



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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The Mars about face

By John Blanton

That should be "about the Mars face." Sooner or later all silliness must come to an end. Let's get on with it.

"In July 1976, Viking Orbiter 1 was acquiring images of the Cydonia region of Mars as part of the search for potential landing sites for Viking Lander 2. On July 25, 1976, it photographed a region of buttes and mesas along the escarpment that separates heavily cratered highlands to the south from low lying, relatively crater-free, lowland plains to the north. Among the hills was one that, to the Viking investigators scrutinizing the images for likely landing sites, resembled a face." This is quoted from "The `Face on Mars,'" Web page by Malin Space Science Systems, Inc.

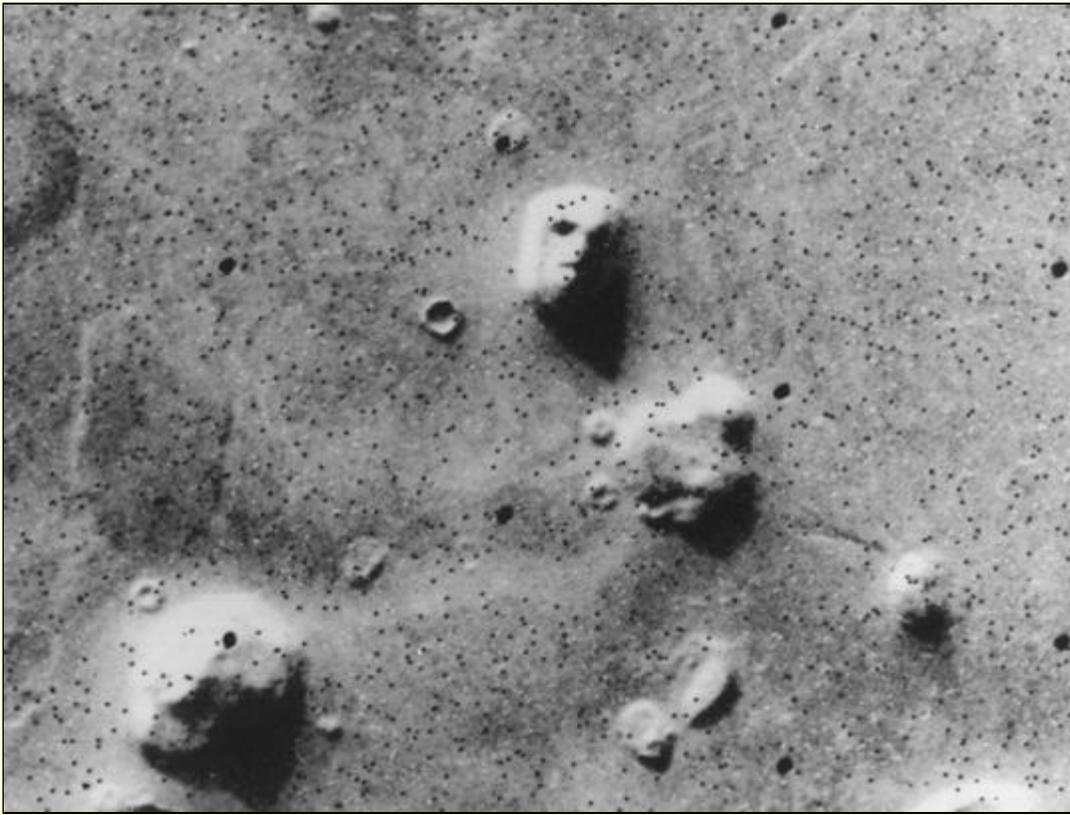
<http://barsoom.msss.com/education/facepage/face.html>

From The Skeptics Dictionary

<http://wheel.dcn.davis.ca.us:80/~btcarrol/skeptic/pareidol.html>

Pareidolia is a type of illusion or misperception involving a vague stimulus being clearly perceived as something or someone. Some examples of pareidolia include seeing the image of Jesus Christ in a burnt tortilla or a tree wound; seeing the image of the Virgin Mary in a cloud or on a public toilet floor; and seeing the image of Mother Theresa in a cinnamon bun.

Under ordinary circumstances, pareidolia provides a



psychological explanation for many delusions based upon sense perception. For example, it explains many UFO sightings and hearing sinister messages on records played backwards. Pareidolia explains Elvis, Bigfoot, and Loch Ness Monster sightings. It explains numerous religious

apparitions and visions. And it explains why some people see a face or a building in a photograph of the Cydonia region of Mars.

Under clinical circumstances, however, some psychologists encourage pareidolia as a means to understanding a patient. Perhaps, the most infamous example of this type of clinical procedure is the Rorschach ink blot test.

Astronomer Carl Sagan believes that the human tendency to see faces in tortillas, clouds, cinnamon buns, etc. is an evolutionary trait. He writes: *

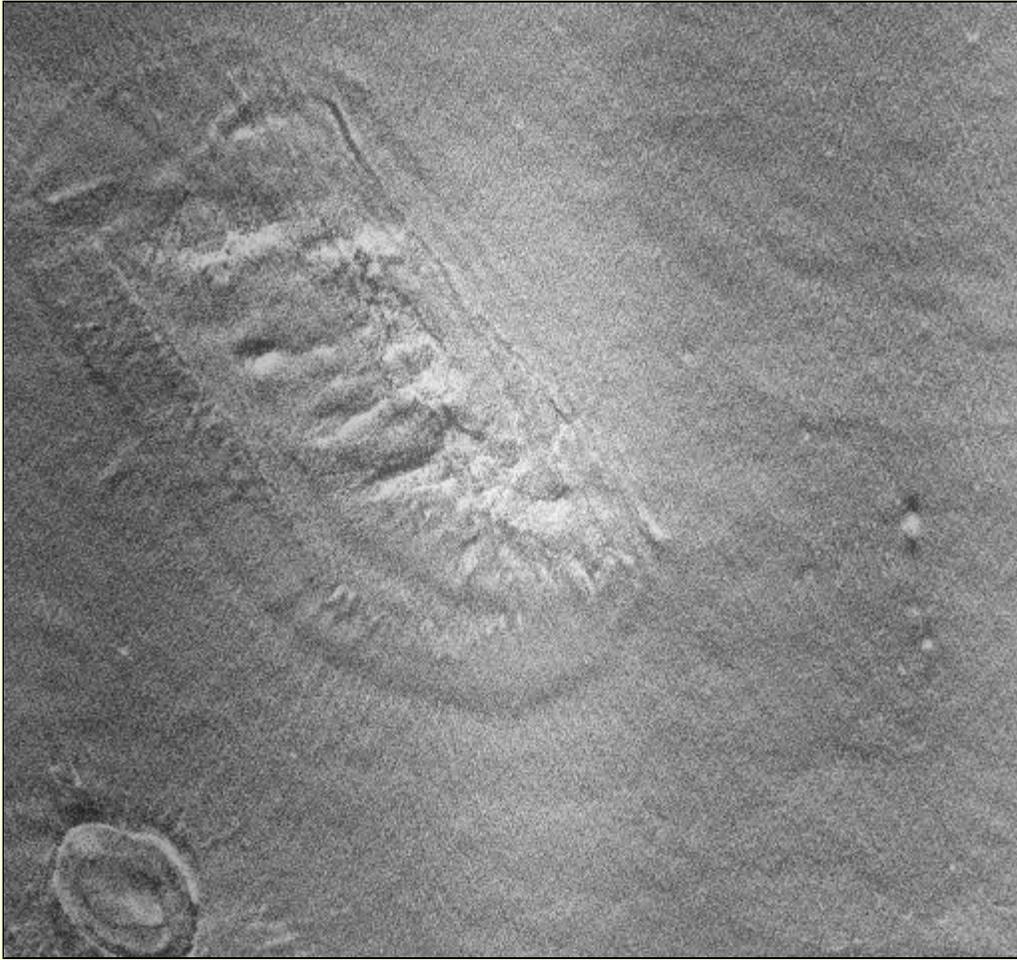
"As soon as the infant can see, it recognizes faces, and we now *know* that this skill is hardwired in our brains. Those infants who a million years ago were unable to recognize a face smiled back less, were less likely to win the hearts of their parents, and less likely to prosper. These days, nearly every infant is quick to identify a human face, and to respond with a goony [sic] grin." [Sagan, p. 45]

Maybe. Maybe not. In any case, Sagan's explanation of the face on Mars is less controversial than his explanation for our fascination with faces. In 1976, the Viking orbiter sent back some images of Mars which looked like a face but which NASA said was just a play of light and shadow. Some took this explanation as a sure sign of a cover-up. Some engineers and computer specialists digitally enhanced the NASA images. This soon gave birth to the claim that the face was a sculpture of a human being located next to a city whose temples and fortifications could also be seen. Some began to wonder: were these built by the same beings who built the ancient airports in Peru and who were now communicating to us through elaborate symbols carved in wheat crop circles? Others took the wonder to the level of belief, based on the flimsiest of evidence and the grandest of imagination.

Sagan's more down-to-earth explanation for the face on Mars is that it is the result of erosion and winds and other natural forces. [Sagan, pp. 52-55]

Maybe the face on Mars was done by the artist who did the Shroud of Turin. Some who have looked closely have seen a family resemblance.

You're not hearing it here first, but here it is: They say it's not over `till it's over. Well, it's over. Next slide please.



NASA has gone back and re-photographed the spot. Check it out. They even smoothed out the bulldozer tracks.

* Sagan, Carl. *The Demon-Haunted World — Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1995). \$11.20

The Hawaii Rational Inquirer

By Vic Stenger

[This is Vol. 3 No. 25]

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SKEPTIC EMILY MEDIA STAR

This past week may have contained April Fool's Day, but it was no week for fools. Emily Rosa, the 11-year old whose research on Therapeutic Touch was published in JAMA 279:1005-1010, April 1, was the week's big media star.

The full text of the paper, co-authored with Stephen Barrett, MD; Linda Rosa, BSN, RN, MOM; and Larry Sarner can be found at:

www.ama-assn.org/sci-pubs/journals/most/recent/issues/jama/joc71352.htm

The conclusions: "Twenty-one experienced TT practitioners were unable to detect the investigator's "energy field." Their failure to substantiate TT's most fundamental claim is unrefuted evidence that the claims of TT are groundless and that further professional use is unjustified."

TT proponents have cried foul. How could an 11-year old (actually 9-years at the time of the Science Fair experiment) disprove a practice used by 100,000 people worldwide, including at least 43,000 health care professionals? TT is the only treatment for the "energy field disturbance" diagnosis recognized by the North American Nursing Diagnosis Association.

Of course Emily did not prove Therapeutic Touch does not work. She also did not prove that the Tooth Fairy does not leave money under pillows, or that pigs can't fly.

RANDI'S PIGISUS AWARDS

Speaking of flying pigs, here are the 1998 Pigisus Awards. These awards are given out every April 1 by the James Randi Educational Foundation. This year's winners are:

Category #1, to the scientist who said or did the silliest thing related to the supernatural, paranormal or occult, goes to Dr. Michael Guillen of ABC-TV News. The science editor of ABC-TV's *Good Morning America* since 1988, Dr. Guillen has supported all manner of questionable "New Age" notions, usually by featuring endorsements by celebrities. Dr. Guillen holds Ph.D. degrees in physics, mathematics, and astronomy.

Category #2, to the funding organization that supported the most useless study of a supernatural, paranormal or occult claim, goes to the National Institutes of Health, whose budget for their Office of Alternative Healing began as two million dollars, and now amounts to twenty million. This money, originally marked to do "basic research" on alternative healing claims such as homeopathy, acupuncture, and chiropractic, has been dribbled away on peripheral claims of individual quack advocates.

Category #3, to the media outlet that reported as fact the most outrageous supernatural, paranormal or occult claim, the prize goes to ABC-TV News, for their unquestioning and enthusiastic endorsement of "cold fusion," ESP, psychokinesis, astrology, "magnetic therapy," and all sorts of junk science and highly questionable "alternative healing" modalities.

[Ed note: In this week's reporting on Therapeutic Touch, ABC was the most credulous, presenting useless anecdotal testimonies by people who were convinced it helped them. But see 20/20 report below.]

Category #4, to the "psychic" performer who fooled the greatest number of people with the least talent, is given this year to all the psychics, astrologers, fortune tellers, spiritualists, and palm readers who, though they were consulted a matter of hours before her death, all failed to see any danger for Princess Di. These were the best of the best, highly paid and respected by Di and her friends.

20/20 EXPOSES VAN PRAAGH

The ABC magazine 20/20 often bucks the paranormal tendencies of ABC News. A while ago they did an excellent report on "Junk Science." Last night (Friday, April 3) they took on best-selling author James Van Praagh and exposed

him for the phony he is.

Van Praagh claims to talk to the dead, and many of his customers believe him. Like the spiritualist mediums of a century ago, he preys upon the emotions of those who have lost loved ones and desperately want to believe that they are up in heaven, waiting to be re-united with those left behind.

In reality, Van Praagh uses the standard cold reading techniques of the mentalist and psychic, with apparently a little "warm reading" and "hot reading" thrown in.

Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic Magazine*, was brought in to comment. Clips were replayed that amply illustrated Van Praagh's probing techniques of questioning, guessing generalities, and watching the responses. He was wrong far more often than we was right, but these misses tended to be ignored by his audiences and the hits remembered. Van Praagh is not even a particularly skillful medium. He would never make it as a stage mentalist.

But, he succeeds because people want to believe him. He tells them what they want to hear. He was caught cheating at one point, using information that he had obtained directly from a subject during a break while claiming he obtained it "spiritually." When confronted with the facts, he still denied them.

Shermer brilliantly exposed Van Praagh's trickery. When *20/20* correspondent Bill Ritter suggested that some good was still being done, since the people came away feeling better, Shermer asked what good can come from playing games with people's emotions.

Still, *20/20*'s Barbara Walters wanted to believe. Van Praagh had gotten her father's name correct and the fact that he wore a glass eye. Ritter pointed out that he was able to dig those facts up by himself that morning with no trouble. Barbara's co-anchor Hugh Downs simply said, "I don't believe him."

But then the three ABC stars copped out, agreeing that Van Praagh was nevertheless "very compassionate." Yeah. All the way to the bank.

A GOOD WEEK IN THE BATTLE AGAINST THE FORCES OF DARKNESS

Emily Rosa and Michael Shermer were not the only skeptics to whom the media paid attention last week. *Skeptical Inquirer* editors were interviewed in recent days on over twenty radio broadcasts across the U.S, and Canada.

Topics included Therapeutic Touch, UFOs, spiritualism, and psychic networks among others. Well-known skeptical author and editor Joe Nickell was recently named special paranormal consultant to the BBC as he collaborates on two upcoming documentaries involving the topics of the Shroud of Turin and Levitation.

The third eye

By Pat Reeder

April has been a very cruel month, indeed, for nonskeptics. In the past two weeks, several of their most cherished totems of hokum have fallen crashing to earth. It's almost enough to make me want to send them a sympathy card and an Easter basket full of Martin Gardner books, to get them started on a new and more rewarding life.

Let's begin on the very first day of the month (April Fool's Day, appropriately), with the story closest to us geographically. You've probably already heard by now that God did not land in a flying saucer in Garland, reproduce himself hundreds of times and give interviews to every reporter present in his or her native tongue (drat these month-long lead times!). But according to cult leader Hon-Ming Chen, he did land, sort of. It seems that God merely decided to nix the "UFO landing on live TV" plan in favor of a less splashy entrance. Chen held a news conference to announce that God had landed invisibly, entered the bodies of everyone present, and they could now all play the role of God and answer their own questions (just what the world needs: more reporters who think they're God). Naturally, anyone who doubted this was denying his identity as a human. Or as God. Whatever.

The good news in this whole ridiculous sideshow is that the cult members did not strap on their best dress Nikes and quaff the holy Kool-Aid. All that happened was that Chen announced he was shuffling off to Buffalo, New York, which is the best news Garland has gotten since LeAnn Rimes won a Grammy.

In a closely-related story, the Church Universal and Triumphant is selling off two-thirds of its 12,000 acres near Yellowstone National Park, laying off staffers, and selling equipment and business holdings, in an attempt to stay afloat amid drastically declining membership.

For those who don't recall, the church's founder, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, attracted over 2,000 followers with her weird East-West religious hybrid, which encompassed karma, reincarnation, communal living and survivalist paranoia. The group bought land in Montana, severed ties with disbelieving family members, built bomb shelters and stockpiled food, clothing and weapons, all in preparation for the nuclear holocaust that Mrs. Prophet predicted would occur in March...of 1990. (Incidentally, why do all these nutball cults fixate on March? Does it have anything to do with March Madness?)

After eight years on red alert, even her most dedicated followers are getting a tad impatient for the apocalypse and starting to suspect that their guru has no more prognosticating powers than Paul Erlich. To stem the losses, the church's new leader, Gilbert Cleirbaut, is playing down the church's fear and survivalism origins and going more mainstream. However, that is not to say that Mrs. Prophet was wrong. Perish the thought! Cleirbaut said that the "more balanced" members of the church stayed because they understand that their prayers averted the holocaust. Perhaps Elizabeth Claire Prophet should change her name to Elizabeth Self-Fulfilling Prophet.

Anyway, let this be a good lesson to you kids who hope to grow up and start your very own doomsday cult someday: NEVER make a prediction with an expiration date! Make sure your holy writ is nothing but vague and open-ended gibberish, and parcel it out in little dabs at the highest rate the market will bear. Just ask L. Ron Hubbard.

Believers in "therapeutic touch" also took it on the chin this month, with the blow being delivered by Emily Rosa, a precocious nine-year-old girl from Loveland, Colorado, with two self-proclaimed skeptics for parents. For those who aren't familiar with it, this is the belief that certain people can "feel" other people's "energy fields" and can speed the healing of ailments by waving their hands around, six inches or so above the body of the sufferer. Believe it or not, the A.P. reports that this is actually practiced in at least 80 North American hospitals and taught in 100 colleges and universities in 75 countries. Naturally, the practitioners want our insurance premiums to cover their services.

Sadly for them, Emily (who is much less threatening and slightly cuter than the Amazing Randi) convinced 21 therapeutic touch therapists to help out with her fourth grade science project. It was a simple test: the therapists stood on one side of a large, black sheet of cardboard and put their hands through two holes in the wall. Then, on the other side of the divider, Emily asked them to state which hand Emily was holding her own hand over, merely by "feeling her energy field."

Result: they answered correctly only 44 percent of the time, slightly below the level of chance.

Emily's test was so impressive that it was featured on PBS's *Scientific American Frontiers*, which brought it to the attention of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which published it, making her the youngest researcher ever to be published by JAMA. JAMA's editor of sixteen years, Dr. George D. Lundberg, supervised the report and praised it as quality science and sound research.

Not surprisingly, Dolores Krieger, co-founder of "therapeutic touch," disagreed, saying she was "astounded" that JAMA published this report and calling it "poor in design and methodology." Among her criticisms were the fact that the designer of the test (Emily) also conducted it, and that 21 therapists wasn't a large enough sample.

I agree completely. I'd be willing to bet that if a totally objective researcher tested an infinite number of therapeutic touch therapists an infinite number of times, they could get their accuracy rating all the way up to the level of chance!

And finally came the most devastating news, since it yanked the rug out from under everyone from UFO buffs to New Age spiritual gurus to that remote-viewing bozo who's always turning up on the Art Bell Show, claiming to be getting psychic messages from the Pleidians. I refer, of course, to the "Face on Mars."

For over 20 years, that shadowy face on the planet's surface that appeared in a Viking mission photo has been promoted as proof that there was intelligent life on Mars, even though, frankly, the face didn't look all that intelligent. Skeptical scientists said it was just a trick of the light on natural geographic formations. Well, this week, the Mars Global Surveyor took the first close-up photos of the area, at a different time and angle, and guess what? As project manager Michael Ravine said, "It's a butte, a mesa, a knob." In other words, just a trick of the light playing over a rough patch of ground that looked to me like a tennis shoe print. (Say, maybe there are giant basketball players on Mars! Someone tell the NBA to start building a rocket immediately!!)

Once again, irrefutable evidence did nothing to shake the beliefs of the faithful. Rather than admit that perhaps the Pleidians had been pulling their leg, Martian Face proponents insisted that the photos were fakes, or had been tampered with in some way (NASA claims the raw data went directly onto the Internet in real time, but then, they're part of the conspiracy). If all goes as usual, I expect the Martian Face proponents to lay low for awhile, wait for people to forget about this story, then start pushing it again as if it were never disproven. (Remember crop circles? And the Loch Ness Monster? They're baaaaaaack!) I predict the respite will last for approximately two years, then Mars will once again begin rearing its ugly Face (or facing its ugly rear) at a psychic fair T-shirt stand near you.

I hate to force all these good folk to Face so much harsh reality all at once, so I should give them something to cling to until the *X-Files* movie comes out. So I'll mention that UPN recently aired a "documentary" on the "most startling video evidence yet that extraterrestrials are visiting Earth!" Or at least the most startling evidence since that laughable McPherson alien abduction hoax yukumentary that the very same network aired twice last month.

This one was called "Danger In Our Skies," and it was built around 70 seconds of footage of a UFO that looked remarkably like all the UFOs ever seen in 1950s sci-fi movies, allegedly hovering over Mexico City. I must confess that I forgot this thing was on and only caught the end of it, thus sparing myself the compelling testimony from the predictable group of "experts." But I did get to see the tape itself several times, and I read an exhaustive (and exhausting) analysis of it by a UFO proponent on the Web. Oh boy, did I read it!

To give you an example of how detailed and lengthy this analysis was, the author filled a full page with mathematical calculations and graphs intended to prove that the wobbling of the saucer whenever it stood still perfectly matched the wobble rate one would expect if the UFO were equipped with some sort of gyroscopic stabilization device.

I'm no math genius, and I'll admit that his calculations made me think "MEGO" (not the Bronson Pinchot sitcom about an alien, but P.J. O'Rourke's abbreviation for "My Eyes Glaze Over.") In fact, I'm so unenlightened, I confess that the wobble rate matched what I would expect if it were a model suspended from a crane just out of camera range, just like the wobbling of the hubcap flying saucers suspended from strings in Ed Wood's immortal "Plan Nine From Outer Space."

But don't worry: I'm planning to have my I.Q. increased by letting Dolores Krieger wave her hands over my skull, and I should be able to decipher his entire analysis of the video in time for next month's column. Especially now that I'm God.

Bless you!