

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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The amazing ideas of Rupert Sheldrake

by John Blanton

In his latest book *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*, Rupert Sheldrake explains why "big questions don't need big science." That's the title of the introduction, which goes on to say, "In this book, I propose seven experiments that could transform our view of reality. They would take us far beyond the current frontiers of research. They could reveal much more of the world than science has yet dared to conceive. Any one of them, if successful, would open up bewildering new vistas. Taken together, they could revolutionize our understanding of nature and ourselves."



Rupert Sheldrake (photo from the Rupert Sheldrake home page)

Sheldrake, Ph.D., is a former Research Fellow of the Royal Society and was a scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, and a Frank Knox Fellow at Harvard University. He has been making waves in the world of New Age ever since his first book *A New Science of Life* burst on the scene in 1981. What the world of science says he's been making is another matter.

Which brings us to the "hundredth monkey" phenomenon. Ron Amundson has previously developed the tale behind this curious bit of superstition for *The Skeptical Inquirer*¹. Sheldrake has taken the monkey business to a new high. Here is a bit of background, according to Amundson. He quotes Author Lyall Watson on the research of some Japanese primatologists during the 1950s:²

One has to gather the rest of the story from personal anecdotes and bits of folklore among primate researchers, because most of them are still not quite sure what happened. And those who do suspect the truth are reluctant to publish it for fear of ridicule. So I am forced to improvise the details, but as near as I can tell, this is what seems to have happened. In the autumn of that year [1958] an unspecified number of monkeys on Koshima were washing sweet potatoes in the sea. Let us say, for argument's sake that the number was ninety-nine and that at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday morning, one further convert was added to the fold in the usual way. But the addition of the hundredth monkey apparently carried the number across some sort of threshold, pushing it through a kind of critical mass, because by that evening almost everyone was doing it. Not only that, but the habit seems to have jumped natural barriers and to have appeared spontaneously, like glycerine [sic] crystals in sealed laboratory jars, in colonies on other islands and on the mainland in a troop at Takasakyama.

Sheldrake calls the principle underlying all of this "morphic resonance." That is, things of the same form (morph) resonate with each other and exchange information. In his book *The Presence of the Past* he indicates this phenomenon works with inanimate objects as well as living things. He explains:

When crystals of a newly synthesized chemical substance, for example a new kind of drug, arise for the first time they have no exact precedent; but as the same compound is crystalized again and again, the crystals should tend to form more readily all over the world, just because they have already formed somewhere else.³

In the usual manner with phenomena of this kind, time and distance have no effect. Crystals formed anywhere in the universe will instantly, special relativity notwithstanding, affect the crystallization of all subsequent quantities of the same substance. This is quite a remarkable concept coming from a Ph.D. chemist. The thinking of mainstream science is that crystallization is managed by well-established physical laws and is completely deterministic. However, Sheldrake contends that for all but the simplest chemicals, the mathematics is completely intractable, and the crystallization process is unknowable to us humans. He quotes J. Maddox:

One distinctive feature of this simple system is that it is a three-body problem, which can no more be exactly solved in quantum than in classical mechanics. What the elementary textbooks on quantum chemistry fail to explain is that empirical spectroscopic evidence that might test these calculations is thin. Moreover, such tests as there may be tend to disappoint the calculators. But nobody need feel ashamed, for the complete calculation of the hydrogen molecule-ion, rotations as well as vibrations, depends on a succession of manifestly false assumptions.⁴

The emphasis of morphic resonance, however, is on living organisms. Here living things of like form, e.g., the monkeys, seem to learn as a body. An example he gives is that of the blue tits. These little birds have learned how to tear the caps off milk bottles left for delivery on doorsteps in order to drink the cream on top. The first recorded instance, according to Sheldrake, was in Southampton in England in 1921.⁵ From there the apparently-learned habit spread, its progress being measured at intervals through 1947. Sheldrake asserts this capability was not learned bird-to-bird, but was individually acquired by birds, remotely located and not in communication with each other. It was the hundredth monkey phenomenon, in short.

An example closer to home is the ability to work crossword puzzles. According to Sheldrake, when a crossword puzzle appears in the daily newspaper, at first, soon after the paper hits the street, the puzzle is hard to solve. But later in the day, after many other people have solved the crossword, it becomes easier for others. Sheldrake claims that a test of this principle was performed using students in Nottingham, England. The publisher provided copies of the daily puzzle to the testers prior to publication. These were given to subjects, and their ability to solve the puzzles was measured. Others were given copies several hours after publication, and the ability to solve was compared. Positive results were claimed by the testers.

Seven Experiments That Could Change the World is subtitled *A Do-It Yourself Guide to Revolutionary Science*. Seven numbered chapters describe the proposed experiments:

1. Pets who know when their owners are returning
2. How do pigeons Home?
3. The organization of termites
4. The sense of being stared at
5. The reality of phantom limbs
6. The variability of the "fundamental constants"
7. The effects of experimenters' expectations

Regarding the first topic, Sheldrake cautions that serious research is hampered by three taboos against research with pets. The first one is "The Taboo Against Investigating the Paranormal."⁶

To start with, there is the general prohibition against taking "psychic" or "paranormal" phenomena seriously. If they really happen, they throw into doubt the mechanistic worldview, which is still the orthodoxy of institutional science. Therefore they are usually ignored or denied, at least in public.

This taboo is actively upheld by Skeptics. I am not referring here to the normal, healthy scepticism that is a component of common sense, but to self-proclaimed Skeptics (spelled with a capital S and a k), who form organized groups and serve as intellectual vigilantes, ready and willing to challenge any public claims of the paranormal. Committed Skeptics tend to equate the mechanistic worldview with reason itself and are passionate in its defense. They are scientific fundamentalists. Their fear is that if claims of the paranormal are allowed to gain a foothold, scientific civilization will be swamped by an upsurge of superstition and religion. Their favorite approach is to dismiss "paranormal" phenomena as nonsensical, and to treat belief in them as an aberration arising from ignorance or wishful thinking—or, among those who ought to know better, as symptomatic of a weakness of the intellect.

Sheldrake has cited cases in which pets seemed to know when their owners are returning home. In particular, a woman told how the family dog seemed to be able to tell when her husband was leaving work to return home, even when he returned at odd times and without her knowledge.

Discussing the phenomenon of phantom limbs Sheldrake recounts tests with Casimir Bernard, who lost a leg below the knee in WWII.⁷ The tests were conducted with "psychic" Ingo Swann and Dr. Alexander Imich, a retired chemist. Both Swann and Imich served as subjects and wore a hood while Bernard raised or lowered his amputated leg on a signal from the remaining person. The subject then indicated whether he could feel the missing limb. Swann described the process:

Rather than using a random number generator to determine whether in any given trial the phantom was to be raised or lowered, the experimenter made up a random-type sequence as he went along. The subject then called whether or not the limb was there. His calls were scored as correct or incorrect, and he could also pass, or in other words decline to answer. (Swann passed on 17 out of 175 trials, and Imich on 11 out of 96.) If he was correct, he was told. Thus there was the possibility of the subject learning to recognize the presence of the phantom as the experiment went along.⁸

Readers will recall that Swann was previously tested by Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff at Stanford Research Institute back in the 1970s during which he affected the operation of a giant magnetometer. James Randi has previously reported on this episode in his book *Flim-Flam*.⁹

The Seven Experiments are meant to provide an easy test of Sheldrake's concept of morphic resonance. Examination of the proposed tests, however, discloses an interesting aspect. My own impression of the way science works is for the scientist to develop an hypothesis concerning some natural principle. This principle is then evaluated in the context of what it says about the natural world—to see whether it makes any predictions, that is to say whether it has any logical consequences. Tests are then designed to determine whether these predictions, these consequences necessarily follow from the hypothesis. A hypothesis that can't make testable predictions or whose predictions fail is considered shaky at best.

Sheldrake does not do this in his book *Seven Experiments*. He asks the reader to go out and perform the experiments, but he does not provide the reader with firm hypotheses to test. It is, in my own words, "Just do this and see what happens."

I can't leave off without touching on the subject of morpho-genetic fields, which are sort of the basis of his book *The Presence of the Past*. The title refers to the idea that the past is always with us. More specifically, we, as living organisms hold memories inherited from all our ancestors. This is a gross simplification of Sheldrake's concept, but then this is only a newsletter. Anyhow, here is an illustration.

Nineteenth Century biologists searched for the mechanism of inheritance. Darwin and Wallace discovered natural selection as the principle that drives evolutionary development, but even they accepted the idea of inheritance of acquired traits. Events in the lives of parents influenced the inherited traits of their children. This was the now discarded Lamarckian principle.

Sheldrake invokes morphogenetic fields to achieve the inheritance of experiences. Figure 1 is from *The Presence of the Past* and illustrates how morphogenetic fields relate to conventional genetics.¹⁰

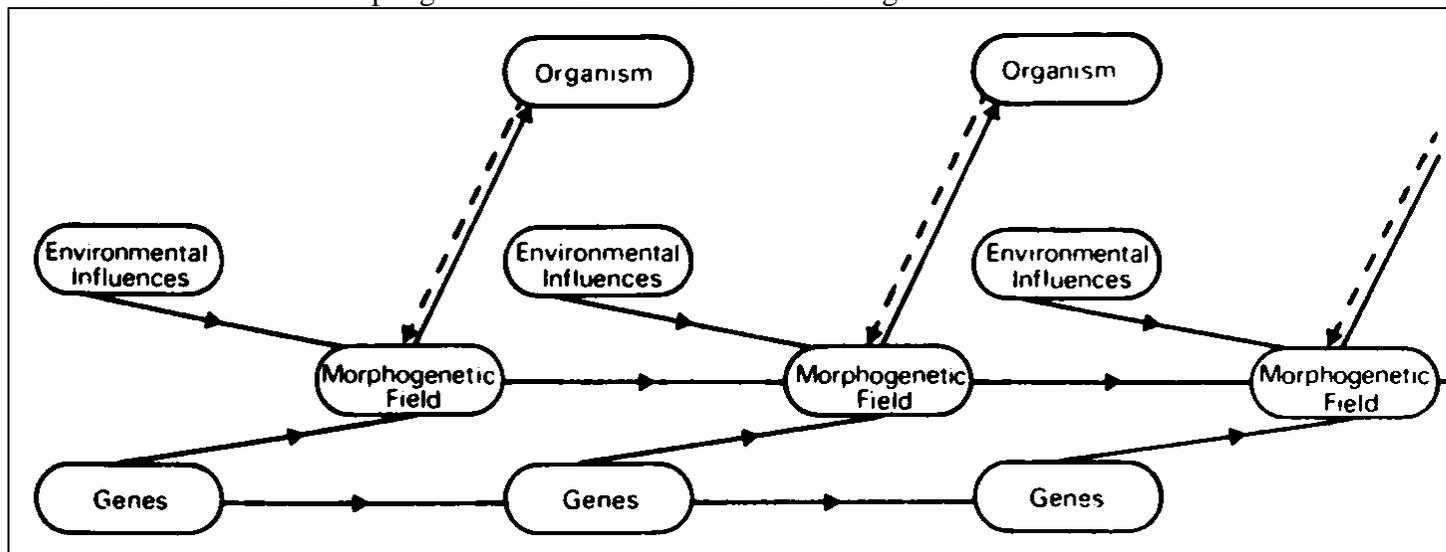


Figure 1. How morphogenetic fields relate to heredity

In the lower row the genes, in the DNA, carry the code for constructing the physical child from generation to generation. The genes pass information to the morphogenetic field (third row), but nothing passes from the morphogenetic field back to the genes. The morphogenetic field receives information from the organism (top row) and from environmental influences (second row). The morphogenetic field also passes information to the organism. Morphogenetic fields of an organism pass information from generation to generation, just as the genes do. The information passed along by the morphogenetic fields encodes the memories of the past that Sheldrake alludes to.

Sheldrake pops up occasionally on PBS TV on a program called "A Glorious Accident." Produced by Wim Kayzer, this program features a two-hour-long interview with Sheldrake as well as interviews with Oliver Sacks, Daniel C. Dennett, Stephen Toulmin, Freeman Dyson, and Stephen Jay Gould. Sheldrake's home page is at

<http://www.uga.edu/~counseling/jung/sheldrake/rupert.html>

From there you can branch out and pick up additional references. A Yahoo/Alta Vista search turned up over a thousand additional references. Here is one—Rupert Sheldrake: A Theosophical Appraisal by David Pratt at:

<http://www.halcyon.com/theosnw/science/prat-shl.html>

1. Amundson, R. The Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon. *Skeptical Inquirer*. fall 1985; 9(4): 348. Reprinted in Frazier, K. ed. *The Hundredth Monkey and Other Paradigms of the Paranormal*, Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991. p. 171.
2. Watson, L. *Lifetide*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979; as quoted in "The Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon." pp. 147-148.
3. Sheldrake, R. *The Presence of the Past*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1995 p. xviii.
4. Maddox, J. Making molecules into atoms. *Nature*. 323:391. 1986; as quoted in *The Presence of the Past*.
5. *The Presence of the Past*: p. 177.

6. Sheldrake, R. *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995 p. 23.
 7. *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*: p. 147.
 8. *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*: p. 148.
 9. Randi, J. *Flim-Flam*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987 p. 131.
 10. *The Presence of the Past*: p. 102.
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The Darwin Awards

by John Blanton

The December meeting was officially the NTS Christmas party and board meeting. Also on the agenda was the first annual NTS Darwin awards.

Lest anyone think we make this stuff up, the Darwin awards have been around for some time. We are just a little late picking up the trail. Actually it's not good, clean fun, because it's at the expense of those who remove themselves from the gene pool through the imaginative exercise of stupidity. Hence the name.

For your information, there is an official Darwin Awards home page on the WWW at:

<http://www.officialdarwinawards.com/index.html>

This site is copyrighted, but I am sure the owners will indulge us for reprinting their 1996 winner and runner up:

The Winner!

[From an AP report] Police said a lawyer demonstrating the safety of windows in a downtown Toronto skyscraper crashed through a pane with his shoulder and plunged 24 floors to his death.

A police spokesman said Garry Hoy, 39, fell into the courtyard of the Toronto Dominion Bank Tower early Friday evening as he was demonstrating the strength of the building's windows to visiting law students.

Hoy previously had conducted demonstrations of window strength according to police reports. Peter Lauwers, managing partner of the firm Holden Day Wilson, told the Toronto Sun newspaper that Hoy was "one of the best and brightest" members of the 200-man association.

Runner-up

Runner-up **[AP, St. Louis]** Robert Puelo, 32, was apparently being disorderly in a St. Louis market. When the clerk threatened to call police, Puelo grabbed a hot dog, shoved it in his mouth, and walked out without paying for it.

Police found him unconscious in front of the store: paramedics removed the six-inch wiener from his throat, where it had choked him to death.

You will note the general trend for winners is a knack for unnecessary risk taking. Also, a bit of poetic justice helps out in case of a tie.

Mr. Impala

We are sad to report that poetry alone does not count. A close relative of the Darwin Awards is the issue of Urban Legends. Yes, Virginia, some of it just isn't so.

So goes the tale of the Impala Rocket. Arizona State Police found a long set of tire skid marks followed by a long set of bare-rim-on-pavement scrape marks out on a desert highway. Beyond the rise they found the remains of a flattened Impala [genus: Chevrolet] on a cliff-side. Close examination revealed also the remains of a JATO bottle. Now JATO stands for Jet Assisted Take Off, and a JATO bottle is a huge rocket canister that military aircraft use for taking off from short runways. It's solid fuel. You light it off. It pushes until it burns out, then you ditch it.

The surmise was that Mr. Impala was contemplating a world speed record for Impalas, and he bolted the JATO to his car and kicked it in while tooling along the blacktop. Somewhere about 300 miles per hour he began to see where all this was leading and applied the brakes, with the aforementioned result. The JATO kept thrusting after he topped a rise, and the Impala thundered, Wily Coyote style, into the desert scenery.

Alas for justice and The Awards, it's just a myth. There are numerous other legends that have vied to the prize, only to fall to Occam's Razor and the cry, "What's your source?"

Skeptics Choice

The Skeptics who gathered in December pored over the gleanings and bid on their favorites. The consensus seemed to be [no official vote was taken] a story previously printed in the Dallas Morning News [I'm going on memory here]. It's a bit dusty, but here it is from a mid 1980's clipping:

\$2.17 million awarded in death

AMARILLO - A jury has awarded the family of a man, electrocuted while working on equipment, \$2.17 million in a wrongful death suit, officials said. An Amarillo jury Saturday ordered Southwestern Public Service Co. to pay the widow and nine children of John Wesley Combs \$2.17 million, which includes \$1 million in punitive damages. Combs was killed in August 1984 when a 26-foot scaffolding on which he was standing was pushed under electric wires at the Amarillo State Fairgrounds Coliseum. He hit one of the wires and was electrocuted. *Two days later, in trying to re-enact the accident, two more men died and another was badly injured.* An additional lawsuit has been filed in that case. The power company was found negligent for failing to properly maintain the lines and post warnings they carried high-voltage electricity. [emphasis added]

Readers are here asked to gather their nominations for the 1997 awards. Wait until the year is really up before you close out your list. Don't ever assume you've seen it all. There is more untapped genius out there than you would believe.

The Third Eye

by Pat Reeder

'Tis the day after Christmas, and here I sit,

Rifling through a big pile of...news stories, all filled with miracles of the season.

I use the term "miracles" quite deliberately, since a new poll commissioned by the Pew Research Center found that 71 percent of Americans say they "never doubt" the existence of God (up from 60 percent in 1987), and 61 percent believe that God creates miracles (up a whopping 14 percentage points in just ten years). Another 10 years like this, and skeptics might as well just throw in the towel and join the Moonies. The AP story on this poll also pointed to the success of *Touched By An Angel* and other miracle-themed shows on TV and massive sales of angel- and miracle-related books, posters and paraphernalia as outgrowths of miracle-mania.

So I've decided to jump on the bandwagon and start using the word "miracle" with wild abandon. Perhaps this strategy will boost The Skeptic's circulation to the heavens. Maybe I could even use it to spur sales of my book, the miraculously funny *Hollywood Hi-Fi* (easily available through the Hollywood Hi-Fi website, but if you find it in a bookstore, it'll be a miracle).

Apologies for the blatant plugs, but skepticism is a tough sell anytime of the year but especially at Christmas. Don't get me wrong: I'm not one of those anti-Santa Scrooges with a poster of the Grinch french-kissing Madalyn Murray O'Hare on my wall (sorry to put that image in your head). I love Christmas; I just wish skeptics could get through the holiday season without being attacked by name.

The skeptic-knocking tradition began 100 years ago, with the publication of that famous editorial, "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus" (there's also a Santa Claus for West Virginia, but he's called "Senator Byrd"). That piece specifically decried "the skepticism of a skeptical age," which is a tip-off that it wasn't written anytime recently. This year being the centenary of that heartwarming essay, a number of politicians joined in a celebration of its anti-skeptic sentiments, including Bob Dole.

It was bad enough to have Al Gore and Bill Clinton accusing global warming skeptics of destroying the earth by asking to see the scientific evidence behind their doomsday environmental claims, but to have Bob Dole stand with the anti-skeptic brigades, even for a little anniversary party, really stings. Let's admit it, if a face could be put on skepticism, don't you think that most people figure it would look just like Bob Dole's?

The nadir of the skeptic-bashing season came on ABC's *Nightline* during the Kyoto global warming conference. With the departure of Brit Hume and David Brinkley, John Stossel is about the last skeptic left standing at ABC News, and this has had two noticeable results. The first is that all stories about global warming are now prefaced with an admonition that a majority of scientists agree that manmade global warming is a fact (a recent poll of climatologists actually puts that number at 19 percent). The second result is that ABC News has quickly sunk to third place in the Nielsen ratings. And no wonder: if ABC's *World News Tonight* included a weather forecast, it would undoubtedly call for an 80 percent chance of boiling oceans by Wednesday.

Anyway, back to Koppel: during a debate on global warming between an environmentalist lobbyist and a spokeswoman for a small business coalition, the latter stated correctly that many scientists in climate-related fields do not accept the global warming hypothesis as fact. Turning back to the environmentalist, Koppel dismissively remarked, "Yes, well, you can always find some people who believe the earth is flat."

So, there you have it: simply questioning the unsubstantiated assertions of environmental lobbyists now puts skeptics, in the eyes of ABC News, on the same level as the Flat Earth Society. I wonder if Ted Koppel believes that 81 percent of climatologists are flat earthers? Personally, I wouldn't be surprised to see Al Gore take up the Flat Earth cause. He could claim that driving all those heavy SUVs is tamping the dirt even flatter, and it will take a radical overhaul of the economy, abandonment of the internal combustion engine and a massive switch to public transportation to combat the "global flattening" crisis.

I guess I'd better shut up. No sense in giving Al any more bright ideas. He gets enough of those from Paul Erlich and Jeremy Rifkin (who once accused cows of tamping the earth too flat with their hooves). You know, it's a miracle anybody listens to these people anymore.



The residents of Garland are gearing up for a homegrown miracle. As if Garland hasn't had enough publicity recently, what with being both the hometown of Leann Rimes and the inspiration for Arlen, Texas, on "King Of The Hill," the town made national news in December when members of the Taiwan-based God's Salvation Church began moving in and buying up houses. Their leader claims that God will return to Earth in a flying saucer on March 31 and will land in Garland to pick up His followers, Garland being chosen because it sounds like "God's Land" (obviously, unlike me, he'd never lived there before).

God will also appear on Channel 18 of all TV sets to announce His arrival, although if he appears opposite Jerry Springer, nobody in Garland is going to see Him. The leader says if God doesn't show up on March 31, his group will not commit suicide but will return quietly to Taiwan. Although they might hang around for one more day, to see if God

shows up to shout "April Fool!"



The next time some New Age airhead starts babbling about how science has never done anything to advance personkind, you now have an alternative to whacking him with a tire iron. You can instead hit him with the name Hidenori Onishi.

Onishi is a researcher at Technos Japan Co. who helped develop the greatest invention since the wheel. It's a hands-free remote control device that enables you to control electrical appliances by brain waves alone, just by thinking the command. While it was designed for the disabled, it's only a matter of time before it becomes the most sought-after Christmas gift for remote control-addicted couch potatoes. Just imagine it: a beer in one hand, chips in the other, and hands-free channel surfing on you brain waves! Provided, of course, you have any brain waves left after watching all that television. It's called the Mind Control Tool Operating System, or MCTOS, and should be available in April for about \$4,800. Truly, it is the miracle product of our age!



Speaking of stunted brain waves, fans of Art Bell's radio show will be giddy to hear that KLIF is now running it in its entirety. It's yet another Christmas miracle! The bad news is, you'll have to keep a schedule like mine to hear it, since it's on from midnight to 5 a.m. But it's almost worth suffering a bout of insomnia just to hear it once or twice.

For those unfamiliar with Bell's show, it is broadcast from his home in the "high mountains" and tends to run to such topics as UFOs, alternative medicine, apocalyptic prophecies, Area 51 and other alleged government cover-ups and conspiracies, ghosts, satanic possession, and on one recent show, "reverse speech." (This is a laughably ridiculous belief that when people speak, they subconsciously reveal truths about themselves in backward language, and if you tape them and play it backwards, you can hear what they are trying to conceal. I can assure you from 22 years' experience in recording studios that if you play tapes backwards, you can subjectively hear all sorts of things in the babble which aren't really there. The most extreme case was probably the Texas minister who found backward satanic messages in the theme to "Mr. Ed." He would make a perfect guest for Art Bell).

About 80 percent of the running time of Bell's show seems to be taken up by commercials, most delivered by Bell himself, for all sorts of entertainingly wacky products, my favorite being the canned gourmet meals for your holocaust shelter, so you can not only survive the coming apocalypse but continue to dine in style, while your fellow humans are reduced to foraging for scorched berries and radioactive nuts.

Speaking of nuts, the best parts of Bell's show are the listener call-ins. This is where we discover what all conversations would sound like had the concept of skepticism never been invented. Let's say, for instance, that a stranger walked up to you on the street and declared that within the next few days, the Pathfinder probe would discover alien-built structures beneath the surface of Mars. What would you reply?

(A.) "How can you possibly know a thing like that?"

(B.) "Did you forget to take your lithium?"

(C.) "Ha-ha-ha!"

(D.) "How old do you estimate these alien structures to be?"

If you chose (D.), then you're going to love "The Art Bell Show."



Finally, never let it be said that I don't acknowledge honest-to-goodness miracles: Mary Sanderson of Concord, New Hampshire, recently awoke from a dream with six numbers stuck in her head. She played them that day in the Powerball Lottery and won \$66 million. She did insist, "They came to me in a dream, and no, it didn't have anything to do with the Psychic Network." Even her own husband, Jason, didn't believe the dream story at first. He said, "I told her she was a fruitball." But until he figures out a way to make \$66 million off a dream about Pamela Lee licking a Popsicle, I assume he'll keep his skepticism to himself.