



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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## The madrasa

by John Blanton

In the madrasa, the religious school, I watched and listened as the instructor related his view of the world to the students and the others present. Politics, personal relationships, nations, and the physical world were interpreted in the light of the speaker's religious teachings. Hinduism and Buddhism were lumped together with that quaintly American religion called New Age. Pagan symbols invoke demons to do dirty work for cultists, and evolution is the root of much of this evil, the students were told. The speaker eventually got around to the Muslims. They, too, were worshipping a pagan god. Muslims! What kind of madrasa was this?

Unlike the madrasas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, this madrasa was in a Christian Bible church (figure 1) in Dallas, and the speaker was Richard Stepanek, who had come from the Alpha Omega Institute in Grand Junction, Colorado, to explain the downside of evolution and alternative religions to the congregation.



**Figure 1. The Bible church**  
(photo by John Blanton)

The congregation this Sunday morning consisted largely of students who had come over from the Christian Bible school adjacent to the church. The students, grade school and up, receive their entire formal education from this school and from the likes of Richard, who was here to re-emphasize the church's peculiar perspective on reality.

The woes of modern life were laid at the feet of evolution. Evolution is the foundation of New Age we were told. Richard should know. He once taught New Age at a Coptic church before coming over to Christian fundamentalism. Turned out not to be a long journey.

Demons are bad we now know. Cult symbols tattooed onto the hands and bodies of young people or carried on ornaments are used to summon up demons. You have seen them all. There's 666 for sure plus the pentagram and the "peace sign." The latter is a broken cross Richard told us, a slight against Christianity. Apparently it doesn't stand for the semaphore ND (for nuclear disarmament) as we were led to believe in the '60s. Also there is, shudder, the "hook'em horns" hand sign made famous by University of Texas football fans. I feel compelled to feed my diploma to the shredder.

Worse, yet, these symbols have real power to invoke demons to deal death to others. Richard vouched this had actually happened in Tanzania where he visited and took testimony. They are in the air, demons are. Ghosts are part of the demonic realm, as well, and UFOs are manifestations of spiritual life in outer space.

Before he got down to his discussion of evolution Richard alerted us to a number of other dangers facing modern society:

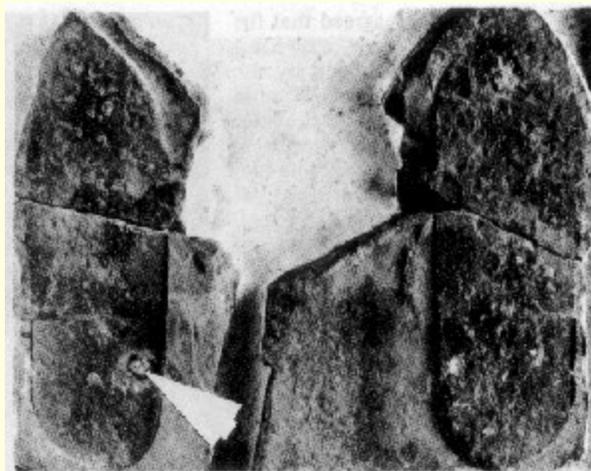
- Alcoholics Anonymous: It has New Age roots.
- Andrew Weil: OK by me.
- Mormons: Not a Christian religion. There are pagan rituals inside the temples.
- Feng shui: Who would have thought it?
- Star Wars (the movie): It was created to teach religion.
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Hint, think of the lotus position.
- Disney's Lion King: Astrology
- Disney's Pocahontas: She gets wisdom from a tree.
- Disney's (again) Aladdin: It has genies killing people.
- Harry Potter: Casts spells and is a religious book (but wait until I tell you what they did in the Christian Bible Church later on that very same morning).
- And finally Pokemon: Check out the lightning tail on that dude.

During the break before he launched into evolution I asked Richard about the demon remarks. Did demons really kill

people in Tanzania? He confirmed this was his true belief, and he wanted the students sitting in the audience to believe it, too.

I'm getting to feel like the fictitious Einstein's chauffeur, who sat through so many of the good doctor's lectures on relativity that soon he was able to give the talk, himself. Watching Richard's anti-evolution spiel was like watching late night reruns. Pardon me while I lip sync the script:

- The Grand Canyon was not formed in 3.5 million years. Steven A. Austin's study of erosion at Mount St. Helens demonstrated that deep gorges can be formed by pent up water in just days. This, of course, disregards the vast history of time in the many events recorded in the canyon formations. <sup>1, 2</sup>
- University experiments in sedimentary layering show that layers don't have to be formed on top of each other, the implication being that multi-layered sediment miles thick did not required millions of years to form. He did not mention the fact that this is a well known geological process that does not account for the vast majority of sedimentary formations. <sup>3</sup>
- The "stacked forests" at Specimen Ridge at Yellowstone Park are really just masses of tree trunks deposited about the same time in a great flood, according to Richard. Never mind that geologists note each layer shows fully rooted trees, demonstrating that successive forests grew on top of the ones buried before. <sup>4</sup>
- Trilobites did not go extinct over 225 million years ago. There's a fossil of a trilobite in a stone with a shoe (sandal) print in it. Never mind that paleontologists know this as the "Meister Print" after its discoverer. Richard's audience were not told the heel line in the "shoe print" is really a crack in the rock. Figure 2 is a photo of the rock in question. <sup>5</sup>
- Worm holes have been found in Precambrian formations, as though that's supposed to be a shocker to mainstream science. <sup>6</sup>
- Rapid burial is required for the formation of fossils. As if paleontologists do not know that.
- There is no geological column anywhere in the earth. Geologists speak of the "geological column," meaning layers of sediment recording geological history for billions of years. Creationists say no place on Earth has the complete geological column. And no place does, except maybe North Dakota. <sup>7</sup>
- Radiometric dating is junk science (my interpretation of what Richard said). When are the creationists going to give up on this one? <sup>8</sup>
- There's a petrified boot (with a foot in it). There is also a petrified miner's hat. Richard, obviously lacking limitless time, did not mention the famous Coso artifact. Nobody has completely explained what all of this is supposed to prove. <sup>9</sup>
- He mentioned the iron pot and other artifacts found in coal seams. This is an issue that continues to hang around well past its shelf life. <sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2. The Meister print**  
(from <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/paluxy/meister.html>)

Richard also presented one of the worst takes on paleomagnetism I have seen in a while. He showed a map of magnetic

stripes in the Atlantic and Caribbean sea floor. If I interpreted the diagram correctly it indicated a varied direction of sea floor spreading, but Richard told us it indicated the magnetic pole was at one time in the Caribbean. In any event, he never took the time to explain it thoroughly, and the audience would not have understood it if he had. It really did not matter to the audience. They just wanted some "scientific" explanation that countered mainstream science in some way. I am sure they felt this reinforced their anti-evolution view.

Richard had been invited to speak by the Bible School's science teacher, who learned about Alpha Omega at a creationists seminar. It was apparent the teacher shared Richard's view of the world. It is certain he shares this view daily with his students at the school.

A number of religious fundamentalists look to home schooling and church schools like this one as a means to insulate their children from the secular world. Within these schools the students see the world through special lenses. It's a view that does not seem to reach much beyond the walls of home and church. Outside these walls science continues to make progress, and the world continues to operate under the rules dictated by nature. It's a world the students of the madrasa are not likely to see.

## References

- 1 Austin's claims are explained here: <http://www.icr.org/research/sa/sa-r04.htm>
- 2 Here is a critique of Austin's Grand Canyon fallacy: <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/icr-science.html>
- 3 Here is what Stepanek was talking about: <http://www.icr.org/pubs/imp/imp-328.htm>
- 4 <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/polystrate/yellowstone.html>
- 5 <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/paluxy/meister.html>
- 6 <http://www.talkorigins.org/origins/postmonth/dec97.html>
- 7 <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/geocolumn/>
- 8 <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/dating.html>
- 9 <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/coso.html>
- 10 <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/how-not-to-argue.html>

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## This month

NTS members and technical advisors will be presenting talks and debating creationists at the Eight Annual Atheist Alliance International Convention.

OK, only *one* creationist.

Technical advisor Tim Gorski will give a talk on the connection between "alternative medicine" and religious superstition and irrationalism. In "Unreason: Hazardous To Our Health," Dr. Gorski will present an information-packed account of how Americans are being systematically deceived, with the help of taxpayer dollars and government officials, concerning aberrant medical claims and practices usually offered as an "alternative" to science and reason.

NTS Vice President Danny Barnett will be presenting a humorous yet informative show and display of medical

quackery and superstition in the past, centering on American medical quackery and "patent medicines."

NTS Secretary John Blanton will debate world-famous creationist Don Patton on whether or not the universe is young and was created in a week, as described in the Bible.

The convention will be at the Harvey Hotel DFW Airport, 4545 John Carpenter Frwy. at Esters Road (just north of D/FW airport). The convention runs 29, 30 and 31 March. Our involvement will be on Saturday, 30 March.

For information about registration and attendance contact the Metroplex Atheists at:

[Director@metroplexatheists.org](mailto:Director@metroplexatheists.org)

Box 48116, Watauga, Texas 76148

(817) 577-0824

A Web site with information about the convention is at:

[Http://www.metroplexatheists.org/convention2002.htm](http://www.metroplexatheists.org/convention2002.htm)

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## What's new

**By Robert Park**

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

### **Bubble fusion: A collective groan can be heard.**

A report out of Oak Ridge of d-d fusion events in collapsing bubbles formed by cavitation in deuterated acetone, is scheduled for publication in the March 8 issue of *Science* magazine. Taleyarkan et al. observe 2.5 MeV neutron peaks, evidence of d-d fusion, correlated with sonoluminescence from collapsing bubbles. Pretty exciting stuff huh? It might be, if the experiment had not been repeated by two experienced nuclear physicists, D. Shapira and M.J. Saltmarsh, using the same apparatus, except for superior neutron detection equipment.

They found no evidence for 2.5 MeV neutron emission correlated with sonoluminescence. Any neutron emission was many orders of magnitude too small to account for the tritium production reported by the first group. Although distinguished physicists, fearing a repeat of the cold fusion fiasco 13 years ago, advised against publication, the editor has apparently chosen not only to publish the work, but to do so with unusual fanfare, involving even the cover of *Science*. Perhaps *Science* magazine covets the vast readership of *Infinite Energy* magazine.

### **EMF: New Italian sportswear shields wearer from EMF.**

Allegrì debuts its carbon fiber jackets as protection from EMF emitted by wireless devices. WN can assure readers that if they use these jackets they will not get cancer from cell phones.

### **Creationism: This rose, by any other name, still smells.**

Having made Kansas an object of ridicule, this sad little comedy, now playing under the title "Intelligent Design," promises to do the same for Ohio and perhaps Washington state. They've dropped the "new Earth" stuff, but insist the "irreducible complexity" of nature must result from an intelligent designer (WN 27 Dec 96); a little slow maybe, but very intelligent. Tracing the roots of the ID movement took WN all the way back to 17th Century England. WN: "I understand you've had a nasty encounter with an apple." Isaac: "True, but it led me to an important discovery, apples are pulled toward the ground by gravity." WN: "Remarkable. What's your next project?" Isaac: "I'm looking into falling oranges." WN: "But wouldn't oranges follow the same law as apples?" Isaac: "Reductionist nonsense. You're mixing apples and oranges. We'll have to find the law for each fruit. This is the irreducible complexity that proves nature has an intelligent designer."

### **Micro-nukes: The explosive power of the soul of a worm.**

I'm indebted to James Randi for calling my attention to an article in the Fall 2001 issue of Frontier Perspectives. When seventy grams of live "California worms" in a sealed test tube were killed by formaldehyde, the weight of the worms decreased 93.6 micrograms. Since matter could not have escaped from the sealed tube, the author says the mass must have been lost in the form of energy.

He identifies this energy as the vital life force (in traditional Chinese medicine it's "Qi," in Ayurvedic medicine it's "Prana.") Randi wondered if a mushroom cloud formed. In fact, the energy equivalent is two giga calories. In nuclear weapons terminology, that would be two tons of TNT. So when a person dies in a crowd, why isn't there a gruesome chain reaction of exploding humans? Can it be that we have far smaller souls than California worms?

### **The great SPAM scam: A "new groundbreaking source of energy."**

You probably got the same SPAM this week, announcing discovery of an "unlimited source of energy," having something to do with "ball lightning." I don't know what the big deal is: new sources of "infinite energy" are announced almost daily, and "ball lightning" is invoked about as often as "zero point energy" or "cold fusion." One thing is new; the most frequent warning sign of voodoo science is that claims are pitched directly to the media (WN 25 Jan 02). Chukanov Quantum Energy, has taken a different road, e-mailing their pitch to thousands of scientists.

### **Airport lie detector: At first blush, it's a dumb idea.**

The system is supposed to scan the faces of passengers at the check-in counter with a high-definition thermal imaging camera while they answer questions. The claim is that blood rushes to the eye area when people lie. That may be, but your face will also flush when you run three miles from Concourse A to Concourse F, only to find the gate has been changed. On the other hand, you may turn pale if you see fuses dangling from another passenger's shoes. In short, it will work as well as a polygraph, which is not at all.

### **Irish voodoo: Reuters bites on the latest free-energy claim.**

I got a call this week from a Reuters correspondent in Dublin who had witnessed a demonstration of the Jasker Power System, a motor that is said to replenish its own energy source. All he could tell me about it was that it's the "size of a dishwasher," and it kept three 100-watt light bulbs lit for two hours without running down the "starting batteries." To prevent the idea from being stolen, everything else was secret. It was developed in Ireland to keep the U.S. government from suppressing it. What did I think? I think he was a damned fool for covering it. The first warning sign of voodoo science is that it's pitched directly to the media. Second, details of how it works are withheld. Third, a powerful establishment is said to be attempting to suppress it.

### **Prayer: Does belief influence what the researcher reports?**

As WN reported last month, Mayo Clinic researchers could find no benefit to coronary patients from prayers if the patients didn't know they were being prayed for. This week, writing in Time.com, Leon Jaroff points out that, by contrast, Elizabeth Targ, who is funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, found a positive distance healing effect on AIDS and cancer patients. Jaroff says such work should be monitored by qualified scientists from outside the paranormal and quack communities. "Past experience," he writes, "suggests that under such safeguards miracles do not occur."

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## **Nine Hallmarks of Highly Incompetent Losers**

**Pat Reeder shares real-world disasters due to a lack of critical thinking**

**By Daniel R. Barnett**

For our February 16 program, author and comedy writer Pat Reeder – who also authored the monthly column *The Third Eye* for our newsletter in the past – introduced the North Texas Skeptics to his research in human failure and summed up his findings with a list he calls "Nine Hallmarks of Highly Incompetent Losers." This designation is also the title of a book on the same subject that Reeder is currently working on in which he details his experiences with incompetence in the workplace and in everyday life.



**Pat Reeder**  
(photo by John Blanton)

"I always believed that mistakes are the best way to learn," Reeder explained to the audience, "but only if you learn from other people's. So I'm not here to tell you how to do things right, I'm here to tell you how to do things wrong, in hopes that I can help you learn to do the opposite."

He also explained that after reading and studying so many cases of failure over the years, regardless of who screwed up or where it happened, he learned that many of the stories had many similarities. Reeder then made a list of those common attributes and boiled it down to nine core principles designed to turn anyone into a loser. The list reads as follows:

- 1. Never plan ahead.**
- 2. Lose sight of your goal.**
- 3. Don't sweat the details.**
- 4. Don't communicate clearly.**
- 5. Work while drunk or high.**
- 6. Call undue attention to yourself.**
- 7. Lose your cool.**
- 8. Claim talents you don't really have.**
- 9. Bend over too far backwards.**

I don't wish to discuss all nine points in this review, but the list serves as an example of how to behave when critical thought goes out the window. As could be expected, Reeder had many humorous examples of what happens when any

one of these principles is adhered to. Take Loser Hallmark #1, for instance: "Never plan ahead." XFL, New Coke, and the Edsel are all examples of what Reeder considers the failure of companies and organizations to stay sharp and plan properly.

Napa Naturals, a popular line of fruit drinks that briefly enjoyed popularity in 1984, also fell victim to Loser Hallmark #1. The idea was terrific: 67% real fruit juice with a great taste and no preservatives. The marketing team that introduced Perrier to the United States came on board to promote Napa Natural beverages, millions in investment capital were raised, and the drinks were an instant success when they hit the market in January of 1984. Within six months, Napa Natural Beverage Company broke Perrier's American sales record – and then summer arrived.

Reeder then asked the audience, "When you combine summer heat, a sealed can, fruit juice and no preservatives, what happens? That's right: a wondrous process known as fermentation. All across America, Napa Naturals began exploding off the shelves...literally." The company went bankrupt soon afterwards because grocers were now afraid to stock Napa Naturals on their shelves.

How could this happen? Why didn't anyone catch such an obvious detail that Reeder claimed any high school chemistry student or hillbilly moonshiner was familiar with? "Because everyone at the company thought that everyone else was such an expert in his field that nobody bothered thinking outside his own specialty," Reeder explained. "Each person concentrated on one area of expertise – sales, marketing, distribution – and never considered the big picture. None of those Harvard MBAs ever planned more than six months ahead and realized that when summer arrives, it gets hot."

Speaking of science, Reeder demonstrated how some of America's most popular science textbooks were examined by North Carolina State University and found to contain many glaring errors, thus demonstrating Loser Hallmark #3: "Don't sweat the details." One textbook showed the Equator passing through Florida, and another textbook somehow identified a photo of musician Linda Ronstadt as a silicon crystal.

And then come the quacks and the miracle workers, who fit neatly into Loser Hallmark #8: "Claim talents you don't really have." For example, Reeder discussed an Ethiopian faith healer who claimed he could cure women of disease by nursing on them. Then there was the Hong Kong woman who tried to patch the hole in the ozone layer by traveling to Chile and staring at the sun seven hours a day for 49 days straight. "All this did," Reeder commented, "was burn a new hole in her retinas."

Loser Hallmark #8 applies not only to people, but also to products and appliances that fail to live up to their hype. "Our little pet name for this is consumer fraud," Reeder told the North Texas Skeptics. Case in point: a New Jersey company that paid a \$300,000 settlement over claims that their "Dermal Retention" hair replacement process was permanent and 98.1% successful. "Which wasn't surprising," said Reeder, "since it involved taking a toupee and gluing it directly to the customer's scalp. Combine that with a nail gun, and it would be 100% permanent."

During the course of his presentation, Reeder also took aim at incompetent burglars, judges and fast food workers who were on the job while stoned, public school bureaucrats who implemented ridiculous "zero tolerance" policies on campus, and others who have forsaken skeptical analysis and inquiry.

After discussing all nine human errors, Reeder delivered a caveat to the audience: "I'm not guaranteeing that if you avoid all these things, that you'll become rich and famous and marry Jennifer Lopez. But I can guarantee you that if you don't avoid them, it will greatly increase your chances of someday hearing yourself being made fun of on the radio."

And since Reeder works with wife and fellow comedy writer Laura Ainsworth on a radio subscription service called The Comedy Wire, there's a good chance that those who find themselves succumbing to one or more of the "Nine Hallmarks of Highly Incompetent Losers" will find themselves ridiculed by morning radio DJs. During the rush hour commute. Where all of the loser's friends and family will hear what he or she did.

Now I'm having trouble waiting for the book to come out. Many thanks to Pat for a very enjoyable presentation!

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# Skeptical Ink

By Prasad Golla and John Blanton

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