

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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Scientific American does pseudoscience

by John Blanton

In November *Scientific American Frontiers* on PBS TV covered the issue of pseudoscience. Touching on crashed aliens, palm reading, dowsing, free energy, therapeutic touch and graphology, they made a respectable presentation of what constitutes pseudoscience and how it differs from the real thing.

Alan Alda, having survived more years of the Korean War than the real war, spends a lot of his time these days explaining science in *Scientific American's* broadcast edition. First of all, working with Ray Hyman he demonstrated how the naïve can easily come to believe in palm reading, even when the reader (Hyman, as usual) does not.

The show did a thorough trashing of dowsing, as well. A dowser was allowed to locate a water drilling site in the Vermont mountains, and a drilling company proceeded to drill dry for over 600 feet before giving up. The local ski resort, which sorely needed the water and was paying for the whole thing, got an education instead of a well. The drill operator was no fan of dowsers (sounds like someone who has drilled a lot of dry holes), but others made excuses for the miss.

Another fellow claimed to be able to find metal objects in an open field, even when they were covered by gray plastic trash cans. Trash cans were numbered and inverted in a vacant lot, and the object of interest was secreted under one of them. Again it was time for excuse after excuse as the dowser scored a flat zero. First a piece of iron pipe turned out to be incredibly elusive. Then the dowser realized he needed a piece of lead. Failing to find even that, he suggested a longer rod. Or a shorter one.

Randi Bummed

James Randi had some comments on this and other aspects of the show. In an e-mail on the day following the program Randi complained about being totally excluded from the broadcast after participating in the production. "We confidently expected to be an integral part of that show. Then I heard nothing from them again until the program aired. They used me and then simply discarded me," Randi said in his note. About the dowsing segment he said "The dowsing test they did was a failure because they never established a baseline with the dowsers (having a short series of demos in which the device reacts to the target when its location is known) so that the failing dowsers couldn't complain that the target

was insufficient, or the stick wasn't working, etc."

Randi also complained the dowsing test was not truly double blind, since the producers used the same cameraman to shoot the dowsing trial as well as to record the placing of the objects. This deserves another look, in my opinion. Alda, narrating, says the scenes of the placing of the objects were made *after* the trials, implying the cameraman was not there when objects were originally placed.

The free energy segment was another high point of this episode. Featuring none other than Harold Puthoff, late of Uri Geller fame. Recall that Puthoff was part of the team with Russell Targ, whom Randi has characterized as the Laurel and Hardy of PSI¹ When Targ and Puthoff allowed themselves to be completely taken in by phony psychics, including Geller, at Stanford Research Institute in California back in the seventies, Randi followed up with a scathing review of their work. Now Puthoff is in business at the Austin, Texas, Institute for Advanced Studies, where he is conducting research in zero-point energy.

Puthoff and others think there is an abundant supply of free energy cached within the empty space of the universe, just waiting for those who would ferret it out. Others, like Steven Weinberg of UT Austin plus Steve K. Lamoreaux and Peter W. Milonni, both at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, think the believers are just chasing their tails.² In the *Frontiers* episode Weinberg acknowledges the likely existence of zero-point energy but contends there is not enough there to be worth writing about, much less trying to extract.

In the mean time, private investors (and maybe some government grants) are paying Puthoff and company to look for free energy. Here the ex-psi researcher seems to be doing good science. That is he is looking, but not finding. They are running the proper tests to keep from fooling themselves when positive results do show up. For example, Puthoff's assistant shows a test of an apparatus when a dummy cell is inserted rather than the hopefully active one. When the instruments still show a positive result the researchers know it can't be coming from the cell. I wonder if Puthoff ever thought of doing that when he and Targ were testing Geller.

The segment on therapeutic touch was very revealing. TT is being taught and practiced at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. Practitioners of TT say they can feel the unevenness in a patient's energy field with their hands. Even the experts are having difficulty figuring out whether this real or not. But someone has an idea, however. Grade schooler Emily Rosa of Powder Valley, CO, has a plan for a science project. The way to tell whether the TT'ers can really detect a person's energy field is to have them do it when they can't see. So Emily has them stick their hands through holes in a partition while she holds her hand over one of theirs. You guessed it. The TT'ers couldn't tell. They scored worse than chance. Emily is preparing to publish her results in a scientific journal. If a kid can do this then somebody needs healing at Columbia Presbyterian, and it's not the patients.

Generally, pseudoscience got a sound drubbing this time out. I can't say the same about the *48 Hours* episode later that week on near death experiences. If you missed *Frontiers* on the tube we have it on tape. We may show it at a Skeptics gathering in the future. Just ask.

Notes:

1. Randi, James. *Flim-Flam*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, 1987.
2. Yan, Phillip. "Exploiting Zero-Point Energy," *Scientific American*, pp. 82-85, December, 1997.

More on Plutonium Twaddle

By John Blanton

(The op-ed column *Plutonium Twaddle* originally ran in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* on October 25. It was reprinted by permission of the author in *The Skeptic*, November 1997)

Ed Hiserodt's *Plutonium Twaddle* deserves some additional comment. While Ed is undoubtedly correct in mentioning that the toxicity of plutonium is considerably overstated on a number of quarters, he sort of loses the fox by overstating

his case and making some of the mistakes of his opposition. In particular:

1. Maybe I'm not as sharp as I used to be, but any attempt by the media to foster the case of the Cassini opponents just blew right past me. I saw uncritical reporting of the protests and also rational responses by spokesmen for NASA. My fault for sticking to the major networks.
 2. Certainly the protesters overplayed their case by placing emphasis on the dangers of the launch, in my opinion, the least dangerous aspect of the mission. Ed knows, but did not point out, that the Earth fly-by poses the greater risk for releasing plutonium.
 3. Hey, even *I* didn't know that plutonium was *both* the 94th element in the periodic table *and* the 94th to be discovered. What a coincidence!
 4. Ed is correct that the radioactivity risk from plutonium continues to be exaggerated, but he seems to be saying radioactive substances are completely harmless. Say you really don't mean that, Ed.
 5. Finally, Ed closes by *seeming* to say that alar, asbestos, dioxin and PCBs are benign, as well. If that's what you mean, Ed, then say so. At the very least, this is a rhetorical blunder. By alluding to the gentle nature of these substances, Ed has unnecessarily burdened his argument with four implicit assertions. The failure of any one of these would make the careful reader re-examine all that was said before. *That's* skepticism.
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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

Shame on you, you evil skeptics! You, with your ceaseless reasonable questions and insatiable requests for scientific evidence! YOU are personally responsible for poisoning the air, killing children, boiling the oceans, exterminating animal species, making the ozone layer look like a big slice of Swiss cheese, and cooking Mother Earth into a big, flaming marshmallow that will soon be spinning helplessly into the blazing inferno of the sun!!!

Whoops, sorry. I've just been so immersed in the cauldron of overheated special interest group propaganda and half-baked pseudoscientific hooey that passes for news here at the End of History, I got caught up in the popular fervor. Yes, you might have thought that this is football season or the holiday season, but if you've tuned in to a network newscast recently, you know that it is, in fact, Open Season on Skeptics.

The chief witch-hunter hunter is, of course, America's #1 pollution-hating tobacco farmer, Al Gore. After several years of haranguing the president with factoids gleaned from such shaky prognosticators as Paul Ehrlich and Jeremy Rifkin, Gore seems to have convinced Bill Clinton that global warming is not merely a possibility but is already happening, despite the fact that U.S. weather satellites have recorded a drop in temperature of about half a degree Fahrenheit over the past 20 years. (Sorry! There I go again, yielding to my evil skeptical tendencies and dragging facts into a discussion of global warming. I'll try to control myself.)

Anyhoo, Al and his fellow global warmers have borrowed a page from Joseph Goebbels, to wit: "If you can just get the media to repeat something often enough, even if it's a load of absolute drivel, people will start to believe it." Thus, he sponsored that surreal White House global warming conference for TV weathermen (good luck telling them apart from the politicians), in the hope that their viewers would be gullible enough to believe that someone who can't tell them if it's going to rain next weekend can accurately predict what the temperature will be in 2015.

By a bad stroke of luck, a handful of the weather forecasters actually knew something about the weather, and Al's global warming pitch met with a cool front from them. However, there was no such resistance from general news reporters, and now, every story on the environment that comes from ABC News (America's number one news source, God help us) begins with an intro. something along the lines of, "With most scientists now in full agreement that global warming is a reality..." They've also birthed a new cliché: "2500 scientists, including many Nobel Prize winners, have signed on

to a UN report confirming the existence of global warming." This assertion is total poppycock, but it has been repeated so often, virtually verbatim, that it has now been drilled into the heads of the public like a mantra, and vast numbers of Americans seriously believe we're all about to shrivel up from global warming, just as we were all about to shiver to death from the new ice age back in the early 1970s.

Of course, any campaign to rouse the populace to action or sacrifice must consist of two elements. Propaganda is only half the equation. You must also come up with a scapegoat, and I am honored to inform you that it is (drum-roll)...us! That's right, fellow skeptics: just as I pointed out in the first paragraph, we are to blame. From Al Gore's *Earth In The Balance* to Ross Gelbspan's operatically overblown bestseller *The Heat Is On*, global warming skeptics are depicted as sneaky minions of coal and oil companies (where's my check, Exxon?), hampering desperately-needed draconian measures to save the earth by lobbing endless and pointless questions, such as, "What global warming?" and "Do you have any scientific evidence at all that the problem you want to spend \$300 billion of our money to fix actually exists?"

Zealots like Gore and Gelbspan have attacked skeptics by name, urged that they be ignored or silenced, barred highly-credentialed skeptical scientists from participating in conferences on global warming, and in some cases, baldly accused skeptics of being paid corporate stooges and agents of death and destruction. Maybe they should just build concentration camps for us. After all, we're the only people left who know how to concentrate.

If you think I'm overstating the level of hatred that has been stirred up against skeptics, then you obviously missed a recent episode of ABC's "Politically Incorrect." Host Bill Maher is a very witty comedian, but sadly, he seems to get all his information on the environment straight from Al Gore, just as he gets all his information on wildlife and Native American history from Disney cartoons. His guests on this show included actor/writer/lawyer Ben Stein and environmentalist/ex-"Baywatch" actress Alexandra Paul.

The subject was doomsday environmentalism, and Maher and Paul were full of it, in every sense of that term. Stein, obviously a very well-read man, was appalled at the nonsense he was hearing, but he answered the charges calmly and rationally, citing facts that backed him up about air quality, total forest acreage, etc. Well, nothing upsets a fanatic like a fact expressed calmly, and Paul and Maher began screaming like hyenas. At one point, Maher angrily yelled at Stein that yes, he DOES believe global warming is going on right now, the planet is dying, we're running out of resources, he's going to die from breathing the air, "and it's all the fault of people like YOU!" That is, people who answer hysteria with facts. You know: skeptics.

Three of my favorite exchanges from the show: When Stein followed Maher's outburst by asking him, "Bill, do you REALLY believe you're going to die from breathing air?" Yes, Maher firmly replied, he does. (He should STOP breathing it and see how long he lives)...When Maher answered one of Stein's arguments by shouting, "That's not true! Where are you getting this crap?!" and Stein deadpanned, "From the Statistical Abstract of the United States"...And one of the all-time classic TV moments, when an arm-waving Alexandra Paul defended the high-minded population control methods of the Chinese government ("Crunch!" go the tank treads) by declaring, "There are a billion Chinese! If they increase their population just one percent a year, that's 100 million people!" Stein stared at her for a second, dumbfounded, then said, "That's ten percent." Guess the auditions for "Baywatch" didn't involve a math quiz.

None of this is to say that there is nothing to global warming. There might be, and there might not be. It certainly merits further study, but that's not what the alarmists want: they want total control, right now, and they want to convince you that there's no time to think about it. Sorry, I don't accept that tactic from car salesmen, and I won't accept it from them. It's in these manufactured "crisis" situations that it's most vital to ask tough questions and demand answers based on real science. If questioning our leaders be treason, then let us make the most of it.

Well, at least when the brown-shirted eco-warriors come to drag you away for being too logical, you can't say I didn't warn you. In the meantime, I'll suggest a little light reading, to prove that not all scientists swallow the global warming line.

On June 17, the New York Times ran an interesting article by William K. Stevens about former National Academy of Sciences president Dr. Frederick Seitz's contention that the UN report on global warming was altered and corrupted by political partisans, to make it look more conclusive than it really is. The very next day, the Times ran a profile on climate expert Dr. Richard S. Lindzen of NAS and MIT, who has taken many slings and arrows for flatly stating that

there is no evidence to support the global warming hypothesis, and that to trust the computer models which predict global warming "is like trusting a ouija board." Lindzen explains his views in detail and also claims that he has gotten many calls and letters from skeptics in the scientific community who agree with him but won't say so, either because they fear for their careers or because they know that jumping on the global warming bandwagon is a great way to keep those grant dollars flowing in. This is science?

If you'd like to read those articles, they can be found on AOL in the NY *Times* archives, or you can come up to my remote mountain hideout, where I'll be safely locked up with my canned pemmican and my skeptical reading material, waiting for the end of Dark Ages II.

Speaking of menacing the populace with imaginary hobgoblins, Washington *Post* columnist James Glassman had an excellent column recently on how easy it is to manipulate scientifically illiterate people. It concerned Nathan Zohner, 14, of Idaho Falls, Idaho. For his junior high science project last spring, Nathan passed around a petition to ban "Dihydrogen Monoxide: The Unrecognized Killer." The petition claimed that DHMO causes the deaths of thousands of Americans each year through accidental ingestion, causes severe burns in gaseous form, is so corrosive it destroys metal, is a major component of acid rain, has been found in cancerous tumors, causes excessive sweating and urination, and for people who have developed a dependency on it, complete withdrawal causes certain death.

Nathan told his fellow students that they could discuss this with their teachers before signing, but 86 percent of them thought Dihydrogen Monoxide sounded so dangerous, they signed the petition to ban it without even bothering to ask the chemistry professor what it was. If they had, they would have learned that it is water. Nathan's science project was called "How Gullible Are We?" and it won the grand prize. Sorry, I don't know if Al Gore presented it to him.

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Entertainment Tonight recently ran a feature on Hollywood Scientologists, such as John Travolta, Tom Cruise, Kirstie Alley and Jenna "Dharma & Greg" Elfman (she's Dharma, or couldn't you guess?). The piece offered the first-ever peek inside the luxurious detox center in L.A. that the rich and famous pay thousands of dollars to use, along with some hilarious descriptions of that marvelous L. Ron Hubbard cleansing process.

As the eminent toxicologist Kelly Preston (Mrs. Travolta) explained it, all the drugs you've ever taken are locked in your fat cells, and you remove them through a combination of vitamins and saunas. Especially entertaining were her mimicry of an anesthetized dental patient as she described how her mouth suddenly went numb when she "sweated out" Novocain she'd gotten years ago, and her wide-eyed declaration that this is all on the level, because it was developed with the assistance of "doctors and stuff."

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Finally, the Heaven's Gate mansion is up for sale! Sorry, bargain hunters: the owner expects he'll be able to get his asking price of \$1.6 million, despite its history as a launching pad for lunatics. Randall Bell, who specializes in appraising notorious properties, was hired to assess the sales potential, and he thinks it's pretty high.

Bell has developed a 10-point checklist to determine the level of stigma on a property, including "media attention," "death and injuries on site," "event takes on a name" (so far, it's looking bad), "lingering physical reminders of the incident" (Bell says the blood stains are out of the carpet, and I assume that all the Nike boxes have been carted away), and "public perception that the situation could reoccur." He lucked out on that last one, since thanks to the castration ritual, it's extremely doubtful that there will be a "Heaven's Gate: The Next Generation."

So if you have \$1.6 mil, I say, "Go for it." You know it isn't haunted, because they all went to the spaceship. If they do ever decide to come back, there are plenty of spare bedrooms and the tennis court will make a perfect landing pad for the UFO. And besides, if you reject every house that ever held a group of wacko cultists, you'll never be able to live in

Southern California.

Anti-science at the Smithsonian

by Bob Park

Bob Park has contributed to The Skeptic before. Not by choice, but because we just pick up what he writes and use it. Bob publishes an electronic newsletter called What's New? (WN). I have picked out a thread of his pieces and strung them together here. Thanks, Bob. -- JB

[14 Nov 97] SCIENCE MAGAZINE: RABID BOOK REVIEW CLAIMS A VICTIM.

In an interview this week with the Chronicle of Higher Education, the former book-review editor of Science, Katherine Livingston, says her retirement last month after 33 years at the journal was due in large part to harsh criticism of one review. "The Flight from Science and Reason," the proceedings of a conference examining the embrace of antiscience by postmodern academics, was reviewed by Paul Forman, a Smithsonian curator and one of the leaders of the postmodern movement. It was less a review than a nasty diatribe against science itself. There was a vigorous negative reaction to Forman's review by Science readers (WN 16 May 97), and Floyd Bloom, editor of Science, reprimanded Livingston.

[16 May 97] BOOK REVIEWING: "POSTMODERNIST ASSAILS RABID RATIONALISTS."

Two years ago, the New York Academy of Sciences held a conference on "The Flight from Science and Reason" (WN 2 Jun 95). A group of distinguished scientists examined the embrace of antiscience by postmodern academics. Who did Science magazine pick to review the conference proceedings? One of the leaders of postmodern silliness, Paul Forman, who proceeds to write a confused 3-page diatribe, not only against the "rabid rationalists" who spoke at the conference, but against all science. Forman, a Smithsonian curator, was the spiritual force behind the ugly antiscience exhibit, Science in American Life (WN 18 Nov 94). He concludes with a sneering account of the inability of physicists and chemists to effect significant change in the exhibit. In that at least he is right (WN 15 Mar 96). The exhibit remains a disaster.

[2 Jun 97] WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT "THE FLIGHT FROM SCIENCE AND REASON"?

The embrace of irrationalism in academic disciplines ranging from literature and history to anthropology has been explored for the past three days at a conference sponsored by the New York Academy of Sciences. The postmodern view is that there is no such thing as objective truth: Science is a product of the power structure it serves, and scientific "laws" would come out differently in a different culture. A platoon of distinguished academics lamented the spread of this corrosive notion and recounted examples of the foolishness it engenders, but there were few proposals for how to deal with the problem. How can you debate someone who denies the existence of objective reality? In contrast to the gray-haired speakers, there was a significant representation of under-thirty social scientists in the audience. It seemed clear that not one of them believed a single word of what was being said.

[18 Nov 94] APS OBJECTS TO THE SMITHSONIAN'S "SCIENCE IN AMERICAN LIFE"!

At its meeting on 6 Nov 94, the elected Council of the APS asked President Burton Richter "to convey its profound dismay" over an exhibit at the Museum of American History (WN 17 Jun 94). In a letter to the Smithsonian's Secretary, I. Michael Heyman, Richter said APS members found the exhibit to be "a portrayal of science that trivializes its accomplishments and exaggerates any negative consequences." Richter offered the cooperation of the APS in developing a more balanced portrayal of the impact of science.

[17 Jun 94] "SCIENCE IN AMERICAN LIFE" — IS SCIENCE THE GOD THAT FAILED?

Tours of the Smithsonian's new permanent exhibit are conducted by a middle-aged docent wearing a white lab coat and

carrying a clip board. "In the 1920s," he recites, "we thought scientists were gods. Now we know they're the source of our biggest problems." That pretty well sums up the exhibit! "Science in American Life" begins with a recreation of the chemistry lab at Johns Hopkins where saccharin was discovered in 1879, complete with life-sized talking manikins [sic] of Ira Remson and Constantine Fahlberg. But the two scientists are not discussing coal-tar chemistry, they are in a bitter dispute over credit for the discovery. And so it goes. The focus is not on discovery, but on the public's changing view of science -- a view that is certain to worsen as a result of the exhibit. It's all there: mushroom clouds, a family bomb shelter from the 60s, DDT and CFCs. A section on wartime plutonium production at Hanford notes that workers' living quarters were segregated by race and sex. As you leave the exhibit, there is a sign warning visitors to "Stop and Think! Is gene therapy safe?"

[21 Oct 94] "NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR U.S. HISTORY": SCIENCE? WHAT SCIENCE?

This stupifyingly PC version of American history is expected to be approved under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994; it will then become the history standard for grades 5-12. "History," it explains in the preface, "is an extraordinarily dynamic field today." Is it ever! It's being completely reinvented! We used to joke about the Soviets rewriting history to make it fit their politics. But whatever history is, science isn't part of it. A word search of the 250-page document turned up only one reference to "science"—in a list of activities from which women have been excluded. Nor could I find mention of a single scientist. But then, George Washington also failed to make the cut. A search for "scientific" turned up the following gem: "The swordplay of the U.S. and the Soviet Union rightfully claims attention because it led to the Korean and Vietnam wars, Berlin airlift, the Cuban missile crisis, American intervention in many parts of the world, a huge investment in scientific research and environmental damage that will take generations to rectify." So may this history.

[18 Nov 94] AND NOW WE HAVE THE "NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY."

The same group that managed to leave science out of U.S. history (WN 21 Oct 94) has now done the same for world history. Well, science is not entirely neglected: in one exercise, students are asked to discuss why science has "failed to eradicate hunger, poverty and disease." Neglect of science appears to be a natural consequence of the demotion of Western civilization. This latest product of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA has been greeted as warmly as its U.S. standards. In an appeal to historians to resist "these fierce attacks," Ross Dunn, an editor of the standards, warns that "critics are attacking the entire enterprise of world history and its teaching practitioners." Wow!

[14 Apr 95] AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY WANTS CHANGES IN SMITHSONIAN EXHIBIT

One year after the opening of "Science in American Life," the ACS has officially expressed its dissatisfaction with the exhibit for which it paid \$5.3M. A letter from the Chairman of the ACS Board of Directors to the Secretary of the Smithsonian complains of the arrogance and high-handedness of museum personnel during four years of preparation. The finished product, the letter says, was strongly biased against science and damaged the reputation of the ACS. The complaints echoed those raised by the American Physical Society (WN 18 Nov 94), but the letter stresses that the American Chemical Society put up the money for the exhibit, and it is the ACS that should be consulted about any changes (24 Feb 95).

[15 Mar 96] SCIENCE IN AMERICAN STRIFE: SMITHSONIAN RENEGES ON COMMITMENT.

Two years after "Science In American Life" opened at the Museum of American History, the American Chemical Society, which paid \$5.3M for the tawdry exhibit, is warning other potential donors to the Smithsonian against doing the same thing, according to a story in Nature. WN carried the first public criticism of the exhibit, calling it a catalogue of weapons of mass destruction, environmental horrors and social injustice (WN 17 Jun 94), and the APS Council expressed its "profound dismay" (WN 18 Nov 94). The new head of the Smithsonian, I. Michael Heyman, in a talk to the National Press Club, acknowledged the lack of balance, and promised changes (WN 24 Feb 95). He gave similar assurances to the ACS, which privately echoed the complaints of the APS (WN 14 Apr 95). But after a year of futile negotiations, an embittered ACS has decided to go public with its criticism of the exhibit.

THE AMERICAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY (Note: Opinions are the author's and are not necessarily shared by the APS, but they should be.)

[What's New can be obtained through the Web site of the American Physical Society at <http://www.aps.org>.]

The Third Eye

by Pat Reeder

Here's a cheery holiday recipe for a dish I call "Hobson's Choice." Take my usual crushing workload, add my wife's birthday strategically placed between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and drop it all into the pressure cooker of the holiday season. Yields one short, sloppy, disjointed column. Feeds all NTS subscribers, like it or not.

First up, dumb junk e-mail from psychics. Awhile back, I reported that I was receiving electronic invitations to have my life altered for the better by renowned psychic Jeanne Dixon, who signed the letters personally, her great supernatural powers apparently allowing her career to remain unimpeded by her burial. And now, I've started receiving multiple copies of this letter, which I now must quote at length in order to waste as much column space as possible:

"Both Princess Diana's and John Denver's untimely and yet needless and preventable deaths once again proves (sic) that you need to call me. Hello, I know you have heard of me. I am the famous Silvia Brown, a well known psychic, medium, healer, spiritualist, clairvoyant and astrologer. My horoscopes and psychic predictions are found in all of the major newspapers and publications worldwide. I can predict your future. I can ease your pain. I can help you make decisions that are important in your life. I can help resolve job anxieties. I can help remove spells. I also have a large psychic pool filled with hand-picked psychics all with the same capabilities as mine..." (That last claim is the only one I can easily believe.)

It is truly astounding to me that with this big, kidney-shaped swimming pool full of psychics helping Silvia Brown to divine every detail of my life, past, present and future, she still hasn't figured out that I'm the co-editor of the North Texas Skeptic and for the past seven years, I have been writing a column that roasts psychics like so many marshmallows on a stick. Even a less than gifted soothsayer might therefore assume that I'm not the best sales prospect. But never mind: let's just assume that their bulk e-mail program doesn't share their psychic gifts and consider an even more interesting aspect of the letter.

This particular sales pitch clearly implies that if John Denver or Princess Di had only enjoyed access to a top-notch psychic astrologer, they would still be driving drunk and taking seemingly endless vacation trips (respectively) today. There's only one problem with this hypothesis: Diana squandered a future king's ransom on big name psychics and astrologers, and not a single one of them ever told her, "Trust me, dearie: take the bus." I can't say whether John Denver ever consulted a psychic, but he did have a personal relationship with God (or at least George Burns), although it might've been more useful to have a personal relationship with the guy at the airport who pumps the gas.

The point is that even though my job forces me to keep up with every trivial little infoblob in the news, somehow I never saw a single prediction of the imminent demise of either one of these people. And if being able to predict the deaths of celebrities posthumously is now a supernatural gift, then I can declare myself to be psychic, because I can assure you with 100% certainty that Jim Morrison, John Belushi and River Phoenix are all goners.

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A bouquet of roses with the pricks removed goes this month to CBS, for a couple of admirably skeptical news magazines. 48 Hours looked at the question of whether there is such a thing as life after death, a question that must weigh heavily on the minds of all CBS programming executives. It was a well-balanced report, giving the believers' stories of near-death experiences, and following with equal time for medical and psychiatric explanations. But the best segment involved a test of a spirit medium who is raking in big bucks from thousands of believers. They put him to the test with a skeptical widow who didn't volunteer much information and who came away unimpressed. Much to my

delight, they then took the videotape of the session to James Randi, who pointed out all the cold reading tricks, one-by-one.

For instance, the reporter asked how the medium knew the woman's late husband was named John. Randi replied that the medium never said the husband's name was John. A quick tape rewind revealed that what the medium actually said was, "Do you know a John?," and the widow replied, "That's my husband." Without even realizing it, she had told him her husband's name. As Randi scoffed, "Who DOESN'T know somebody named John?"

The psychic had also relayed a number of disconnected (some might say "pointless") messages from beyond the grave, such as "there's a coat in the closet with a price tag still attached." They meant nothing to the widow, but a few weeks after the seance, she reported that she did find a coat with a price tag attached in her closet. Randi explained that it was pure coincidence, and he had no doubt that as time went by, the woman would see other things purely by chance and mentally connect them with things the psychic had said, while forgetting all the things he got wrong, and thus would his accuracy rate seem to grow in her mind.

It was a great primer in the techniques of cold reading (for another, check out Steve Martin's unfairly overlooked movie, Leap of Faith) and a welcome reminder that even trained reporters can sometimes be fooled by psychics into thinking they heard things that were never really said. It also reminded me just how banal these alleged "messages from the other side" always turn out to be. Honestly, if I had died, then managed miraculously to return from the Great Beyond to talk to my wife, there would be a million things I'd want to tell her. But somehow, I doubt that doing an inventory of the clothes closet would be number one on my list.

Another interesting story appeared on CBS' Sixty Minutes, about a Wisconsin woman whose psychiatrist had destroyed her family and nearly ruined her life. Through a combination of hypnosis and drugs, he filled her head with false memories of all kinds of terrifying childhood abuses and convinced her that she had 126 personalities, including an angel, Satan and a duck (but she only did the duck at parties). The therapist moved to Montana, where he is still doing that voodoo that he do so well, even after he was forced to pay his former patient a \$2.4 million malpractice settlement. He should've known that if he convinced her she was Satan, she would end up knowing a lot of lawyers.

The story ended with a legitimate psychiatrist declaring that "recovered memories" dragged up via hypnosis have now been so thoroughly discredited that the whole concept is going the way of the hula-hoop. Don't tell that to Bud Hopkins, or else a whole lot of Midwesterners will suddenly start remembering that they were abducted by hula-hooping aliens.

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The big global warming convention is going on in Kyoto as I write this (it's also 28 degrees outside, but never mind). In addition to the 2,000 official delegates all arguing over which previous decade they ludicrously believe they will be able to roll the clock back to, the event has also drawn a wide array of mixed nuts from every point of view.

The more radical environmentalists are doing what they always seem to be doing in lieu of holding jobs: making a big, obnoxious, counterproductive nuisance of themselves for no apparent purpose. One group of jolly green doofuses chained themselves to gas pumps, ostensibly to protest auto pollution. No doubt cars had to wait in line much longer than usual to get to the remaining pumps, thus spewing a lot more exhaust fumes than they would have otherwise.

Another sect of greenies illustrated their contention that the fossil fuel industry was a dinosaur by building a giant, fake dinosaur. Come on, guys: you're in Japan! Just build a miniature Kyoto and let a guy in a dinosaur suit stomp on it!

But my favorite group of environmentalists had to be the band who traveled all the way from Europe to Kyoto by train, boat and bicycle to protest the delegates' use of private jets to fly to an environmental conference. The journey required weeks of painful, arduous, uncomfortable and dangerous traveling...and they didn't even take U.S. Air! (Ba-dum-bump!) By the time they arrived in Kyoto, their B.O. was probably strong enough to destroy the ozone layer.

Lest you think I am anti-environment (in fact, I love the environment; I even spend a large part of my time in it; I'm just

anti-idioty), there were also some pretty amusing folks on the other side of the fence. The award for Most Incongruous Marketing Campaign had to be the convention floor display erected by the nuclear power industry on the theme, "Let's turn their world green with nuclear energy!" Glowing green, perhaps? Even if you're not a kneejerk anti-nuker, you must admit that a global warming convention is a strange place to pitch nuclear reactors. Their booth must've been about as popular as a steamed broccoli concession stand on the State Fair Midway.

Finally, I leave you with the iconoclastic words of Thomas Gale Moore, in Kyoto to represent the conservative Hoover Institute think tank at Stanford University. Moore is the first person I've seen who had the guts to stand up before the international media and flatly declare that global warming would be really cool! He can hardly wait for global warming, which he said would lengthen the growing season, create a bounty of food, reduce snow delays at airports, make roads less hazardous, keep people in the north from freezing to death, and save up to 40,000 lives a year in the U.S. alone. Dismissing all the scare stories, he declared, "People like warm weather. Where do they go when they retire? Where it's warm." He has a point: if I wanted to put up with snow, I never would've been born in Texas.

Well, I have to go now, since I'm meeting with some investors to pitch my idea for building a new Sun City in Siberia. Meanwhile, here's wishing you all a happy, prosperous and unseasonably warm holiday.