



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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THE THIRD EYE

News and Commentary From the Weird World of the Media

By Pat Reeder

This month, we begin with a cautionary tale from Sitcom Land, surely a very dangerous place to go looking for spiritual enlightenment.

As any dedicated viewer of "Hard Copy" knows, Roseanne is quite the spiritual seeker. She has written several books to help her get in touch with her many personalities and incarnations, and has ripped her family asunder with therapist-induced "recovered memories" of childhood abuse (including a claim that her father once dangled her brother from the Swiss Sky Ride at Disneyland in front of hundreds of horrified onlookers, an incident which went oddly unrecorded by both Disney Security and the Anaheim Police Department). Her latest psychofad is mysticism of the Shirley MacLaine "we're all creating our own reality" sort, and in a recent episode of her ABC sitcom, she attempted to proselytize her viewers to her philosophy of life.

In the episode, Roseanne's daughter has given birth to a premature baby. The finest doctors are flown in from around the world, but being the world's finest doctors, naturally, they don't know anything. The child is put on life support, and a decision must be made whether to pull the plug. Up to now, the script has been heavy-handed, but not offensive. Suddenly, Roseanne turns to her sister and begins telling her about all the books she's been reading on spirituality, and how the spirit creates reality, and if you just believe something will happen, then it will. Why, it's the wisdom that other cultures have that we stupid Westerners don't (we're so dumb, we thought it was a pretty neat trick just to invent penicillin). So they all get together and BELIEVE really hard. And guess what? If you said, "The baby miraculously pulls through," then you win a free scholarship to the Famous Correspondence School for Hack Sitcom Writers.

I could just rail about the fact that a program on the ABC network, now owned by Disney, actually suggested that people ignore their doctors during medical emergencies (although I'm comforted by the thought that hardly anybody watches "Roseanne" anymore). But the story took an even more wicked twist that's just too good to ignore. It seems that last season, Roseanne decided that this would be the final year of "Roseanne" and set out to make darn sure that it was,

giving the show a true Viking funeral by filling it with absurd plot twists, tasteless sex jokes, and painfully unfunny fantasy sequences that sent the ratings dropping like an anchor. With that reality accomplished, she suddenly decided to create a new reality.

Just days after the "believing makes it happen" episode aired, Roseanne met with ABC programming executives and declared, in the immortal words of Jethro Bodine, "I have changed mah mind!" She told them she had decided to do another season of "Roseanne" after all. And the ABC executives' reply went something like this: "Over our cold, dead, decomposing bodies!!"

And so, Roseanne experienced a new spiritual epiphany. She discovered that, in fact, she does not create her own reality. Reality is, just as I always suspected, created by executives of the Disney Corporation.

Really spiritual people would call this karma. Others might say, "What goes around come around." My personal response would be, "Hey, stuff happens." But if Roseanne is now groping for new spiritual guidance, I would suggest this wisdom, imparted by space aliens to Woody Allen in the film, "Stardust Memories":

"If you want to do mankind a favor, tell funnier jokes."

* * *

You'll be happy to hear that "Roseanne" is not the only mindrot that I inflict on myself so that you won't have to. At the risk of killing my few remaining brain cells, I also watched NBC's "Asteroid," which, like every cheesy made-for-TV movie, inspired a flurry of cross-promotional feature stories on all the "news" programs. For a couple of weeks, we were inundated with dire warnings about the fiery rocks of death that could rain down on us at any moment, as if there were actually something we could do about it, like carry around cast iron umbrellas. And then, as soon as the miniseries ended, the asteroid hysteria suddenly dried up, replaced by a new worry: cloning. Well, I have a solution for both problems. Get yourself cloned and send your clone to live on the other side of the planet. Voila! You've just cut in half your chance of getting wiped out by an asteroid! I'm amazed that I have to think of this stuff for you people.

Now, on to the news, and we begin with a story Roseanne could appreciate. An Appleton, Wisconsin, woman is suing her former psychiatrist for malpractice, claiming that he hypnotized her, implanted false "recovered memories" of childhood abuse in her head, and convinced her that she had 120 personalities, including angels, Satan and a duck ("Quack, quack!" she cried, and boy, was she right). But here's the best part: After convincing her that she had 120 personalities, he allegedly billed her insurance company \$300,000 for group therapy. Actually, that's not bad for 120 people. He must've given her a group discount.

If you think that's a weird court case, then turn your attention to Garden City, New York, where a man named Walter Kern attempted to gain custody of his three-year-old son by outing his ex-wife, Rana, as a witch. Rana admitted that she practices witchcraft, but claimed that she's a "good witch" who does not indulge in ugly satanic rituals, such as animal sacrifice or Judas Priest concerts. But what really sunk Walter's case was when Rana's lawyer conjured up some photos of him apparently engaging in pagan fertility rites with a maypole (photos that I for one do NOT want to see). Rana admitted that her ex-husband is not a warlock and that "technically, he's a Druid" (that's why they broke up: religious differences), but he lost custody anyway. He should've known that divorce court judges couldn't care less that your ex-wife is a witch.

From Reuters comes word that a Scottish coast guard officer thinks he has found the secret lair of the Loch Ness Monster. A routine sonar scan turned up a 30-foot-wide cave on the lake's bottom, which he thinks might connect to the sea. He wants to dump some nontoxic dye in it to find out. Then if Nessie is down there, she'll be even scarier, because she's going to end up looking just like Dennis Rodman.

The Wireless Flash news service brings us a big scoop (or two big scoops) from the frontiers of medicine: South Korea's Chuju pharmaceutical company is planning to introduce a new herbal pill called "Suwon-4D" which they claim can increase a woman's bust up to three cup sizes. Naturally, they are planning an advertising blitz on the boob tube and are looking for a flat-chested spokesmodel to host an infomercial. (Kate Moss, call your agent!) I don't know if taking these pills will really increase your bust size, but if not, try stuffing your bra with them.

If you wanted to buy a pair of Reebok's "Incubus" running shoes for women, you are out of luck. They were yanked off the market last month after a TV reporter in Phoenix pointed out to Reebok executives that an incubus was a medieval demon that had sex with women while they slept (as Jay Leno noted, today we call them "husbands"). Nobody at Reebok would admit to okaying the name, or remembering how it came to be chosen, or knowing the first thing about mythology. At least, they didn't try to argue that a woman being descended upon by a horny demon could use a really good pair of running shoes.

* * *

For some reason, the rest of the news stories all involve religion, and judging by their inexplicable weirdness, we truly must be living in the Last Days. Ponder the following:

Police in Lawrence, Massachusetts, were called to a break-in at a church basement on Ash Wednesday. They opened the door, and a naked man, covered in blood and carrying a Bible, came running toward them, screaming religious quotes. Turns out he had broken into the church, stripped, set up a cross and tried to crucify himself. (Incidentally, it is impossible to crucify yourself. After you nail your left hand down, how do you nail your right hand down? This is why, if you want to be crucified, you should always ask a friend to help you. Preferably a friend with carpentry experience. But I digress.) A judge released him on condition that he undergo psychiatric evaluation. And come back around Easter.

Speaking of crucifying people, black actor Desi Arnaz Giles was thrilled when he was chosen for the role of Jesus in the annual Passion Play in Union City, New Jersey. But after his first performance, a number of good Christians called to cancel their reservations, and Giles even received death threats (Police are questioning local Romans). Giles said he was also playing the devil in a musical, and he was curious to see if anyone objected to a black man playing that role. Perhaps he's jumping to conclusions: maybe they don't know he's black, but they just heard his name and think he's Cuban.

The Vatican has ordered all divorced Catholics not to remarry, and told priests to urge those who have remarried to stop having sex with their current spouses. An interesting approach for an organization that allegedly wants fewer divorces. Luckily, it seems unlikely that anyone who falls into the category of "divorced Catholic" will be taking any orders from the Vatican.

Finally, my favorite story of the month: American Family Publishing sent a piece of junk mail to the Bushnell Assembly of God Church in Sumter County, Florida. The computer-generated letter informed them that "God" is a finalist for their \$11 million sweepstakes. It read, "We've been searching for you, God," and urged God to "come forward" and return His game piece. For if He should win, "What an incredible fortune there would be for God! Could you imagine the looks you'd get from your neighbors? But don't just sit there, God."

They really should quit searching for God and realize that He is an Occupant within us all. I suggest that they turn their attentions to an even greater cosmic mystery: How are they going to get Ed McMahon into Heaven to deliver the check?

Energized Water and Kirlian Photography

By Edgar Camargo

[This item was submitted to the skeptics list server on the Internet. The author has given us permission to print it in the newsletter. It is being printed much as it was submitted, since it provides an interesting insight into the paranormal in a neighboring country. For those who are not aware of Texas history, Saltillo was once the capital of Texas. The writer can be contacted at txmegcg@txm.ericsson.se]

I live in Saltillo, a middle size city in the north of Mexico, and there are fewer than 10 bookstores in this city of a little bit more than half a million people. It is almost impossible to find a good science book here, but there is a new age bookstore (all they carry are new age books, music, and of course, crystals and all that stuff).

The book store is called Alternativa, and about a month ago on a Sunday, I went to the shopping center where the book store is located, and there was a long queue of people outside of the book store (that is the only time I have seen people queuing outside of a book store in Mexico). There was a big sign there that said that they were energizing water.

People were standing there with bottled water waiting for their turn. I actually don't know how they do that, perhaps I should go and ask. I didn't give any more thought to that until yesterday when I passed in front of the bookstore again and now they had four Kirlian pictures in the door that "prove" that the energized water actually works.

The pictures are divided in two sets of two pictures each, the first set shows in the first picture the Kirlian of one finger. You can see some "energy fields" around the finger, then the second Kirlian shows the same finger with much larger and shining "energy fields." The explanation they have written there is that the first picture was taken before the guy drank the energized water, and the second just immediately after he drank it.

The second set shows in the first picture the Kirlian of another finger and a comment saying that the picture showed fear and anger (it actually doesn't say whether they did something to the guy to induce that. I was hypothesizing that maybe it was a skeptic, and they were explaining to him/her the whole concept of the energized water, but probably he/she would be laughing instead) and the "energy fields" were very small and not shiny at all. The last picture shows the same finger after the guy has drunk the energized water, and this time the "energy fields" were very big and shiny. Also, it was mentioned in the picture that the energy field now is a complete circle since the guy has found peace and harmony with the environment, or something like that.

...

They have another sign in the door of the bookstore just behind the Kirlian pictures. The sign is about selling the bookstore. I was wondering if maybe the energized water is the last attempt to continue in business.

Web News

By John Blanton

Some people have nothing better to do besides sitting at the tube and surfing the net. So for the rest of you, we are providing some of the gleanings. Those who already have Internet access can skip to the next article.

1. From Robert Park at the American Physical Society we get this note [not an official statement of the APS]:

Seventy-one years after the Scopes trial, the New Mexico State Board of Education decided last August to omit "evolution" from the state's teaching standards. On Monday, the state Senate voted 24-17 to put it back in, but not before a debate in which one senator brought a stuffed ape to the floor and declared the Earth to be only 10,000 years old. The bill must still pass the House and be signed by Governor Gary Johnson, who refuses to indicate where he stands (or swings) on the issue. The bill would require the school board to adopt the National Academy of Sciences standards, which specify the teaching of evolution. The House is expected to take action on the bill sometime next week.

2. John Gillies of the Department of Psychology at the University of Glasgow tells us about a local TV program (part of a series) that featured some NASA conspiracy buffs. The program "featured a group dedicated to proving that the moon landings (and many other Apollo missions, including Apollo 13) had been faked." Here is the description quoted from Gillies' e-mail:

1. The lighting in both the still and video records of the moon walks is totally inconsistent with what would be expected on the moon - and entirely consistent with staged studio lighting effects (e.g. "pools" of light around the central figure with rapid fall-off of lighting in the surrounding areas; "fill-in" lighting of central figures where shadows should have been virtually black; etc).

2. *The audio of e.g. Armstrong's quiet voice describing the landing has virtually no "background noise" - whereas he ought to have been yelling to make himself heard above the noise of the engine controlling the descent.*

3. *There are glaring inconsistencies between the video and still records - e.g. of Aldrin's descent on to the lunar surface.*

What these guys are saying is that NASA did not have the wherewithal, either money or smarts, to put a man on the Moon, so they just faked it and spent the money on a TV extravaganza. I think I saw something like this several years ago, and at that time I pointed out that I once stood in the control room at McDonald Observatory and watched while we bounced a laser beam off the reflector the Apollo 11 astronauts had left there. Of course, I have been fooled before. John Gillies can be reached at johng@psy.gla.ac.uk.

3. The Associated Press reports from Burrillville, RI about a farmer named John Barnatowicz who harvests deer antlers for fun and profit. John sells the antlers either whole or in powdered form for homeopathic remedies for arthritis, high blood pressure and more. He gets the antlers when they are soft and still contain the ingredients the homeopaths desire. Slices of deer antler are attractive in the Asian market, while the American market prefers the powder. Barnatowicz gets 80 to 100 dollars per pound for the antlers, which he gets after the deer, which he raises on the farm, have been anesthetized. He doesn't wait until the antlers fall off, as they would naturally each year.

4. Tia O'Brien writes about a "corporate psychic." Barbara Courtney is called the "Psychic of Silicon Valley." With no formal business training, she reportedly advises executives from Intel to Apple for \$190 per hour. She helps these stalwarts of business make key business decisions - who to promote, what design to push. "Her tool kit is as much out of Stanford business school, where I graduated with an MBA, as anybody I've ever dealt with in business," O'Brien quotes VP Ellen Lapin as saying. "I'm very results-oriented, and so I don't care if the solution comes from a psychic or all the texts out of Harvard." David Williams, founder of an industrial paint and lubricants company says, "I don't know about regular psychics--I've never used them before. But she has a good grounding in business, and she picks up things that you haven't even addressed yourself. If she gets those visions, an impression, a person might be foolish not to put some stock in them." Williams has used Courtney's services for ten years. You can follow up on this thread by contacting Tad Cook at tad@cascadia.ssc.com.

5. Also from the Associated Press we learn about psychics making a living by talking to animals:

Your beloved pet isn't eating. Or it's hiding from you. Or biting you. Who you gonna call? Well, when Merlina Sparks' favorite cat, Scarlette, began ignoring her a few months back, she called Raphaela Pope.

It only cost Sparks \$40 for a half-hour phone session, according to the AP article. Pope told Sparks that Scarlette thought her owner did not want her around, but the pet's attitude changed for the better after talking to the psychic. Everything is OK now.

Pope has been doing this for two years and has clients all around the San Francisco area and at least one in Virginia. "I communicate at the animal's soul level," Pope is quoted as saying. "Animals are capable of sending pictures, images and sometimes words to communicate their thoughts." The article goes on to relate that the animal psychic industry around Berkeley has gone from nothing to an estimate of 15 working practitioners in the last ten years and that there may be 100 in the country.

Another practitioner is Sam Louie of Berkeley, who has a law degree from Columbia University and dropped out of his job as Alameda County public defender to launch his new career:

"There is nothing mysterious or spooky about this," Louie said. "It's easier to do the job because a lot more people are becoming aware of it."

There is a lot more of interest in this item, but since we don't have AP's permission, I am not going to reprint the rest. Contact me if you want to follow up on the amazing animal psychic business.

Adventures in LA LA Land

by John Blanton

Journalist Jessica Yu's adventures with LA area psychics was the topic of February's meeting, a video tape program called "Psychics R Us."

Yu writes for Buzz Magazine and for LA Times Magazine, and she also produces films. She is a Yale grad and apparently not one to let grass grow under her feet, but in LA she found herself one of the few without her own personal psychic consultant. Following up on the trend, she persuaded Buzz to front her the cost of dredging Los Angeles' psychic underworld.

She started with the low rent operators who ply the board walk at Venice Beach and give readings for \$5 to \$10. She got what she paid for. Although her wedding ring was obvious when the palmists read her signs, none picked up on the fact she was married. One even predicted she would marry at 27 or 34, then asked how old she was. Replying "twenty-eight," she was informed she would be married at 34 (and not 27 after all).

The next step up was psychic hotlines where she learned the average call in the industry is \$40 with \$4 going for the first minute. She also noticed that telephone psychics talk v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. "Psychic Anna" was advertised as "97% accurate" and did not charge for her advice. She did, however, recommend burning a candle for her phone client. The candle would be the size and weight of Ms. Yu, who was expected to pay for the candle, only \$100. Yu declined the offer.

A \$100 "personal psychic" in Chatsworth was named Frank, and he offered to tell her everything about herself. Without getting into why one would pay \$100 for one's own personal dossier, Yu explained Frank's technique. It was to simply hold up a piece of paper on which the answers were supposedly already written and then to secretly write the answers down as he pretended to confirm them with Yu. Frank never caught on to Jessica's one fib about the name of her husband, though, and he continued to tell her all about "Melvin" for the remainder of the session. Jessica had spotted the trick as the same on her brother used to perform when he was ten. And Melvin was better at it, besides.

Maria, "psychic of the stars," charged \$165 for 45 minutes and required an appointment two months in advance. For the \$165, Yu got an excellent cup of coffee while sitting in a nice office and being told she was single.

The whole episode cost Buzz \$390 spread over nine of LA's finest. And Jessica Yu became a confirmed skeptic.

The Skeptic by E-Mail

Since the announcement last month, several members have signed up to receive the newsletter by e-mail: Here is how it will work:

1. You tell me by e-mail that you want to receive your newsletter by e-mail.
2. I will send you a trial issue by e-mail just to make sure you are getting your copy OK.
3. Once you tell me everything is fine on your end, we will stop mailing your newsletter to you and will send it by e-mail. You will get your copy at least a day earlier than everybody who gets theirs by post, and paper will be saved.
4. We expect to send the complete newsletter, leaving out nothing of any significance. Some technology on your part will be required to accomplish this.
5. You can go back to getting your newsletter by post anytime you wish.

John Blanton

Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth

