



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

Volume 12 Number 10

www.ntskeptics.org

November 1998

In this month's issue:

- [The Next Vön Daniken / Velikovsky !?](#)
- [Web news](#)
- [The third eye](#)
- [Aliens, angels and archetypes](#)
- [Magnets](#)

The Next Vön Daniken / Velikovsky !?

By Tim Gorski

As many skeptics may know, Erich Vön Daniken wrote the popular book *Chariots of the Gods?* in which he argued that space aliens had visited the earth in ancient times and that this could be proved from the findings of archaeologists and corroborated by various ancient texts. From there, he and others perpetuated all sorts of nonsense about space aliens building the pyramids and constructing hidden and not-so-hidden spaceports and even influencing or engineering the earliest human ancestors through breeding and genetic experimentation. Unfortunately, there never was or has been a shred of credible evidence to support such ridiculous claims.

Immanuel Velikovsky, a bit earlier than this, wrote several books in which he claimed that the planet Venus had once been a comet that made several close passes to the earth during prehistoric or proto-historic times. These violent celestial encounters, according to Velikovsky, caused all sorts of natural catastrophes that were memorialized by the survivors in epic accounts of a Great Flood and so on. Unfortunately, Velikovsky's claims are not consistent with elementary mechanics as taught to high school and college physics students.

Now here comes another crackpot: one Jeremy Narby by name. And his book is featured as a selection by Newbridge Communications' Library of Science (LOS) book club in its Spring 1988 Volume 215 catalog. It's right there being given equal billing with the usual fare of popular science books by Sagan and other reputable scientists! But readers should draw their own conclusions. The promo text for Narby's book *The Cosmic Serpent* reads as follows:

At the 1992 World Summit in Rio on the environment and development, the governments of the world signed treaties that recognized the ecological knowledge of indigenous people. However, as Jeremy Narby argues in *The Cosmic Serpent*, the scientific community is not ready to engage in a true dialog with indigenous people, as biologists cannot receive their knowledge due to several epistemological blocks. Narby's thrilling narrative not only identifies these blocks, but presents challenging new models which may help us enter into such a dialog. ... During ten years of intense study ... Narby explored the possibility that specific knowledge may be transmitted through DNA.

The beginnings of his exploration lay with Peruvian Indians who claim their now scientifically confirmed data had its origins in plant-induced hallucinations and that during these experiences they gain knowledge that could not possibly be acquired through traditional methods of trial and error. Narby suggests that indigenous and ancient people have known (and drawn) the DNA double helix structure for millennia, something Western science only discovered in 1953. The cosmic serpent found in myths and imagery all over the world (even in cultures where there are no snakes) may indeed be a metaphor for the double helix if DNA ... [which] suggests that DNA, and the life it codes for at the cellular level, are minded.

... The biodiversity of tropical forests represent a fabulous resource, but without the botanical knowledge of indigenous people which this book helps us understand, biotechnicians will be reduced to blindly testing the medicinal properties of its estimated 80,000 plant species.

The book evidently is pushing the idea of supernatural revelation through hallucinogenic plant use. The notion of the inheritance of acquired traits, with which Trofim Denisovic Lysenko virtually destroyed the science of Genetics in the former USSR under Stalin, is apparently also taken seriously. Yet the book is not only featured in the LOS catalog but is blurb/endorsed in the LOS flyer with glowing quotes from Antoine Tremolieres, a molecular biologist of the Centre National Recherche Scientifique and Stefano Varese, anthropologist at the University of California, Davis.

I have nominated Narby's Nonsense for a Pigasus Award (when pigs can fly) from the James Randi Educational Foundation.

Aliens, angels and archetypes

by **John Blanton**

What was once science fiction is now science fact. What was imaginary is now real. All we need is to wait.

Scott Allen is an M.D. radiologist from Garland, and he explained all this at the October meeting. The topic was "Aliens, Angels, and Archetypes." Scott Allen speaks occasionally on New Age topics, he being an active proponent. An associated issue of New Age is the matter of post modernism. By way of introduction, let me just note that the post modernists believe that science is not the proper way to study the universe. All interpretations of the universe are equally correct if they are truly believed the post modernists will tell you, and experimentation is not required for confirmation.

Dr. Allen explained one aspect of this. Figure 1 shows how fiction becomes fact with time. Dr. Allen explained that powered, heavier-than-air flight started out as fiction, denied by all the great minds of the time. This is the upper region between the two lines. Where the lines cross is where the Wright brothers performed their first powered flight. Even afterward this fact was unknown by most and denied by many who were told. Finally, as the diagram shows, as more people came to believe, the truth became fact.

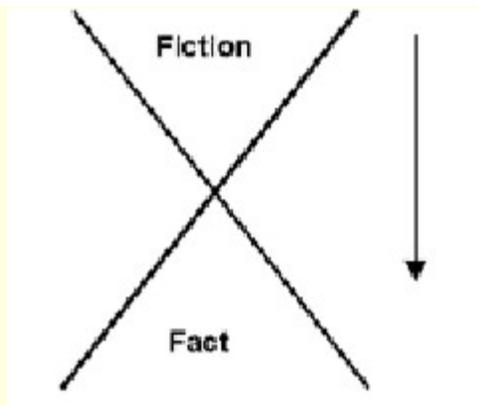


Figure 1

He also illustrated with the matter of helicopter flight. Scott Allen told us he first flew in a helicopter when he was eight, and he asked if anybody present had not experienced helicopter flight. I raised my hand, of course. Though I had worked on helicopters and programmed computers on helicopters, I had always watched from the ground as they took off. Dr. Allen pointed out that as more people participated in it, helicopter flight took on more reality and less fantasy, ultimately becoming very real.

Much the same holds for a number of other modern beliefs we were told. In this talk and in others, Dr. Allen has discussed the electromagnetic spectrum. Electromagnetic radiation is his livelihood, as you might suspect, and he has some interesting comments on the topic. Figure 2 is from an illustration he uses.

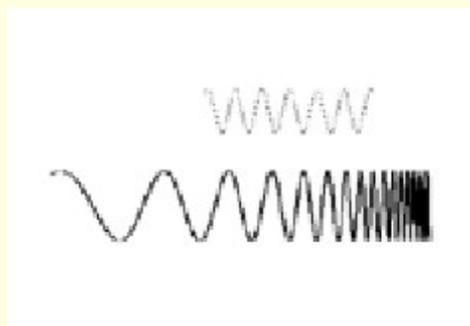


Figure 2 The wavy line in the bottom of the figure represents the electromagnetic spectrum. The spectrum is a continuum of energy from very long wavelengths on the left to very short wavelengths on the right. The long wavelengths would typically be radio waves, and the short wavelengths would be x-rays, Scott Allen's specialty. The wavy line at the top is a separate part of the spectrum that can travel faster than light.

This phenomenon, Dr. Allen contends, is part and parcel to what Albert Einstein had called the "spooky, action-at-a-distance" principle of quantum mechanics. It so happens that this is something increasingly in the news, with researchers like Alain Aspect, Bernard d'Espagnat and others publishing about and popularizing this queer corner of physics. In short, when a property of two elementary particles is described by a single quantum state, the two particles show a remarkable correspondence with each other, even when they are miles apart. Furthermore, this correspondence propagates practically instantaneously, Dr. Einstein and special relativity notwithstanding.

Dr. Allen brought up the matter of the late physicist David Bohm, who, though he never won the Nobel Prize, was famous for some of his ideas concerning non-local action-at-a-distance. Dr. Allen did not mention David Bohm's association with Robert Oppenheimer and Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunts of the 1950s and why David Bohm left the US and never came back. He did not mention Jack Sarfatti, either. Since this was not a physics lecture, I let all that slide. Our readers can follow up on Bohm and Sarfatti by reading Martin Gardner's book *Science Good, Bad and Bogus* and James Randi's book *Flim-Flam*. You might also check out Vic Stenger's excellent article "The Spooks of Quantum Mechanics" in the fall 1990 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*. Actually, just about everybody has written about this topic. Check out my comments in the sci.physics FAQ on the Internet. Sci.physics moderator Scott I. Chase and

others have patched up my original submission and made it an interesting read. Even Jack Sarfatti has jumped into the issue, as you will see if you follow the links.

Vic Stenger's Web page on this topic is at:

<http://www.phys.hawaii.edu/vjs/www/vjs.html>

A page on the EPR paradox can be found at the following URL. There are pointers there to related discussions:

http://www.public.iastate.edu/~physics/sci.physics/faqold/bells_inequality.html

Skeptics were not the only ones to turn out for Scott Allen's presentation. A participant known as "Ron" had even more remarkable worlds to reveal. Ron reaffirmed Scott Allen's views on reality and the powers of the liberated mind. He let slip that he had the amazing ability to pass through solid walls and to see what was inside closed rooms. Impressed, we let slip our offer of a \$6000 cash prize to anybody who could demonstrate this to us. Ron let slip what he really thought of our prize.

Ron's accomplishments were not confined to our squalid earthly existence, either. He had, he told us, journeyed to the Pleiades and had conversed with the Pleiadeans. They had their own language he informed us, and he explained one of the words of the Pleiadean language as proof of what he was saying.

At the end of the session several of us pressed Scott and Ron to make good on their pronouncements of the paranormal. We again reminded them of the \$6000. Both graciously declined, of course. Scott assured us that what he knew to be true did not require confirmation by others. He made the comparison with casting pearls before swine. I had to think about that for a while. The swine I could figure out. It was the pearls I could not account for.

It's for sure that Scott and Ron and the others of the New Age have a different outlook on reality. While we are held back by the speed of light, to say nothing of mired in rush-hour traffic, they freely roam the universe and pluck flowers (figuratively) among the stars. Who am I to deny Ron his vision. Who am I, anyhow. Ron has been to the Pleiades and back. And I've never even ridden in a helicopter.

[Back to top](#)

The Third Eye

NEWS AND COMMENTARY FROM THE WEIRD WORLD OF THE MEDIA

By Pat Reeder

Well, it's been a long time since my last column. Thanks to Danny Barnett's wonderful (and wonderfully lengthy) series on exorcism, I was able to take an extended vacation. Not surprisingly, a lot of garbage piled up over the past few months, and now, it's time to take it out...on you. For some reason, possibly millennium fever, much of it involves New Agey religious doubletalk, spouted from some pretty unlikely sources. It's everywhere from the entertainment and society columns to the political news, so let's start with the front page.

It's said that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, but as we all know, the first refuge is religion, preferably an extremely public religious conversion. Anyone who's ever attended a small town tent revival knows that nothing redeems the reputation of the town reprobate faster than one good, tearful repentance, performed in front of as many spectators as possible. Thus have we been treated over the past two months to that entertaining spectacle that I like to call "Brother Clinton's Traveling Salvation Show."

When our straying prez finally broke down in August and admitted what anyone with more than two brain cells already suspected (that he and his thong-sporting intern had been giving new meaning to the phrase, "in bed with big tobacco"), his speech seemed grudging and combative, with an obvious subtext of "How dare you peons catch me?!" Naturally, this did not set well with the yokels outside the Beltway, so within days, Plan B went into effect. Voila! One miraculous religious conversion, comin' right up!

Overnight, our oversexed overseer morphed into Jimmy Swaggart, shedding glycerin tears and weeping, "Ah have sinned!" in front of any group of Bible-toters who would have him. Particularly shameless was his performance in front of a prayer breakfast of compliant ministers (as fuming fundamentalists fulminated outside, boycotting the Fakin' 'n' Eggs buffet). This was followed by the appointing of two ministers as his staff spiritual advisors, to be on call 24 hours a day to help him fight his carnal temptations (I picture him contacting them by shining the Bat Signal, except it's a silhouette of a naked woman, like the ones that appear on truckers' mudflaps). One of these ministers has a history of adultery himself, making him uniquely qualified to offer both godly advice and dating tips. Frankly, I don't know why Clinton doesn't just go all the way and offer White House staff positions to Tammy Faye as Presidential Crying Coach and Robert Tilton as Head of Fundraising.

Mighty odd behavior, one might think, for the leader of a political party that prides itself as the defender of the separation of church and state. But desperate times call for desperate measures. Besides, the "old time religion" aspect of this charade only lasted a couple of weeks before it began evolving into a more mass-appeal variety of New Age self-worship, à la that classic Whitney Houston anthem, "The Greatest Love Of All" (is learning to love myself). And of course, to find it in your heart to forgive yourself.

Two months removed from the original semi-confession, the Old Testament has been replaced as the guidebook for governance by pollsters, who seem more omniscient than God, anyway, or at least more omnipresent. The latest White House doctrine holds that the sin was not so bad after all; that law enforcement officials who are investigating the leader are the true evil; that as long as you preach peace and do good works, you can do whatever you want in private and not feel guilty; that anyone who doubts the leader's divinity is part of the vast conspiracy against him; and that there's no such thing as lying, it's just "creating your own reality."

That's right, the power of the U.S. government is no longer in the hands of fundamentalist religious fanatics in Congress. It's now in the hands of a New Age cult leader. I know I'll sleep easier.



Given Clinton's recent move into the spiritual realm, it's not surprising that his support is stronger than ever in Hollywood, where crackpot New Age religions flourish like weeds over a septic tank. Of course, the word they prefer is "spirituality," a term used by people who like the idea of being religious, but don't like religion.

One of Clinton's most vocal defenders has been the ever-evolving Madonna, who is looking more and more these days like an illustration from an Indian restaurant menu (she's even started dying her hair entirely black instead of just dying the roots black, the way she did when she was a blonde). The Catholic iconography she once appropriated now being passé, she has moved on to a weird cocktail of Hinduism, ancient Judaism and narcissism. A recent bulletin informs us that she is deepening her spirituality by learning Sanskrit and taking yoga classes (as if she needed to be more limber) to "help keep me humble." If that's the goal, she might want to schedule extra classes.

Not surprisingly, Madonna's faux-Hinduism has outraged real Hindus, some of whom howled in protest after Madonna appeared on the MTV Music Video Awards, wearing a Hindu symbol of purity on her face while gyrating suggestively in a see-through T-shirt. If it is any comfort, I can assure them that nobody noticed her face.

Madonna's recent move into mysticism is partly sparked by her involvement with the Kabbalah Learning Center in Los Angeles. It's one of those places like the Scientology Center that entices celebrities by combining mystical religion, feel-good aphorisms and a country club atmosphere. Other famous KLC regulars include Roseanne, Barbra Streisand, Elizabeth Taylor, Sandra Bernhard, Jeff Goldblum and Laura Dern.

The KLC supposedly instructs people in a form of ancient Judaism known as Kabbalah, but a recent expose in *Self*

magazine by Rabbi Michael Skobac, director of Jews For Judaism, makes it appear that the KLC is not exactly kosher. For instance, the rabbi notes that religious fanaticism has sparked a number of divorces among KLC devotees (although that could just be Liz Taylor throwing off the curve). But that's not surprising, since KLC founder Rabbi Philip Berg reportedly dumped his wife and seven kids in Israel to move to America and start instructing other people in proper living.

The KLC's letterhead states, "Established 1922, Jerusalem," when *Self* notes that it was actually founded in 1969 and has no branch in Israel. There are also allegations that the KLC leaned on an elderly couple to fork over much of their life savings and that they charge members outrageous prices for religious texts and trinkets available at any Jewish bookstore for a fraction of the cost. An example that will make Robert Tilton fans nostalgic: \$26 for a five-cent red yarn bracelet that's been "energized at a sacred tomb." KLC followers still need to learn some of the greatest Jewish words of wisdom: "Never pay retail!"

As the KLC siphons off rich celebrities from L.A.'s Scientology Center, L. Ron Hubbard's army also faces new competition on the East Coast. An attractive female guru named Swami Chidvilasananda (she's obviously doing well enough to buy plenty of vowels) has opened an ashram in Fallsburg, New York, which is described by the *New York Post* as being more like a four-star hotel in St. Tropez than a monastery. And she's attracting the cream of monied New Yorkers, including fashion magazine editors, heirs to family fortunes, and such stars as Sting, Meg Ryan, Phylicia Rashad and Betty Buckley.

Aside from the guru's physical beauty, the celebrity-attracting hooks of her religion include lessons in meditation to "put you in touch with who you really are" (maybe Sting will even remember his last name!), plenty of mumbo-jumbo about reincarnation and karma, and a blessing with a peacock feather which absolves you of hundreds of thousands of years worth of sins (some rock stars manage to pack that many into one weekend). Not surprisingly, the *New Yorker* ran an article accusing Swami Chidvilasananda of too-aggressive fundraising, but her spokesman dismissed it as "anonymous allegations." Besides, you don't think peacocks just go around dropping feathers on the ground so you can pick them up for free, do you?

All these New Age religions offer a combination of factors that are irresistible to errant politicians and wealthy showbiz stars, many of whom harbor inner guilt that they became famous while their equally-talented peers are still waiting tables. They provide an absolving of all guilt, affirmation of the celebrity's self-centered view of the universe, an absence of that annoying and outdated belief in punishment and repentance that mainstream religions are so fond of, and of course, a luxurious place of worship complete with juice bar and fitness center. Imagine how many more Baptists there would be in Hollywood if they'd just drop the concept of sin and convert the Baptism tank into a jacuzzi.

Well, I must sign off now, as I am writing this on Halloween, and I wouldn't want to offend any Wiccans or Druids by working on a religious holiday. In closing, if anything I've said in this column has insulted your favorite singer or politician, if I have in any way offended your religious views, or if I have come across as cynical and mean-spirited, I just want to say this:

"PLEEEEEEEEESE forgive me! Ah have sinned!!!"

There! All better!

Magnets

In some respects we are like *Consumer Reports*; we don't take advertising. However, when offered enough money we are *not exactly* like *Consumer Reports*. Unless you want to see more advertising in The Skeptic you must send \$30 immediately and join the NTS!

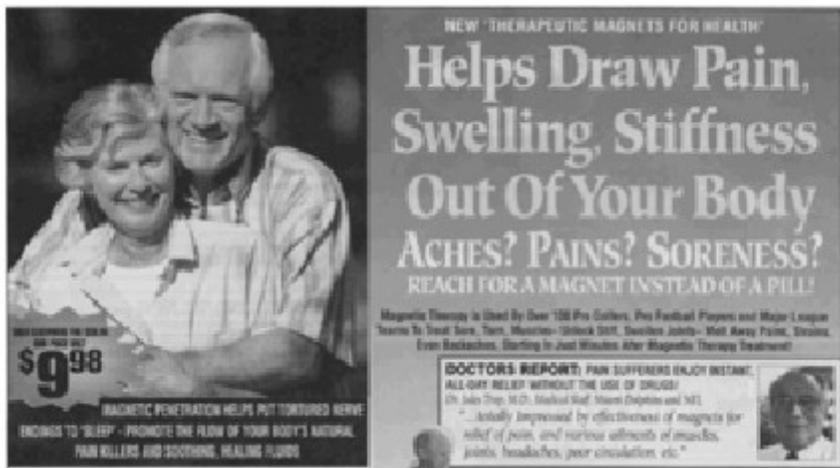


Figure 1. It's a dream come true. Throw away all your pain medication.



Figure 2. Here's where you put the magnets. Nobody in Connecticut has shoulder pains.

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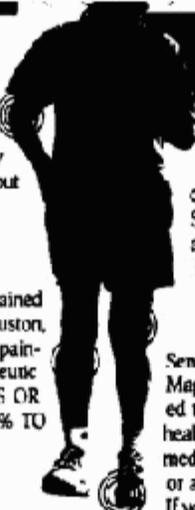
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Figure

3. With testimonials like this, why look further?

WEB NEWS

Skeptical Inquirer Electronic Digest by Matthew Nisbet and Barry Karr

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"Power of belief" delights many skeptics

Tuesday, October 6, ABC News ran their much anticipated John Stossel special on belief in the paranormal. Featuring provocative visuals and snappy soundbites, the hour-long program was a critical review of firewalking, psychic sleuths, therapeutic touch, alternative therapy nostrums, near-death experience, astrology and spiritual mediums.

Unlike the majority of media presentations, which in the name of "balance" present most any claim in the wide realm of the paranormal as unsolved mysteries, John Stossel and his production team at the Stossel Unit of ABC News provided responsible, critical information and commentary for American audiences.

The special featured investigator of unusual claims and CSICOP founding fellow James Randi. One of the most illustrative segments of the program aired clips from Randi's now famous Carlos hoax from the 1980s. With the aid of an Australian news program, Randi trained a young Miami artist to impersonate a medium. In the stage show and multi-city tour, Carlos and his claims were unleashed on the rest of the Australian media. Sure enough, the media bought into Carlos' tale with little or no background investigation or criticism.

Viewers of the ABC News program can post reviews on the Council for Media Integrity Website at:

<http://www.csicop.org/cmi/reviews/submit.html>

You can also send comments to ABC News by going to:

<http://www.abcnews.com/onair/email.html>



Cambridge publishes neo-creationism

Marty Rudin martyrudin@hotmail.com posted the following on the Skeptix list server:

Creationists have finally slipped one past the goalkeeper. Cambridge University Press has just published William A. Dembski's *The Design Inference*. In it Dembski acknowledges such creationists as Phillip Johnson, Michael Behe, and A. E. Wilder-Smith. The creationist David Berlinski wrote the jacket endorsement (see below).

If you really want to see what Dembski is up to, compare this book to his blatantly theological *Mere Creation: Science, Faith & Intelligent Design* (from the evangelical Christian publisher InterVarsity). This book has also just been published. In it Dembski lays out the theological agenda behind the so-called "intelligent design movement."

This neo-creationism is a lot more sophisticated and slickly packaged than the creationism that lost in the courts back in the 80s. Given that 50% of Americans are creationists, this new-style creationism may not only slip past the academic publishers (as it has here), but also past the courts. The threat to science education is real. I urge you to take this threat seriously and meet it head on.

- Marty Rudin

Dembski's *Design Inference* - the inside dustjacket reads (taken from Amazon.com; see also the reviews there):

How can we identify events due to intelligent causes and distinguish them from events due to undirected natural causes? If we lack a causal theory, how can we determine whether an intelligent cause acted? This book presents a reliable method for detecting intelligent causes: the design inference. The design inference uncovers intelligent causes by isolating the key trademark of intelligent causes: specified events of small probability. Just about anything that happens is highly improbable, but when a highly improbable event is also specified (i.e., conforms to an independently given pattern) undirected natural causes lose their explanatory power. Design inferences can be found in a range of scientific pursuits from forensic science to research into the origins of life to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. This challenging and provocative book shows how incomplete undirected causes are for science and breathes new life into classical design arguments.

It will be read with particular interest by philosophers of science and religion, other philosophers concerned with epistemology and logic, probability and complexity theorists, and statisticians.

"As the century and with it the millennium come to an end, questions long buried have disinterred themselves and come clattering back to intellectual life, dragging their winding sheets behind them. Just what, for example, is the origin of biological complexity and how is it to be explained? We have no more idea today than Darwin did in 1859, which is to say no idea whatsoever. William Dembski's book is not apt to be the last word on the inference to design, but it will surely be the first.

It is a fine contribution to analysis, clear, sober, informed, mathematically sophisticated and modest. Those who agree with its point of view will read it with pleasure, and those who do not, will ignore it at their peril."

- David Berlinski,
author of *The Tour of the Calculus*.

[Back to top](#)