

## The REALL News

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The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land  
Volume 1, Number 10 November 1993

### Electronic Version

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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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The views expressed in these articles are the views of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of REALL.

From The Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

In this month's issue, we feature articles by Chairman David Bloomberg, including one on the science educators' convention he attended on behalf of REALL. Besides getting the word out on REALL, he was able see how educators attempt to deal with the problems concerning the teaching of creationism in the schools.

For those of you involved, or wanting to get involved, with computer bulletin boards, check out his article on "electronic skepticism." With all the attention given the "information highway" of the future, more and more of us will certainly be using computer bulletin boards to find and discuss information.

As we approach our first year of existence, we wanted to take a break and ask you how you feel about REALL, its activities, and its newsletter. We would appreciate any comments -- positive or negative -- that you have about REALL. Help us to do our job even better by sending in those surveys today!

Please come to our special presentation this month -- an interesting talk by Dr. Richard Walker about the problem with some philosophies. All skeptics should be interested in the flaws of philosophies that he will detail at our Nov. 15 meeting. See you there!

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

Apparently there have been a rash of alien abductions lately. Or maybe there's another reason to explain the rather low attendance at our past two meetings. If there is, please fill out the survey form on page 7 of this issue and send it in to us. We want REALL and The REALL News to reflect what our members want, so we need your feedback. And don't feel you have to limit yourself to the survey. Call, write letters or articles, make use of the computer bulletin board, come to meetings, and make yourself heard!

Right now we're gearing up for some exciting meetings in both the near and further future. This month, we have Dr. Richard Walker, a consultant for the Illinois State Board of Education, presenting "Fools, Fallacies, and Philosophers--17 Flawed Epistemologies from Plato to Quantum Mechanics."

Next month, we expect to be showing CSICOP'S video Beyond Belief. For next year, we plan to have Ranse Traxler, Prof. Steve Egger, a return visit by Det. Bruce Walstad, and a host of other interesting speakers. Remember, if you have any suggestions, you know our address. Let's hear from you!

PROMETHEUS BOOK SALES

The deadline for this book order is the November meeting! If you don't get your order in, you'll have to wait until February. Remember, you get 20% off, and only \$1 for shipping (if you pick it up at a meeting). I know there are people out there who want to order books, so remember to bring your order to the next meeting, or just send it in to us by November 15th.

/s/ David Bloomberg

REALL At the ISTA Convention  
by David Bloomberg

On October 1st and 2nd, REALL, Gateway Skeptics, the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), and the St. Louis Association for Teaching and Education (SLATE) shared a booth at the annual meeting of the Illinois Science Teachers Association (ISTA).

The booth was manned by Gateway Skeptics Chairman Steve Best, SLATE Director Ranse Traxler, and myself. NCSE sent a great deal of literature to hand out or sell. Our hope in getting the booth was to inform science teachers of the problems with creationism and other unscientific beliefs (astrology, ESP, etc.) in schools and to interest them in our groups. Ranse Traxler also gave a presentation on anti- evolution activities in public schools.

We handed out all of the NCSE brochures, and about 100 of the REALL information sheets (we made 400 of them, so we have a few extra). While there were a number of people who seemed interested in the issues and our group, so far we have not received any memberships from them. Even if we receive no memberships, I still think it was money well spent. Informing science teachers is definitely one of the reasons for the creation of REALL.

Happily, most of the people who came by and talked to us agreed that evolution needs to be taught, and that creationism should not. Some were going through controversies in their districts, and one told us she had actually quit her previous job because they required her to teach creationism. Of course, there were several who thought we were all wet.

The most notable opponent was actually a representative from a scientific equipment (microscopes, etc.) company in the booth across from ours. It turns out that he is a Bible- literalist who is a friend of the leader of the Missouri creationists group. When he realized that we were promoting evolution and attacking creationism, he came over and gave us a rather loud piece of his mind. He attacked us for trying to influence science teachers (influencing them by giving them scientific information?), confused the theory of evolution by suggesting it dealt with the rise of life from non-life, and called it "scientific gobbledygook" (this coming from a man who sells scientific equipment for a living), informed Steve Best and I that we are going to Hell, and generally argued loudly with us.

After a little while, he stormed back to his own booth and seethed. A couple hours later, he came over and offered, "No hard feelings." We shook hands, and then he again proceeded to pound me, somewhat more quietly, with religious and philosophical topics which had nothing to do with evolution and science in general ("Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?", "What are you going to do when you face God and he sends you to Hell for promoting evolution?" etc.) Several times, I tried to explain that we are not a religious organization, and that many religious people accept the scientific evidence and evolution. In his opinion, however, these people are hypocrites for not accepting the literal word of the Bible, which says plainly that everything was created in six days. Period. So either you accept creationism and reject science, or you go to Hell.

Needless to say, this was not the most fruitful discussion in which I've ever engaged, but it reminded me that, even at a convention of science teachers, there are people who believe pseudo-science.

There were a few other creationists who struck up conversations, but they were neither as vehement nor as loud as the first one. I think I impressed at least one of them by listening to what she had to say and trying to point her in the proper direction to get information, rather than simply attacking her viewpoint. Apparently, her father is a scientist who despises her creationist outlook, and he merely ignores her whenever she tried to talk to him. She therefore assumed that anybody who was against creationism was against dialogue. As I showed her, that simply isn't true. What is true, however, is that there is no scientific evidence for creationism, but there are mounds of it for evolution. I'm not sure I convinced her to take a better look at the information, but at least she didn't lecture me on going to Hell and I may have given her a better picture of skeptics.

Now, you may be asking yourself, "Does pseudo-science really run that rampant in our science educators?" Well, in some cases, yes. As a matter of fact, only a few years ago, the ISTA allowed creationist teachers to give presentations at their annual meetings! They have since put together a resolution on creationism (they are supposed to send me a copy of it) and do not allow presentations on creationism any longer (they almost did not allow Ranse Traxler's, because it dealt with creationism).

But I think that, while there are some science educators who are rather unscientific, the majority of them are quite good, and many are concerned about the unscientific ones in their profession. Along these lines, Ranse Traxler had a pretty good attendance at his presentation. Most of those there were concerned and upset as he related his information on creationist activities in Illinois public schools (I won't go into details, since he plans to give that presentation to us in the near future). However, remember that creationist who presented a talk at the previous ISTA meeting? Well, he was there, right in the front row, checking to see if Ranse mentioned his name or school district (he said that to me after the talk, but before I knew who he was -- at the time, I thought he was joking). Also attending were an officer of the ISTA and Dr. Richard Walker from the Illinois State Board of Education, who commended Traxler for his work and courage in speaking out against the unscientific behavior of some schools (Dr. Walker is our guest speaker this month).

Overall, I think the conference represented time and money well spent, and I hope REALL can continue to engage in these kinds of activities to encourage critical thinking in the classroom and anywhere else that irrationality rears its head.

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Electronic Skepticism  
by David Bloomberg

You've seen the little box in every issue of The REALL News, right below the Editor's column. If you've come to meetings, you've heard me talk about it. But what is a BBS?

"BBS" is short for computer "bulletin board service." There are literally tens of thousands of them across the country. Many of these are networked together in one form or another. Some of you may have heard of InterNet and UseNet, which link many universities and government sites, along with private companies and BBSes. Privately, there are also hundreds of non-professional networks, ranging from the general to the very specific.

But what does this have to do with skepticism?

For one thing, the exchange of information is always a good thing for scientists and skeptics. Many fringe-science claims have been debunked hundreds of times, but if the information doesn't get out, it doesn't do any good. BBSes allow such exchanges in a relatively short time period.

As an example, I will discuss the BBS you see advertised in this newsletter, The Temples of Syrinx BBS. (Before anybody asks, the name of the BBS is from a song, and has nothing to do with skepticism.) I am the System Operator (Sysop) of this BBS, which will be called "Syrinx" for short for the remainder of this article.

Syrinx is a free system, meaning that users are not required to pay anything to access any part of it. There are some systems that charge for access to all or part of their services, but that does not apply here. The services you can find on Syrinx include access to both discussion and file areas.

Discussion areas are simply places where somebody can write a message, and have others respond to it, thus engaging in a discussion or debate. They are also known as "conferences" or "echos" (because when you enter a message on one system in a network, it "echoes" throughout other systems). There is a wide variety of such areas, ranging from the very general, where any subject is OK, to the very specific, where only a limited number of topics are discussed.

File areas are essentially places where many types of computer files can be disseminated. These files can range from text files, which can contain articles, electronic newsletters, etc. to actual computer programs.

Syrinx offers access to a variety of both message and file areas, some of which are very specialized to skepticism. Syrinx is connected to three computer networks, and gets message areas from all of them. FidoNet is the main network found on Syrinx. It is the largest amateur (hobby) computer network in the world, linking over 25,000 BBSes. From FidoNet, Syrinx gets conferences dealing with skepticism, UFOs, evolution, science and technology, and a number of others, unrelated to skepticism (such as politics and music).

ParaNet is the second network available to Syrinx users. ParaNet is very specialized in the areas of the paranormal and fringe science, especially as it is related to UFOs. Until recently, ParaNet was only available to a relatively few BBSes, but they have since expanded through InterNet, and now reach significantly more people. On Syrinx, ParaNet has a skeptics area (different from the FidoNet one), an area for general UFO discussion, an area for general paranormal discussion, an area where users can talk directly to the editors of UFO magazine, and an area for discussion of alleged UFO abductions, where users can usually find UFOlogist David Jacobs.

TechNet is the most recent addition to Syrinx. This network, operating on a grant from the National Science Foundation, deals with science and technology education and is a place where teachers and students can go to discuss chemistry, astronomy, biology, etc.

The file areas on Syrinx have similar breakdowns. Unlike many other BBSes, the Syrinx files are mostly text files, rather than computer programs. There is an area for general science and skeptical information, an area containing over 50 electronic versions of other local skeptics groups' newsletters, an area specifically dedicated to information on UFOs, and another especially for evolution/creation information.

What does all this mean to skeptics?

As I mentioned earlier, the exchange of information is the most important aspect of BBSes. A member of the Georgia Skeptics might need information on UFO "investigator" Bill Knell, and write a message in the FidoNet skeptics conference to see if anybody has heard of him. I would see this message a day or two after they had written it and can respond by sending over the article written by Bob Ladendorf and myself for the April issue of The REALL News ("Saucers for Sale: An Evening With a UFO Cheerleader"). The skeptic in Georgia can then use this information to help with whatever he needs. I have used the BBS many times in gathering information, including last month's article on Sun Pictures ("Incredible Mysteries of Sun Pictures").

Besides the simple exchange of information, debating is a key feature of BBSes. I have honed my debate and writing skills for over six years on various message conferences (some might say that I've honed my sarcasm as well, but I'll leave that for the reader of "REALLity Check" to decide). In the evolution echo, for example, a user will find several vociferous creationists debating geneticists, biologists, and other knowledgeable scientists. I have learned more about creationist arguments, and the ways to combat them with facts, in just a few months of reading that conference than I had in many years using other means.

The file areas serve as another means of information transfer. They are more permanent than a message area, which is transient and "goes with the flow" of conversation. File areas serve as a repository of information. If a biologist writes about the definition of macroevolution in a message area, it may only be available for a few days. But if I, or somebody else, save that message and place it in a file area, it remains available for as long as we want. This is especially useful for beginners, who may have all sorts of questions that more experienced people have answered hundreds of times. The beginners can be referred to certain files to "catch up". Good examples of this are found in the UFO conference, where newcomers will often try to start conversations about the MJ-12 documents, which they think are just great examples of the government cover-up. Referring them to the several articles I have online, discussing them as hoaxes, saves a great deal of time as well as informing the new users. Some conferences also maintain "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) lists, to aid newcomers and to avoid going over the same conversations time and time again. Syrinx has a number of these FAQs online and ready for download.

While I have used Syrinx as an example throughout this article, there are a large number of BBSes in the Central Illinois area. The Quest (546-7608), operated by REALL's Secre-tary/Treasurer, Wally Hartshorn, carries the Internet skeptics conference (different from the other two skeptics conferences I have already mentioned) along with a number of other non-skeptic conferences. In fact, there are over 15 BBSes just in Springfield which are connected to FidoNet, and probably twice as many in the Champaign-Urbana area. Nationally, I know that at least the Bay Area Skeptics, Tampa Bay Skeptics, and Georgia Skeptics have BBSes partially or fully associated with their groups.

Many of you may still have questions about BBSes. It's difficult to explain everything in a short introductory article. I will be happy to answer those questions sent to us here at The REALL News, either in a later article, letters to the editor, or personally. The other option is, of course, to plug in your computer and modem and call up The Temples of Syrinx at (217) 787-9101.

REALLity Check  
by David Bloomberg  
Abuse Abuse

Recently, there have been a whole bunch of stories particularly dealing with False Memory Syndrome (FMS), which will be specifically discussed in an upcoming article by Wally Hartshorn.

Two of the articles appeared in Science News (Sept. 18, Sept. 25) which gave both sides of the debate (are they false or are they real or can they be both in different situations?). 20/20 (Oct. 23) had a segment on created memories in children, in which an experimenter found that children can and do make up these stories sometimes, as well verifying that repeated questioning of children can make the children change their answers to fit the question.

In addition, there were two separate discussions of facilitated communications in the media within the past month. NBC's Now featured it, as well as PBS's Frontline (Oct. 19). For those unfamiliar with facilitated communication, the Skeptical Inquirer had a feature article on it in the Spring 1993 issue and it appears the general news media is just now catching on that something fishy is going on here. There have been numerous cases of abuse accusation, and people are quite possibly going to jail for crimes that never happened.

Facilitated communication is used for autistic children, to try to get them to communicate with the outside world. A facilitator "helps" the child select letters on a keyboard to spell out words and sentences. This is where the charges of abuse have come in.

\_Frontline reported that several experiments were done in which the facilitator unknowingly saw a different picture than the child, and it always turned out that the word typed in was the picture seen by the facilitator, not the child. Now also showed similar results. Both of these shows were excellent and examined just how false charges can destroy the lives of innocent people. Frontline also showed that, despite the evidence, some people will continue to believe. Amazing!

In the hour before the Frontline discussed above, \_Nova\_ featured James "The Amazing" Randi. Randi took Nova to a freshman college class in which he showed how willing many people are to be fooled, he discussed the career and exposures of Uri Geller and Peter Popoff, and he took a tour of Russia to look into their supposedly promising paranormal research.

It seems that Russian paranormal research is approximately on a par with America's. They didn't use double-blind tests (if they tested at all) and allowed investigator bias to pop up throughout. When Randi showed them the proper way to test certain phenomena, the results were, as expected, rather poor (to put it kindly). And, as is often found in paranormal research, excuses took over when results didn't appear.

Probably the funniest portion of the trip to Russia was Randi's encounter with two women who claimed that they could tell all about a person just by looking at a picture of them. Randi gave them Ted Bundy's picture. The women tossed out all sorts of vague comments and waited for feedback - even asking for it several times. In other words, they seemed to be simply cold reading. Finally, when they were done, Randi told them that they had missed the single most important fact (among others) about Bundy - that he was a serial murderer who had been executed four years earlier (one of the "psychics" had said he had a major event change his life three years earlier, which would have been interesting, considering he'd already been dead a year by then). Both psychics then played the excuse game, trying to claim, "Oh, yes, I pretty much said that" when they had said nothing of the sort.

Another feather in Randi's cap.  
Facing Reality on Mars

The journal Science reported (Sept. 10) on the conspiracy theories being associated with the breakdown of the Mars Observer satellite. Those of us who have been watching the conspiracy theorists cackle with delight in "proving" a huge government cover-up by citing the deafening silence of the satellite already knew about this nonsense, but Science has thoughtfully shared it with others who may not have known there was even a controversy (outside of the dollars that disappeared into a black hole, that is).

Conspiracy theorists were picketing the Jet Propulsion Laboratory two days after contact with the satellite was lost. They claim that NASA knew that the "face" on Mars was evidence for Martian life, and they didn't want to admit it to us. NASA has, of course, explained many times that it isn't really a "face," but simply a rock formation. Psychologists have also explained that the human mind has a tendency to see faces, even when only given minimal detail. But that doesn't stop the determined conspiracy theorists, who want to force the government to end its supposed cover-up on all

matters related to aliens and UFOs. [Graphic of the "face" on Mars included in regular version of newsletter. It was taken from a printout of the gif file, MARSFACE.GIF, available from The Temples of Syrinx BBS, FidoNet node 1:2430/2112, phone (217) 787-9101. To see future graphics, please help support REALL and send in your subscription!]

A special membership survey was included in the regular version of this issue. Since members are the ones being surveyed, and it is highly unlikely that they will be reading this version instead of the paper version, the survey has not been reproduced here.

Predictions for Future Issues \* Top 10 Paranormal/Fringe Science Activities \* Looking into the Sun -- and other tabloids \* Paranormal Beliefs in Medieval Times \* False Memory Syndrome  
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

Regular membership includes The REALL News and all of the benefits of membership. A subscription to The REALL News, without membership, is available. Full-time students can join at the discounted rate. A patron membership includes all of the benefits of a regular membership, plus a listing in The REALL News and our eternal gratitude (where "eternal" is defined as "one year").

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