



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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## Anatomy of a claimant

By Mike Combs

I recently found myself on a maillist regarding a potential claimant for the James Randi prize (a homeopath this time). As I observed the complex verbal sparring of the would-be claimant, and witnessed his non-stop piling on of issues, concerns, and conditions, it occurred to me that I'd seen this performance before.

There seem to be two kinds of claimants. One is the self-deluded type who honestly believe they have the powers they claim. These can generally be successfully negotiated with to an actual preliminary testing of their abilities. They're genuinely baffled when they fail (although surprisingly their belief system usually survives the experience intact). But the other kind secretly know they can never win Randi's money, and they all seem to use the exact same techniques and methods. While thinking of the latter, I sent the following article in to the maillist:

...

Here's an unsolicited point of view from an uninvolved amateur:

I've been mulling over two different scenarios, and how I would respond in each case.

First, let's say that I was the promoter of a fantastic claim, and I not only believed in this claim very strongly, but had verified that the claim was true. As a scientist, my tool for this would have been the double-blind trial: the only surefire way to eliminate the possibility that I was just kidding myself. How would I react to the Randi Challenge?

First, I would certainly take it. I would follow the letter of the Challenge, and do everything required of me by Randi, because I would want to bend over backwards to avoid any perception that I was trying to be in any way difficult. I would agree to most any condition Randi insisted on, as the truthfulness of my claims would give me such an overwhelming advantage that I could afford to be generous. In return, my list of conditions would be short or nonexistent. After all, it's Randi's Challenge, and Randi's money, not mine. If I'm right and know it, I require nothing but a fair chance to prove my claim. No matter how high my self-confidence, I would keep my comments relatively modest, like "We think we stand a good chance of winning your Challenge." Because who likes a braggart? If Randi happens to respond with rudeness or belittlement, I would take great pains to avoid responding in kind. Because everybody loves a gentleman, and is inclined to think he has something on the ball.

Now let's say that I was the promoter of a fantastic claim, but down in the deepest parts of my psyche (the part that I try to avoid looking at as much as possible), there was at least a strong suspicion that it was all total nonsense. But maybe I've become so emotionally invested in the subject that I can't back out now. Maybe there's money involved. But bottom-line, it's in my best interests for the nonsense to continue. How then do I react to the Randi Challenge?

It would be preferable to ignore it, but to my great annoyance, people keep throwing it in my face when I'm promoting my fantastic claims. In my heart of hearts, I know that I'll never win the Challenge. How do I resolve this frustrating dilemma?

I would have to engineer a situation where I could later make the claim that I applied for the Randi Challenge, but was "turned down." I have to invent an image of Randi "running scared" from the sacred truth I was promoting.

So I would send an e-mail to Randi, and refer to that as my acceptance of the Challenge, pretending not to know that the terms of the Challenge involve sending in a signed, notarized form. I would insist upon condition upon condition, all designed to give the appearance to an observer that Randi could not be trusted with someone's lunch money, much less to administer the tests fairly. At the same time, I would make remarks such that the money was practically mine already, and pretend to a concern about collection.

I would work diligently on affecting an air of exuded confidence. But still, I would discuss lawyers, as though my winning the Challenge and Randi refusing to hand

me my money were something which had already occurred, and not just a personal fantasy.

I would invoke some scientific-sounding principle in support of my claim. It would be best to pull from some scientific oddity sufficiently well-known among laymen to be a subject of cocktail party conversations and sf TV shows, but of course I would put my own spin on it, or maybe turn it on it's head.<sup>1</sup> Whether it had any conceivable connection with my claim is, of course, irrelevant. After all, the goal is merely to make my promotions sound vaguely scientific to anyone largely unacquainted with real science (which is to say, the vast majority of people).

If Randi tosses an insult my way, I'll respond with one well below the belt. If my enemy's not going to be a gentleman, why should I be? I would prefer that Randi come to hate me to the extent that he would view any further dealings with me with extreme distaste.

As my spurious claim on the Challenge progressed, I would need to continue to pile condition upon condition to the Challenge, rewriting it as though it were my own Challenge and my own money, until any potential agreement finally collapses under the ponderous weight of it all. The goal is to provoke Randi until he throws his hands up in the air in disgust and frustration, and walks away.

At last we have achieved what we sought from the outset. From now on, we can regale potential customers or converts with the story of how Randi "refused to allow us to take the Challenge."

Now I ask anyone capable of looking at this objectively: Who is following which scenario?

Regards,

Mike Combs



The homeopath promptly E-mailed me to charge that my essay was primarily directed toward him. Whether he saw himself in the first claimant described, or the second, he did not indicate. I was chided for spending my time making up a scenario about him when instead I could have been inquiring about the new discovery which he was sharing with me. He invoked Galileo (as cranks unvaryingly do), and told me to keep writing my scenarios.

He correctly pointed out that he did indeed send in a signed, notarized application. So I suppose we should call the subject of this article a "composite claimant." James Randi presented me with yet a third scenario: that it was possible for a potential claimant to truly believe their claim because they don't understand science (while still having a working knowledge of the terminology), and that they might simply want to rant and rave from pure orneriness.

Postscript: In the weeks and months to follow, the homeopath did indeed continue to push Randi's buttons (chiefly by spamming Randi's E-mail account) until negotiations were ultimately terminated. Randi had been negotiating via two intermediaries who, while believers in homeopathy, were capable of being reasonable. It got down to an agreement on the test method, and an inquiry from Randi if the month of November was suitable. At that point, the homeopath launched into an "investigation" of Goldman, Sachs & Co., the accounting firm with which the prize money lies. When they were not as responsive to his inquiries as he thought this weighty matter deserved, he declared them in on it with Randi to deny him his money. By this point, earning the prize had somehow gone from passing a test to merely providing Randi with the test method. The homeopath's former allies have given up on the negotiations, and at this point no onlooker holds out any hope that any kind of test will ever be performed. The homeopath continues to post to newsgroups on the subject of Randi's refusal to hand over the million.

## References

1. In this instance, the claim on the Randi Prize concerned homeopathy, which is the belief that medical benefits can be had from solutions which are so diluted that none of the original molecules remain. This effect is attributed to some type of memory which water molecules are said to possess. The operative force of "water memory" offered in this particular case: the white hole, which as we all know is the exact opposite of the black hole, with matter and energy pouring out rather than in.

*That follows... doesn't it?*

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# NTS under new leadership

by **John Blanton**

*Haven't we run this headline before?*

Continuing to insist "I never had sexual relations with that woman," President Danny Barnett declined to run for office of President again. On the other hand, Al Gore and George Bush, who claimed they did, took strong leads in the Iowa caucus. Vice President Curtis Severns moved up to take over the top position in the NTS with a majority vote from the board of directors. Here is a recap of the election results:

## Board of Directors

Laura Ainsworth  
Danny Barnett  
John Blanton  
Keith Blanton  
Elizabeth Hittson  
Curtis Severns  
Virginia Vaughn

## Officers

President: Curtis Severns  
Vice President: Danny Barnett  
Secretary: John Blanton  
Treasurer: Mark Meyer

## Appointments

Editor: Keith Blanton  
Web master: Curtis Severns

Also, at the January meeting the board voted to purchase domain names for the NTS Web site. The following domain names have been purchased:

**ntskeptics.org**  
**ntskeptics.com**  
**northtexaskeptics.org**  
**northtexaskeptics.com**

You can't enter these names into your browser yet, but as soon as Curtis gets it set up we will notify you (by e-mail, of course).

This month The North Texas Skeptics will present a talk by Dr. A. H. Giesecke on "John F. Kennedy and Pepper Jenkins: A Moment that Lasted Thirty Years." Dr. Giesecke is retired Jenkins Professor and former chair, Department of Anesthesiology and Pain Management, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

He will discuss the events that happened when JFK and Texas governor John Connally were brought to Parkland Memorial Hospital after being shot during a visit to Dallas in 1963. As one of the few who saw JFK in the operating room who is willing to talk about it, Dr. Giesecke's observations should be of great interest to skeptics, historians, and anyone else interested in the JFK assassination.

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# INCOMING! The return of Uri Geller

By Daniel Barnett

*Special thanks to Virginia Vaughn of the North Texas Skeptics and Paul Jaffe of the National Capital Area Skeptics.*

I remember seeing Uri Geller on some television program when I was just a kid. Here was this guy with a funny accent who was bending spoons and keys with psychokinetic powers. Eventually, he more or less vanished from the scene — but with the year 2000 now in full swing, it looks like Geller might be staging a comeback.

Geller, 53, was born in Tel Aviv, Israel. He is married and has two children. During the 1970s he gained popularity by demonstrating what he claimed to be psychic powers that he claimed anyone could develop. And when he appeared on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno on January 5, 2000, it looked like he had a pretty receptive audience.

## Fixing watches on national television

One of the first things Geller told Leno on the program was in reference to something his mother recently told him: "My father actually forced her to go through eight abortions; so many a time I feel that I have my brothers and sisters as guardian angels around me." This declaration brought scattered applause from the audience.

Later on, as he discussed his special powers with Leno, he made an interesting remark: "Obviously, there are the skeptics who think it's all trickery, and what I do is all sleight of hand and all that. But they're a minority. I'm over the controversy. Controversy's great." No argument from Leno or from fellow guest Tim Robbins.

I won't cover all of the details of Geller's appearance on The Tonight Show, but Leno provided him with a metal tray filled with watches collected from the audience that had apparently stopped working. Geller grabbed up four or five watches and quickly wrapped his left hand around the faces, letting the straps dangle out of both sides of his fist. I was not able to see the faces, but I suspect he gathered a combination of mechanical and electronic watches. Geller then looked into the camera and encouraged the television audience to grasp their own malfunctioning watches; he then repeatedly said "One, two, three - WORK!" as the studio audience joined him in echoing the command. Afterwards, Geller claimed he was able to get one watch to work and showed it to Leno; he then joked that whomever owned the watch now owed him a dollar.

Here's what I noticed about the performance:

- It appeared that Geller selected those watches out of the serving tray himself, rather than letting Leno or someone else select watches for him.
- As far as I could tell, Geller did not hold up any of the watches to the television camera, nor did he show them to Leno or anyone else before leading the audience in the chant.
- Even after Geller stopped the exercise, it looked like he showed only one watch to Leno, keeping the rest of the watches out of view.

Needless to say, I wasn't exactly convinced by the presentation. The studio audience, on the other hand, appeared to enjoy it greatly. However, Geller's television appearances didn't always go so smoothly.

## Heeeeeeeere's Johnny!

Geller previously appeared on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson back in 1973 to discuss his powers. During that program, Geller was presented with a display

table covered with spoons, sealed metal film cannisters, and other items (including at least one pocketwatch). Geller was scheduled to perform feats such as determining which film cannister was filled with water using only his mental powers and demonstrating his spoon-bending abilities.

Unlike Jay Leno, however, Johnny Carson had some experience working as a magician, and he also had the assistance of James Randi — a veteran magician, escape artist, and skeptic. Before Geller's appearance on The Tonight Show, Randi had assembled the collection of items to be presented to Geller and made sure that neither Geller nor his aides had access to any of the items beforehand.

The film cannister test did not go well. Geller also tried to bend a spoon as fellow guest Ricardo Montalban watched. Although Geller and Montalban both claimed to see the spoon bend slightly, Carson had trouble seeing any change in the spoon. Afterwards, Geller told Carson "I don't feel strong" and stated that he felt "pressed" on the show by Carson, which supposedly interfered with his psychokinetic abilities. As a result of the fiasco, Geller didn't return to The Tonight Show for 27 years.

Geller told Jay Leno that the skeptics were "in the minority." He didn't mention if they were right or wrong; he merely stated that they were not part of the majority. And he certainly didn't mention any skeptics by name.

### **Mind Medicine and Pokémon**

Recently, Geller has also released a new book called Mind Medicine which he co-wrote with Lulu Appleton. I'll confess that I haven't had much time to study the book in detail yet, but it appears to contain sections that deal with relaxation exercises, meditation, and discussions on the effects of environment and stress on a person's overall well-being.

Pages 54 and 55 of Mind Medicine, however, feature something a little different — life-size photographs of Geller's hands. Some of the accompanying text on page 54 reads:

Touch the palms of your hands with mine, then close your eyes and concentrate, looking deep inside your own mind. You already have your own power and my hand could act as a catalyst to help you harness this inner energy. Touch my palm with yours and trigger your own force for healing. I could be wrong, but this sounds a lot like the old "Point of Contact" routine used by faith healers such as Oral Roberts. This would be the first time, however, that I saw a psychic try this approach.

Finally, by now you've probably heard of pokémon, an animated television series created by the Japanese gaming firm Nintendo. pokémon, which is shorthand for "Pocket Monster," is about magical little critters who engage in battle with each other. (The series has also spawned enormously popular card games and computer games.) Some of the most popular pokémon characters include good guys such as Pikachu, Psyduck, and Jigglypuff.



**pokémon character Kadabra, known in Japan as Un-Geller.**

**Image courtesy of Psychic Investigator**

([www.psychicinvestigator.com](http://www.psychicinvestigator.com))

It turns out that Geller is now suing Nintendo over Kadabra, one of the evil pokémon characters, claiming that Kadabra is damaging his reputation. This little guy is a psychic warrior capable of inducing painful headaches in his enemies. Kadabra's trademark happens to be a bent spoon that he carries wherever he goes. Also, Kadabra's name in his native Japan is Un-Geller, which translates into "Evil Geller."

How this will play out in court is still up in the air — but it certainly means more media coverage for Uri Geller. As he told Jay Leno, "Controversy's great."

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## **What's new**

**by Robert Park**

*[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/index.html>. Following are some clippings of interest.]*

**Warning!!! This issue may contain theories.**

**Oklahoma: there is a theory that creationists are book burners.** Last Friday, the state textbook committee discovered that biology textbooks refer to—gasp!—evolution, which we all know is only a theory. The panel voted to have stickers affixed to the textbooks to warn unwary students that they contain dangerous references to evolution, "... a controversial theory some scientists present as a scientific explanation for the origin of living things such as plants, animals and humans." Alabama also requires an "only a theory" disclaimer on its biology textbooks.

**Kansas: who you gonna believe, Genesis or Jurassic Park?** For a lot of Kansans, the answer seems to be "both." According to a Gallup poll, 45% accept a literal interpretation of the bible, which puts the age of the Earth at about 6,000 years. But in a poll released by the Kansas City Star, 81% said they thought

dinosaurs lived millions of years ago. WN, of course, is above saying “we told you so” (WN 20 Aug 99). Overwhelmingly in the Star poll, the people of Kansas affirmed their belief in God, but by a solid 52% they disagreed with the School Board decision to eliminate evolution from the curriculum. Only 32% supported the board, with the remainder undecided. So much for the creationist theory that the decision reflected public opinion.

**Free energy: Good Morning America exposes scam.** Dennis Lee is in Charlotte today, nearing the end of his 45 city tour of the US (WN 29 Oct 99). People who never learned, never understood, or never believed that energy is conserved, flock to his shows. On Tuesday, USA Today, which carried a full page ad announcing Lee’s tour (WN 1 Oct 99), ran a good story about Lee, but buried it in Section D. Janice Lieberman, ABC News consumer reporter, who has been on Lee’s trail from the beginning, flew to Houston on Monday to interview him in person, but he recognized her and refused to talk. She gave her report this morning on Good Morning America.

I was the ABC science consultant for the report, and was able to assure GMA viewers at the end that, “Dennis Lee has broken a lot of laws, but he hasn’t broken the laws of physics.”

**Free electricity: Dennis Lee generates skepticism in Philly.** It was to have been the grand finale of his nationwide tour, but the bad press was catching up (WN 29 Oct 99). Only a couple of hundred showed up, and that included his long-time nemesis, electrical engineer Eric Krieg <http://www.phact.org>. Most free energy scams claim new physics, but Lee resurrects old perpetual motion schemes based on a misunderstanding of classical physics. His discovery is that they still have the power to bamboozle. He appeals to Christian fundamentalists by claiming that God told him how to extract electricity from the air. If this violates some physical principle, well that’s only a theory.

**Science lobby: Newt Gingrich urges scientists to speak out.** “The fate of our country may depend on whether or not scientists recognize that they have real responsibilities as citizens,” the former speaker of the House wrote in the Boston Globe this week. Describing the mind set of most scientists as a conviction that “their work is so obviously important that they should not have to explain it,” Gingrich asks scientists to attend town hall meetings, contact members of Congress, and go on talk radio. “All I’m asking is that every scientist spend an hour or two each month being an active citizen. Do your duty and educate your fellow countrymen about the exciting world that awaits...and we will help you find the resources to achieve these breakthroughs.”

**Secrets: Federal judge denies bail for Wen Ho Lee.** Citing the missing tapes of downloaded secrets, which Lee says he destroyed, the judge refused to allow bail. However, he urged authorities to accept Lee’s standing offer to take a polygraph exam on what happened to the tapes. Well, that should-uh-clear things up. Predictions: WN still refuses to play it safe. The National Examiner this week predicted that a manuscript by Albert Einstein will be discovered in 2000 that contains the secret of time travel. Piffle! WN will take you on a trip into 2000 without a time machine. Look at our record: for the third straight year, WN scored a perfect six out of six in its predictions for 1999 (WN 1 Jan 99). But we don’t plan to sit on our lead—we’re coming out throwing deep. Here is what we see for the coming year:

- Following new School Board elections, Kansas will restore both evolution and the big bang (WN 17 Sep 99).
- There will be serious delays and cost overruns on the ISS, along with new concerns about shuttle reliability, leading to calls for termination of the space station project.
- President Clinton will postpone a decision on deployment of a National Missile Defense pending realistic tests involving countermeasures (WN 26 Nov 99). CTBT will languish.
- BlackLight Power, which has already raised \$25M on the claim that it generates energy by putting hydrogen into a state below the ground state (WN 22 Jan 99), will announce an IPO.
- Our challenge to Jacques Benveniste to prove in a double-blind trial that homeopathic information can be sent over the Internet will continue to go unmet (WN 14 May 99).
- A book coining the term “voodoo science” will be published. It will name names, point fingers and step on toes.

**Snake oil: FDA caves in to the supplement industry—again.** The Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994, passed in response to a massive lobbying campaign by the supplement industry, turned the clock back a hundred years to the days of traveling snake-oil salesmen. It exempted “natural” dietary supplements, such as vitamins, minerals and herbs, from proof of safety, purity or efficacy. The only legal requirement was that dietary supplements not be promoted as preventing or treating disease. So what is “disease”? Compliance turned into a tightrope act. Two years ago FDA proposed a new regulation to cover such natural conditions as morning sickness, menopause and memory loss due to aging, within the definition. The industry launched a new lobbying campaign. Result? The FDA dropped the broader definition from the final rule issued this week [7 January].

**Training psychics: it’s hard to see where this is headed.** According to the New York Times this morning, New York City’s Human Resources Administration has been recruiting and training welfare recipients to work as telephone psychics. The minimum starting salary is \$10 per hour plus bonuses, and you can work at home. Had the HRA looked further ahead, however, it would have seen that there’s not much of a future for telephone psychics. They are suffering rapid technological displacement by Internet psychics. Unfortunately, they never seem to see it coming.

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

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## More skeptical news

By John Blanton

*Pat Reeder has sent me some news items. Here they are condensed.*

Many people consider the Church of Scientology to be a cult rather than a religion, but not Bill Clinton. In a recent press release, the star-studded organization lists Clinton as being “among those sending congratulations” for a “half-century of spiritual leadership,” reports the Washington Post. It was under the Clinton Administration that the IRS reversed 20 years of rulings to recognize Scientology as a tax-exempt church. The President sent a letter thanking the followers of science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard for “all your efforts to promote [religious freedom] and to build communities united in understanding, compassion and mutual respect.”

Although we like to shy away from religious debates in The North Texas Skeptic [creationism does not count], there is a lot to be skeptical about the CoS.

Transforming a science fiction plot into a mainstream religion should stretch a little more credibility than it seems to, even in high circles. Out of earnest consideration for religious liberty, many straight churches in the US are standing up for CoS. Perhaps these groups see their own foundations mirrored in this Church's origins.

From a story by Cadonna M. Peyton distributed by Associated Press, we get some insight into where the psychic craze is heading.

Instructor Joel Higgs runs twice weekly classes into how "to read the thoughts of others and attain a better understanding of their own feelings." The classes are conducted at the Southern California Psychic Institute in Anaheim.

"There is a nationwide surge in facilities known as enlightenment schools and metaphysical institutions that cater to cultivating your aura, mirroring the growth in psychic hot lines and infomercials that began about 10 years ago" the author goes on to say.

New York has the Advanced metaphysical Studies, which gets \$275 per semester from students, and the College of Metaphysics in Clearwater, Florida, has 400 students. The college also has branches in Orlando and in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Joel Higgs previously studied and taught at the Berkeley Psychic Institute for nearly 20 years. "During the past 25 years, more than 100,000 people have taken meditation, healing and intuition classes at the Berkeley school. The Clairvoyant Training Program, one of the most popular, has trained 4,000 graduates in keen insight and perception" according to the AP story.

Higgs' student Kristin claims to now be able to see auras and otherworldly flashing lights. She can hear the thoughts of unborn babies.

*Every so often, perhaps by accident, the American jury system gets something right...Pat Reeder.*

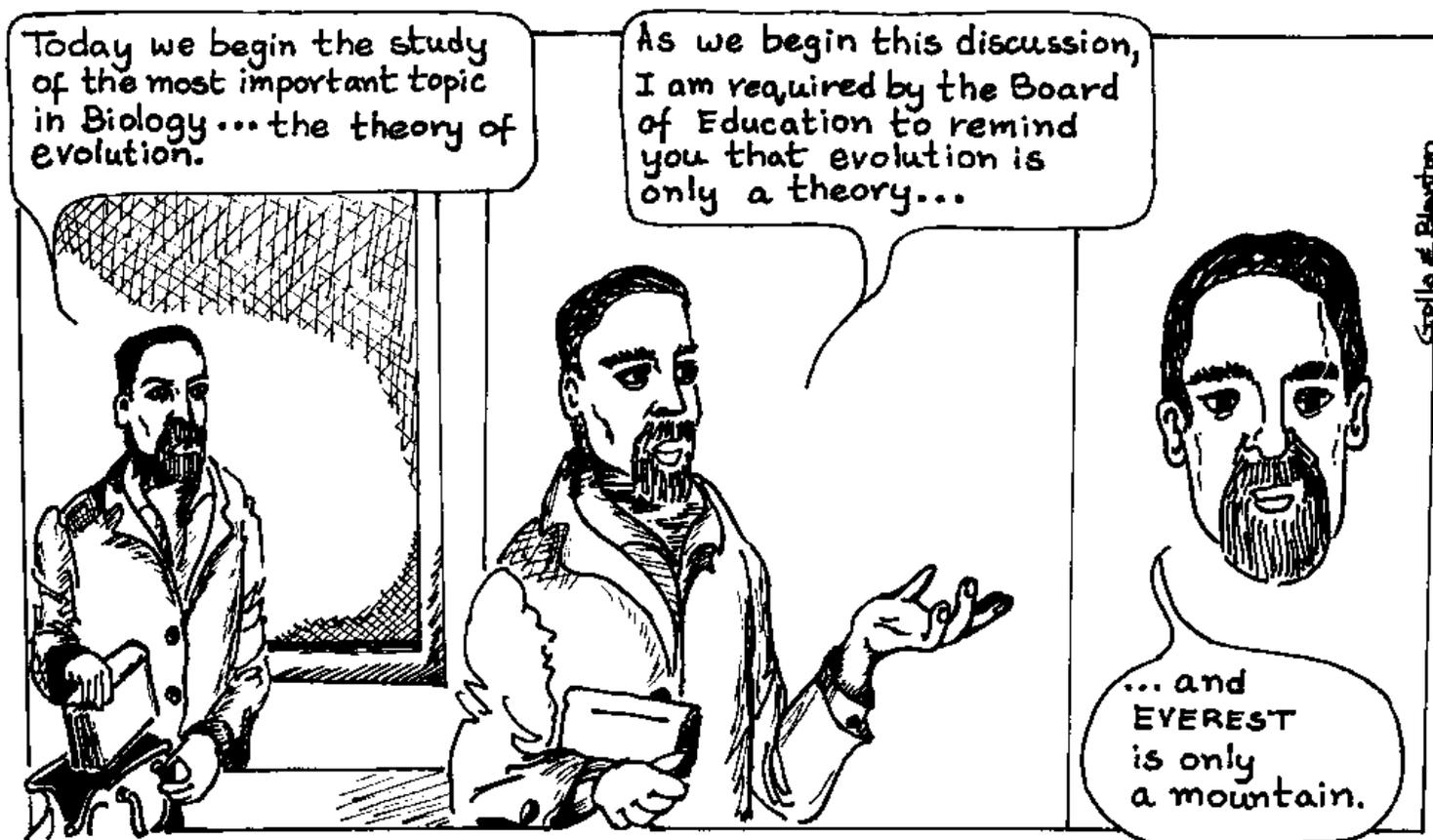
An AP story from San Diego carries the bad news that a jury there has dismissed a lawsuit by Deepak Chopra. He had accused a former employee of blackmail. Chopra had claimed Joyce Weaver was subjecting him to emotional stress as part of a conspiracy.

Supposedly Weaver was going tell people that the psychic guru had sex with a prostitute. How this threatened Chopra's reputation was not made clear.

In the AP story Chopra states "Maybe it is my karma to dismantle the corruption in the San Diego judicial system." Looks like the San Diego system is getting better already.

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## Skeptical Ink.



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