As such he was a lightning rod for science, drawing to himself the slurs and the barbs of the anti-science crowd.

For example, in 1990 when Cal Thomas and Eugenie C. Scott were sparring on TV over the Forrest Mimms/Scientific American matter, Thomas felt compelled to challenge Scott's supposed views on the spirit world. He asked her if she agreed with Sagan that the cosmos is all there is, all there ever has been and all there ever will be.

Additionally, in conversations with creationists I notice a rankling tone whenever there is mention of Sagan. They have long bristled at the attention his naturalistic explanations of the world have received by so wide an audience. They understand correctly that there is a large segment of the population without a firm commitment to either creationism or evolution and that the popularity of his lectures and his writings is swaying the argument against creationism.

It seemed to me that Sagan never took the philosophical easy-out in his defense of science. While other speakers, either because of generosity or because of a desire not to offend, seemed to hedge on the possibility of supernatural explanations, Sagan always wound up saying politely but firmly that he had never seen any substance to the supernatural. A correspondent on an Internet list recently posted this quote from Carl Sagan's *Broca's Brain*, which I think best summarizes his attitude:

"An interesting debate has gone on within the committee [CSICOP] between those who think that all doctrines that smell of pseudoscience should be combated and those who think that each issue should be judged on its own merits, but that the burden of proof should fall squarely on those who make the proposals. I find myself very much in the latter camp. I believe that the extraordinary should certainly be pursued. But extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

Skeptical Quotes

Compiled by Joe Voelkering

(Here are a few quotes from our collection of "skeptical cogitations.")

"Science . . . looks skeptically at all claims to knowledge, old and new. It teaches not blind obedience to those in authority but to vigorous debate, and in many respects that's the secret of its success."

Carl Sagan

...

"I believe that much 'knowledge' is indeed merely 'memory,' and that this is why so many misconceptions persist for such a long time. . . . Because so many people are so thoroughly schooled in the common misconceptions, however, only the most brilliantly skeptical of them will ever discover a mistake. And even then, it will likely be denied for generations to come."

Marilyn vos Savant

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"Rational skeptics consistently have great confidence in many things to the point they feel entirely comfortable risking everything they value, including their lives, on the validity of those items. They are aware, however, that such level of confidence may not be actually justified and are receptive to additional information on the validity of the contention."

Jay von Glieker

...

"Of course, it is often much more fun to DISPROVE a theory. As Thomas Huxley wrote, 'The great tragedy of science is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact.'"

Leon Lederman

...

"Science deals [with nature], the only reality of which we have any certain knowledge. . . . Those fundamentalist[s] . . . who speak contemptuously of science . . . reveal an astonishing insensitivity to the very world they tell us God created. Granting, then, our prior assumption of a Creator, anyone who criticizes real science is in a direct sense criticizing God."

Steve Allen

...

"Why do I think the theory of evolution is far more probable than the doctrine of creation? Evolution does not rule out the possibility of an intelligent Creator which should not be ruled out although it implies the Biblical account must be no more than an allegorical version of that event.

"Further, if there is such a Creator, I'd expect It to be far more intelligent and far more benevolent than to have, in essence, messed up the initial attempt and wiped out all but a single boat-load of critters to get a fresh start."

J. B. Stratton

...

"The causes of things are more interesting than the things themselves."

Cicero