

The REALL News

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The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land
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Purpose:

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe- science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

Board of Directors: Chairman, David Bloomberg; Assistant Chairman, Prof. Ron Larkin; Secretary-Treasurer, Wally Hartshorn; Newsletter Editor, Bob Ladendorf; At-Large Members, Prof. Steve Egger, Frank Mazo, and Kevin Brown.

Editorial Board: Bob Ladendorf (Newsletter Editor), David Bloomberg (electronic version editor), (one vacancy).

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From The Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

Unless one had his or her head in the sand, perhaps out of the sand in this case, most Midwesterners talked about or

acted upon the biggest story during July - the Great Flood. What struck me during this past month while watching NBC News, Channel 20 News, and reading a pile of newspapers, and while working on the West Quincy and Sny levees side-by-side with REALL board member and this month's cover story author Steve Egger was how all seemed to be united for a common cause -- fighting the rivers. The humbling effect of trying to hold back this mighty work of nature was moderated by that, trite as it may sound, coming together of farmers, National Guard and Coast Guard troops, and civilians, such as the Philadelphian who hitchhiked to work the levees.

That "coming together" is what REALL is all about, too. Bringing together individuals of all kinds, we are fighting perhaps a greater enemy -- ignorance and superstition. Armed with the best, up-to-date scientific knowledge, we can try to hold back the force of that river.

What also amazed me about the Great Flood was the absence of claims that UFOs or other pseudoscientific phenomena caused the floods. (And, did any self-proclaimed psychics predict the Great Flood?) Sure, there was a poll indicating that a fifth of Americans believe the floods are a sign from God, which is not surprising, but since the satellite photos show how swollen the waters have become, you'd think that any UFOs in the area might just wonder what the hell is going on and check it out.

Of course, the crisis isn't over yet . . .

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

Yes, I've journeyed through the Bermuda Triangle and lived to tell the tale. As a matter of fact, I've lived to tell several tales.

So, sit right back, and you'll hear a tale -- a tale of a fateful trip... Well, ok, so it was more than a three- hour cruise, a three-hour cruise.

Actually, I came into contact with fringe beliefs several times during my cruise. The first came before the cruise itself, when I went to buy Dramamine for my new wife, who had never been on a plane nor a ship before. Sitting on the shelves at Osco, right next to the real anti-motion sickness medications, were Sea Bands (or some such thing). If you've never heard of these, they are elastic wrist bands with a button on them. You are supposed to place the button on a certain point on your wrist, and they allegedly alleviate motion sickness through acupuncture. Have they been proven to work through scientific tests? Nah, but why should that stop anybody from selling them?

And it didn't stop people from buying them, either. When the weather started getting rough, and the tiny ship was tossed, if not for the courage of the fearless crew, the Holiday would've been lost, the Holiday would've been lost... Whoops, sorry. Kind of let that sentence get away from me there. Anyway, as I was saying, when the sea got a bit choppy, one woman at the table next to ours felt sick and used them. Did they work? Well, that's hard for me to say, since she was using them at the same time as taking Dramamine. But she was sure they were working.

When I got seasick (my wife was fine, but Mr. Experienced Traveler got sick), I took Dramamine, but not in time to save myself from what seemed an eternity of having my stomach trying to catch up with the rest of me. That night I went to dinner in this state, my face a nice shade of green. I was given all sorts of suggestions as to what would help me: crackers, apples, soup, etc. I couldn't stomach the soup and crackers, but did eat an apple. When I was about half finished with it, I started feeling better. Now, I have no idea if apples do actually help with seasickness (though I have my doubts), but I do know that on previous days, the Dramamine took about an hour to start catching up with my stomach, and darnit if it wasn't about an hour after I had taken the Dramamine when I started to feel better. Of course, several people at the table attributed my returning natural color to the apple. This is the essence of alternative medicine: coincidence combined with the urge to believe.

Luckily, I didn't get stranded on an uncharted desert isle with a "professor" who can build a radio out of a coconut, but can't build a lousy raft. Or am I the only one who was ever bothered by that? ****ANNOUNCEMENTS**** *McGrath to

Analyze Loch Ness Photos at August REALL Meeting* As mentioned elsewhere in this issue, we have a special guest speaker this month. Robert McGrath will give a presentation on the photoanalysis of pictures from Loch Ness. He has given this presentation several times before, including once at a colloquium for the University of Illinois Geography Department. Robert has also written articles on various topics for Skeptical Inquirer, Skeptic (the British skeptics journal), and, of course, The REALL News. Don't miss what promises to be a great presentation!

Discount Book Sales Also, don't forget to bring your Prometheus Books orders to the August 16th meeting. We only need a few more before we can send in our first group order. Remember, you get 20% off and only pay \$1 shipping per book (assuming you can pick up the books), and you also help REALL! If you need a catalog, we'll have them available. Don't delay, order today!

/s/ David Bloomberg

***** * Traxler to Speak on Creationist Teaching * * *
* Ranse Traxler, Executive Director of the St. Louis * * Association for the Teaching of Evolution (SLATE), * * is tentatively scheduled as the guest speaker at the * * September 20 special meeting of REALL, which will be * * held in Champaign. More information will be avail- * * able on the meeting in the September newsletter. * * * * Traxler will speak on creationism taught in * * Illinois schools. * * *

{EXCLUSIVE}

Psychics and Law Enforcement

-- Steve Egger

A renowned psychic walked up to a police officer on the street and said, "Hello there Officer Frank Smithe." The crowd on the street was amazed when the officer admitted he did not know the psychic and had never seen him before. No one seemed to notice that the officer was wearing a name tag.

And so it goes. Psychics are able to fool almost anyone, including the police. Police officers are known for being a cynical and skeptical breed. Yet there are a number of officers in this country who claim that psychics are ". . . real, and have been a great deal of help to law enforcement in finding missing children and dead bodies as well as assisting in serial murder investigations." (My source will have to remain anonymous so he doesn't embarrass his supervisor or Chief of Police. I should add, this same source, who I believe to be a rather good law enforcement officer, is very concerned about satanic cults taking over our schools in this country.)

Psychics will tell police (in Illinois) looking for a young child missing for more than a week that the child's body will be found under a deciduous tree near a corn field. When the body is found by other means, under a deciduous tree near a corn field, the psychic claims success. And who is to argue? Certainly not the media! It makes for a great story and sells newspapers.

A recent article in the Skeptical Inquirer (Winter 1992) by Jan Ayers Sweat and Mark W. Durm discussed the results of their survey of the use of psychics by large urban police departments in the U.S. Their survey revealed that 65 percent of these agencies did not use psychics. As part of this article, Sweat and Durm discussed the book The Blue Sense by Marcello Truzzi and Arthur Lyons, sociologists at Eastern Michigan University. They were not complimentary of this work, describing it as a ". . . veil of objectivity" by authors who are ". . . subtle proponents of `the blue sense.' "

Prof. Truzzi responded to this criticism of the book in the letters to the editor section of the most recent Skeptical Inquirer (Summer 1993). Among other things, he felt the authors of the article were not sufficiently impressed with the other side of their finding -- that 35 percent of the urban agencies responding acknowledged having tried the services of a psychic. Truzzi claims this is a large and impressive number, because it is "an enormous increase over what most analysts estimated" and that "most *previous evidence* indicates that psychics have been used more often by rural than by urban police and when urban police use them they are most often consulted by individual officers [acting on their own]." (Emphasis added)

As skeptics, we must indeed keep open minds and be tolerant of new ideas. However, that doesn't mean that we have to

accept assertions that appear to be unreliable. The Sweat and Durm research is badly flawed because it lacks reliable results. The authors seem to falsely assume that the responding agencies are telling them the truth. Nothing could be further from reality!

As a former police officer and criminal investigator, and as a criminologist, I strongly suspect that a large number of agencies in that 65 percent category are not telling the truth. Given the fact that the average tenure of police chiefs in this country is about 2.6 years and the fact that sheriffs are elected, what could these various administrators of the responding agencies have to gain by admitting to having consulted a psychic? I think very little. On the other hand, lying about their agency's use of psychics would undoubtedly be the most prudent course of action in order to stay in the good graces of the mayor, city manager, county board, or local voters. Unfortunately, Sweat and Durm fail to acknowledge this very real possibility.

I strongly suspect that Prof. Truzzi is also a purveyor of unreliable data. (I will review *The Blue Sense* in a future newsletter.) He refers to "previous evidence" but fails to cite the source or documentation of this "evidence" documenting police use of psychics. The only plausible explanation for the professor's reticence in disclosing his sources is that these sources are from newspaper reports gathered by diligent advocates from around the country or from the NEXIS online data base, which records newspaper stories from major papers. Here we have another problem of reliability. I hope it won't surprise newsletter readers to learn that newspapers don't report on what is happening in their respective areas, but rather on what happenings will sell newspapers and retain their readership.

My research on a unique and newsworthy crime -- serial murder -- with which police agencies are infrequently confronted shows that there is a strong belief that psychics are found somewhere in almost all serial murder investigations by police. They are either lurking on the periphery of an investigation consulting privately with an individual detective or they are called in with a great deal of fanfare to help a frustrated group of detectives. The latter was the case in which Dorothy Allison descended upon the Atlanta police during the "child murder" serial murder case a few years ago. By the way, Allison's feelings about bodies in water and someone with long hair being involved was "felt" after the arrest of Wayne Williams. It should also be noted that her arrival in downtown Atlanta in a large white limo with a great deal of previous notice of her arrival provided to the press coincided with a new edition of her book hitting the bookstores in Atlanta.

Unfortunately, there are many other examples of police use of psychics. For example, Joseph Kozenszak, retired police chief of Des Plaines, Illinois, and winner of the Parade magazine Police Officer of the Year award, is a strong believer in the use of psychics. During the John Wayne Gacy investigation, which Kozenszak is correctly credited in solving, he used two different psychics. One was used as part of the investigation and the other was consulted regarding the location of Robert Piest, a 15-year-old boy who was missing and later discovered to be Gacy's last of 33 victims. Kozenczak has offered a number of agencies advice in their use of psychics. He always advises discretion when police employ a psychic. I doubt that he would advise an agency to admit in a questionnaire that they had used the services of a psychic in a criminal investigation.

Psychics are frequently referred to as "informants" by police agencies using their services. I wonder why? [Steve Egger is a professor of criminology at Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois, and is an internationally known expert in serial murder. He is the author of *Serial Murder: An Elusive Phenomenon* and is currently writing a new book on serial murder. Egger is also a REALL Board member.]

{Defending science from pseudoscientific attacks}
10 Tips for Successful Letter Writing
-- Mary Lou Mendum

One inexpensive and effective way to educate the public on the nature of science in general is through the editorial pages. Letters to the editor are widely read, and paranormalists have long been using letter campaigns to push their agenda.

A well-written and well-researched rebuttal can stop such a campaign. For example, when the Vacaville Reporter suddenly started printing letters attacking Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, I noticed a suspicious

monotony to the quotes from her writings. I located the quoted book and wrote a letter describing the context of the misquotes. Since the Vacaville library didn't have the book, and I had checked out the only copy in the University of California library system, I accused Vacaville's Sanger critics of dishonestly quoting from a book they probably had never seen, much less read. No further letters on the subject of Margaret Sanger have been published in the Reporter.

Here are 10 guidelines to consider when writing rebuttals to paranormalist letters: 1. Criticize facts, not opinions. Honest statements of

belief in creationism as an article of faith, for

example, are not open to argument, and they serve the

useful purpose of revealing its religious basis.

Instead, concentrate on exposing misquotes and factual

errors. Name calling is not advisable, but accusations

of sloppy scholarship and ignorance, in combination with

suitable documentation, can be devastating. 2. Do your homework. If you are criticizing paranormalists

for poor scholarship, you can't afford to make the same

mistake yourself. On the other hand, if you can back up

your statements with references to the scientific

literature, or document misquotation, you can greatly

increase the impact of your letter. 3. Don't cover more than one or two points in each letter._

Your goal should be to destroy the credibility of the

local paranormalists, not to give an introductory

scientific seminar. A lengthy point by point discussion

of transitional fossils is less effective than a short

letter detailing one misquote and one major scientific

error. If you try to cover too many topics, the editor

is likely to delete half of them. 4. Keep it short and succinct. The more concise your letter

is, the less chance there is that the editor will either

reject it entirely, or edit it beyond recognition. Make

sure that every word is essential to the overall point

of your letter. This is particularly important if you

are writing to conservative papers, for example, as they have a tendency to delete all those annoying little facts that make evolution sound more scientific than creationism. Letters of one page are much more likely to be published than those of two or more pages. If you use a computer, and your letter is still a little too long after editing, try expanding the margins and changing the font. That won't change the word count, but your letter will look shorter, and that might be enough to keep it from being rejected out of hand. 5. Humor is helpful. A funny, entertaining letter is much more memorable to both editor and readers than an angry or sarcastic one. 6. Slant your letter towards the newspaper's style. Don't attack the creationists' right to advocate their beliefs, for example, when you write to a liberal paper--you might even want to include a statement that you support their freedoms of speech and religion, when they are exercised outside of the science classroom. Appeals to scientific authority are very effective in letters to conservative papers, while liberal papers prefer more specific references. 7. If you have credentials, mention them. Few paranormalists writing letters to local newspapers have any scientific training. If you have earned a degree or done research in a relevant scientific field, you are automatically more credible than a person who has not. If you are affiliated with a university, use your departmental address. Most newspapers will print such information under your name, and that is far more

impressive to readers than the usual hometown fluff. 8. Two letter hacks are more effective than one. Letters editors like to keep lively debates going, but they will seldom print two letters from any one person during an exchange, and if two people submit good letters on the same topic at the same time, chances are that only one of them will be published. If you coordinate your efforts with one or more other people, you can be sure that any paranormalist attacks on your letters will be responded to promptly and effectively. 9. Don't limit your writing to one topic, such as creationism. For instance, an effective defense of science requires that the constitutional basis for rejecting the teaching of creationism remains intact. Letters advocating strict church-state separation on issues such as school prayer are just as important as letters which debunk creationist pseudoscience. If you can document scientific inaccuracies in a fundamentalist's letter, he or she will be less likely to use the same tactics to attack evolution. 10. Be persistent. It may take five or six tries before a newspaper publishes one of your letters, especially if it has a large circulation. Don't be discouraged; eventually, the letters editor will tire of printing yet more letters on the latest election scandals, and start looking for a little variety. It is very unlikely that even the best letter-writing campaign will convince hard-core paranormalists to abandon their beliefs. However, by writing in to correct their factual errors and dishonest scholarship, it is

possible to discourage them from using the letters pages

to promote bad science, and you influence the

"undecided" vote. [Mary Lou Mendum is a researcher at the Dept. of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California - Davis. She also is a member of the National Center for Science Education. This article is excerpted and edited with permission for adaptation in The REALL News from the Spring 1993 issue of NCSE Reports. Permission to reprint this article must be obtained from NCSE at P.O. Box 9477, Berkeley, CA 94709-0477.]

"First of all, it typically being difficult to prove a negative, the burden of proof must fall not on the skeptic but on whomever would make a particular claim." -- Joe Nickell with John F. Fischer, *Mysterious Realms: Probing Paranormal, Historical and Forensic Enigmas*, p. 20

REALLity Check by David Bloomberg

Due to my three-week absence, I'm afraid I wasn't able to devote as much time to checking out the wild and the wacky this month. So I'd like to thank Wally Hartshorn, who picked up some of the slack and provided me with much of the information in this REALLity Check.
Underhanded Creationist Tactics

The Peoria Journal Star (June 25) had an article about Kent Hovind, an evangelist who is offering \$10,000 to anybody who can provide empirical evidence of the theory of evolution. But the key is "empirical" or based on experiment. In other words, he wants somebody to prove millions of years of natural selection and evolution in a laboratory, to his satisfaction.

Bradley University religion professor, Robert Fuller, is appalled with Hovind's challenge, saying, "No properly educated, reflective person could possibly dispute the fact of biological evolution. No credible professor of religion in the world has difficulty with the concept of evolution."

But that's not the half of it.

It seems the Hovind is not being exactly straight with everybody. The article states that Hovind is scheduled to debate "paleontologist Steven (sic) Jay Gould, a Harvard University professor." Hovind goes on to state, "I suspect Gould will back out."

Hovind apparently has good reason to expect that Gould won't be there. Dr. Eugenie Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, wrote to Gould and asked about Hovind. In his response, Gould says, "You really shouldn't believe everything you read ... I have never heard of the man and therefore cannot have agreed to anything with him." Gould went on to comment about "the obvious phony tactic of claiming that he challenged me to a debate when he didn't, and then claiming that I backed out when I didn't appear."

If Hovind is so sure of himself and his "theory", why does he need to mislead the public in such a manner?
Quack, Quack

According to the July 30 State Journal-Register, our next-door neighbor, Iowa, has prosecuted and convicted a man, Albert Miller, for practicing medicine without a license. What makes this news REALLity Check worthy is that Albert Miller apparently dealt in (all together now) alternative medicine.

Douglas County State's Attorney Richard Broch said that Miller "diagnosed" patients by placing some of their hair, or even just a photograph of them, into a machine that he claimed could take readings "from every organ in the body." He then "treated" his patients through massage and over-the-counter vitamin and mineral supplements.

Sentencing is scheduled for August 30, and Miller could receive up to three years in prison and \$10,000 in fines.

I hope authorities in other areas have been watching this case and will act similarly against those falsely practicing "medicine" under the guise of an "alternative."

Elvis is Everywhere

Just when you thought there couldn't be a court case sillier than the one about mercury and a baked potato, one comes along. According to the July 30 State Journal- Register, Major Bill Smith, who produced some of Elvis Presley's records and concerts in the mid 1950's, is suing the Presley estate for claiming that Elvis is dead.

Smith claims he and Elvis still talk to each other, he has even written a book about it, and all this silly nonsense being spread by the Presley estate claiming that Elvis is dead is cutting into Smith's profits.

Nothing really paranormal here, but, let's face it, it isn't exactly normal either.

Witch Hunt

PBS's Frontline recently aired a two-part show called "The Loss of Innocence" about the Lil Rascals day care trials. While I did not see the show myself, I've heard about it from several people who did, and I have not liked what I've heard. The show did a fine job of exposing the problems with the trial, and those problems are apparently quite serious.

It seems that the Salem witch hunts and McCarthyism are back, but this time they are hunting supposed child molesters, not witches or communists. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying we shouldn't prosecute child molesters, but we need to be careful of the methods that are used to gather evidence.

According to what I was told, it seems that such evidence-gathering standards might not have been as scientific as they perhaps should have been. Children were apparently questioned for months until they "pointed out" the person who supposedly molested them. When parents started to show doubts, they were ignored.

Several jurors apparently admitted on the show that they had not followed the judge's orders, and others said they voted "guilty" just to get deliberation over with.

And those accused were found guilty. One was sentenced to 12 consecutive life terms, one to life, with eligibility for parole in 20 years.

I think the court system needs to seriously review the methods for evidence gathering in this type of trial. Repeated questioning of children until they agree to something should not be tolerated as a valid method of evidence gathering, or should at least be carefully examined by an uninvolved third party before admitted as evidence to a jury.

In a similar vein, Governor Edgar signed legislation removing the statute of limitations for the filing of civil damages in childhood sexual abuse cases, according to the July 29 State Journal-Register. Supporters of the bill said that some victims block out the memories until many years later.

However, readers of the Skeptical Inquirer know that while there are currently many people out there pushing this "hidden memory" idea, most psychologists are not convinced. In fact, an organization called the False Memory Syndrome (FMS) Foundation has been set up to, in the words of Martin Gardner, "combat a fast-growing epidemic of dubious therapy that is ripping thousands of families apart, scarring patients for life, and breaking the hearts of innocent parents and other relatives."

Once again, we have come back to the witch hunts. Are you depressed, overweight, have headaches, etc.? There are therapists out there who have decided that these are symptoms of childhood sexual abuse. And if you don't remember it now, the therapist will urge you to remember the horrible trauma. After a while, you may begin to believe your therapist. You may even think those memories are coming back. But are they real memories? Or are people unknowingly accusing innocents of committing horrible crimes, when the crimes never even happened?

Some of you may recognize these methods, especially if you have followed the UFO abductee fad. If the symptoms I listed earlier didn't mean you were molested, maybe you were abducted instead. The question is the same, though: Are

the memories real? * For more information on this subject, contact the FMS Foundation at 3401 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Their phone number is (215) 387-1865. * For more information on the Lil Rascals trial, you can write to the Committee for Support of the Edenton Seven, 1851 Carolina Ave., Washington, NC 27889.

Predictions for Future Issues * Current Research Updates on Top Ten Paranormal/Fringe Science Activities * Paranormal Beliefs in Medieval Times * The End of the World! Skeptics Online

If you have a computer and a modem, you owe it to yourself to participate in the skeptic message areas on the computer BBS networks. Here in Springfield, call The Temples of Syrinx at (217) 787-9101. David Bloomberg operates this BBS, which carries the FidoNet SKEPTIC, EVOLUTION and UFO conferences, internationally distributed message areas for discussing topics of interest to skeptics. He is also carrying ParaNet conferences, all dedicated to UFO and paranormal topics. You can also find a wide variety of skeptic text files. The Temples of Syrinx -- (217) 787-9101 Membership Form

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