

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land
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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.

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REALL

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From The Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

When I was little, I had a toy submarine that shot little torpedoes in my bathtub. I enjoyed watching the torpedoes zing through the water at my toy boat and making the sub dive and surface in that small Pacific Ocean. Little did I realize then that the already mythical Loch Ness "monster" was probably a similar type toy submarine_a hoax admitted to by Christian Spurling on his deathbed.

As the REALL chairman points out in his "REALLity Check" this issue, such deathbed confessions do not constitute proof. He is right, of course, and the mystery of the mythical Loch Ness "monster" is not necessarily ended. On the other hand, why would someone about to die be thinking about the Loch Ness "monster" and want to confess that it was a hoax unless he, as a witness to the photographing of the "monster," wanted to set the record straight? Sure, he might be a practical joker.Or maybe he was senile. Or a liar.

Nevertheless, the burden of proof for the claim for Nessie is on the proponents, not the skeptics, as it should be. Such controversial hoax claims also illustrate the problem of anecdotal, oral history. Without corroboration, all oral history is suspect. In the face of all that, we should at least acknowledge that Spurling's claim is possible, particularly in light of recent scientific studies indicating that a "Nessie" could not be supported in Loch Ness by the available food supply. Back to you, David!

Speaking of the necessity of "proof," don't miss Det. Walstad's new survey about the police use of psychics. The results indicate more usage than reflected in Sweat and Durm's study published in the Skeptical Inquirer (Winter 1993). This result may be surprising to some, but not to others. I expect we will continue to hear an ongoing debate about the extent of usage of psychics by police departments in this country.

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

Before I mention anything else, I want to direct your attention to the flyer you got with this newsletter. [Obviously not included in this, the electronic version.] REALL's longtime friend and supporter Ranse Traxler will be speaking on Creationist Activities in Illinois Public Schools on April 18th. This presentation is a review of the great investigative work Ranse has done over the past several years, including specific names and districts, and you really don't want to miss it! This is our first Champaign- Urbana event, so I hope we can get some interest from students and faculty at the University of Illinois. If you're one of our members who live in that area, be sure to tell your friends!

If you're a Springfield-area member and would like to see about carpooling, feel free to call me (my number is on the page opposite this one, just below the Editor's column) and we'll see what we can arrange. But don't wait until the last minute!

It looks like the timing of Ranse's presentation is great for a number of reasons. The Institute for Creation Research (ICR) seems to have targeted Illinois this month. They sent people to a Chicago-area church March 25-26, and are doing so again on April 7-9 (for a "Good Science" Workshop, Student Discovery Days, and a High-School Workshop); they are also sending the heavy hitters of Gish and John Morris to Morton, Illinois on April 8-9 (a "Case for Creation" seminar); and Gish is stopping at SIU- Edwardsville to preach about creationism and "debate" anybody who chooses to come forward on the 7th. I tried to get some people together to go to the Morton "workshop," but I couldn't find anybody with the time or inclination.

This could have something to do with a totally different presentation occurring on the same day. James "The Amazing" Randi will be/was (depending on when you read this) at Meramec Community College outside of St. Louis on the 8th. Since this conflicts with the Morton ICR "workshop," you can probably guess which one most people I talked to would prefer. I have tried to call everybody in REALL for whom I have a phone number, in case you don't get this issue in time.

While this is a big month for presentations, May is a big month for other reasons. It's time for our second annual elections meeting. But, I've learned my lesson from last year. This time, we will be having a video presentation in addition to the elections. I'm not sure just which video we'll be seeing yet, but our choices range from false memories

and/or facilitated communications to James Randi on NOVA to a horrid anti-evolution video. If you have any preferences, let me know! And, more importantly, if you're interested in becoming an officer of REALL, please make sure to let me know and come to the May meeting!

/s/ David Bloomberg

===== {Special Report}

Police Use of Psychics

Results of a 1993 Questionnaire

by Det. Bruce Walstad

In recent years, I have seen a remarkable number of media stories concerning the police use of psychics. Tabloids regularly have articles about psychic crime busters, who are solving crimes and locating missing persons. Television shows such as Unsolved Mysteries, Sightings and other programs have featured segments on psychic detectives and their amazing and fantastic claims of paranormal abilities. The proof offered, if any, is usually vague and/or faulty.

Local and network television news stations often broadcast stories about how the police have called in a psychic to assist with a particular newsworthy investigation. Yet, at a later date, they don't broadcast the psychics' failures.

I suspect that the average person and some police officers who are exposed to these types of stories might get the impression that psychics do regularly assist the police in investigations, with positive results.

Let's assume for the moment, that psychics can really name and locate suspects, find missing persons and predict crimes and accidents before they occur. If this were true, every police department in the country could lay off at least half of their officers, and replace them with a single psychic. I don't know of this happening anywhere.

For more than eight years, I have researched this topic vigorously, actively seeking every bit of information available. I have collected volumes of news clippings, many hours of videotape, books, case histories and research statistics, and I have yet to find any hard evidence that any psychic has ever helped the police solve a crime.

On occasion, I have met with and debated psychics and psychic detectives, listening to the outrageous tales they tell about their psychic crime-busting abilities. When I question them, or show doubt about the tales they tell, they become quite defensive and, at times, angry with me. When I have caught them stretching the truth, I am either ignored, or they say, "That's not my understanding of it."

To further my investigation in this field and to see for myself exactly what police officers, do, think and believe about the police use of psychics, I conducted a survey of police officers throughout 1993.

From Jan. 1, 1993, through December 31, 1993, I questioned 270 police officers by means of a written questionnaire. Of the 270 completed questionnaires, 7 were spoiled or incomplete in such a manner that they were unable to be used, thus leaving 263 completed ones.

The questionnaires were given out at seminars I conducted for law enforcement personnel on fraud. The officers were asked to participate, and to be candid with their responses. Their names or department names were not asked. There were no biased opinions or remarks made before the questionnaire was completed.

Participating were police officers from 14 states: Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio, New York, Iowa, North Dakota, Florida, New Mexico, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri and North Dakota. The majority of the officers were from Illinois and Indiana. Department size ranged from 2 to 12,000 to sworn personal. In many cases, officers from the same police department participated.

Here is a breakdown in the rank of the officers participating:
Chief 3 Assistant Chief 2

Commander 3

Lieutenant 8 Detective Sergeant 5

Sergeant 33

Corporal 21 Detective/Investigator 51 Special Agent 4 Patrol Officer 133
Total 263

The overall responses of the questionnaire were as follows: 1. Your department size. Responses: Ranged from 2 to 12,000 2. Your rank? Responses: (See above.) 3. Would you personally use a psychic in a police investigation? Responses: Yes-94 (35.75%); No-165 (62.75%); Maybe-4 (1.5%~).* 4. Does your department currently use psychics in investigations? Responses: Yes-14 (5.5%); No-183 (69.5%); Unknown-55 (25%). 5. Has your department used psychics in past investigations? Responses: Yes-61 (23%); No-106 (40.5%); Unknown-96 (36.5%). 6. How many times has your department used a psychic? If unsure, please estimate. Responses: One Time-30; Two Times-18; Three Times-8; Four Times-3; Five Times-4. 7. What types of cases were the psychics involved in? Responses:

Homicide 45 (52%) Missing Person 35 (40.5%)

Kidnapping 2 (2.5%)

Other 4 (5%)** 8. How did the psychic get involved in the case? Responses: Called in by officer 31 (41%) Called in by Family 15 (20%) Volunteered self 26 (34%)

Unknown 4 (5%)* 9. Was any of the information given by the psychic useful in solving the investigation? Responses: Yes-9 (13.5%);**** No-33 (50%); Maybe-24 (36.5%). 10. Would the case been solved without the assistance of the psychic? Responses: Yes-33 (51%); No-0 (0%); Unknown-32 (49%). * The choice "Maybe" was not included on the questionnaire, but was written in by four officers. ** Of the four questionnaires marked "Other," two were marked as arson, and the remaining two had no written explanation. *** The choice "Unknown" was not included on the questionnaire, but was written in by four officers. **** Of the nine questionnaires marked "Yes," four did not give any written explanations. The remaining five were explained as follows: + "Location of body". + "Area where crime was committed". + "The Victims social behavior, I believe his girlfriend background". + "Remembering license number and vehicle color". + "Identified area where the patient was located". Results of questionnaire by rank: (Questions 3-4-5-6) Chiefs (3) 3. Yes-0; No-3. 4. Yes-0; No-3; Unknown-0. 5. Yes-0; No-3; Unknown-3. 6. No responses Assistant Chiefs (2) 3. Yes-0; No-2. 4. Yes-0; No-2; Unknown-0. 5. Yes-0; No-2; Unknown-0. 6. No responses Commanders (3) 3. Yes-1; No-1; Maybe-1. 4. Yes-1; No-1; Unknown-1. 5. Yes-2; No-0; Unknown-1. 6. 1 Time-2. Lieutenants (8) 3. Yes-3; No-5. 4. Yes-1; No-4; Unknown-3. 5. Yes-4; No-1; Unknown-3. 6. 1 Time-2; 2 Times-2; 3 Times-2. Detective Sergeant (5) 3. Yes-2; No-3. 4. Yes-1; No-4; Unknown-0. 5. Yes-3 ;No-2; Unknown-0. 6. 1 Time-1. Sergeants (33) 3. Yes-15; No-18. 4. Yes-1; No-27; Unknown-5. 5. Yes-10; No-17; Unknown-6. 6. 1 Time-3; 2 Times-4; 3 Times-1; 4 Times-1; 5 Times-1. Corporals (21) 3. Yes-9; No-12. 4. Yes-0; No-16; Unknown-5. 5. Yes-0; No-4; Unknown-17. 6. No responses. Detective/Investigator (51) 3. Yes-13; No-38. 4. Yes-3; No-39; Unknown-9. 5. Yes-21; No-16; Unknown-14. 6. 1 Time-11; 2 Times-4; 3 Times-1; 4 Times-2; 5 Times-2. Special Agent s(4) 3. Yes-1; No-3. 4. Yes-0; No-3; Unknown-1. 5. Yes-1; No-2; Unknown-1. 6. 1 Time-2. Patrol Officers (133) 3. Yes-50; No-80; Maybe-3. 4. Yes-7; No-84; Unknown-42. 5. Yes-29; No-59; Unknown-54. 6. 1 Time-7; 2 Times-8; 3 Times-4; 4 Times-0; 5 Times-1. Results of questionnaire by department size: (Questions 3-4-5) 2 to 25 Officers (51) 3. Yes-20; No-30; Maybe-1. 4. Yes-2; No-44; Unknown-5. 5. Yes-3; No-36; Unknown-12. 26 to 100 Officers (90) 3. Yes-39; No-50; Maybe-1. 4. Yes-6; No-68; Unknown-16. 5. Yes-23; No-42; Unknown-25. 101 to 500 Officers (108) 3. Yes-34; No-72; Maybe-2. 4. Yes-4; No-62; Unknown-42. 5. Yes-29; No-26; Unknown-53. 501 to 12,000 Officers (14) 3. Yes-1; No-13. 4. Yes-2; No-9; Unknown-3. 5. Yes-6; No-2; Unknown-6. RESULTS

Overall, the results were mixed. I found it a bit surprising that about 35 percent of those officers surveyed responded that they would use a psychic in a police investigation. I had expected (and hoped) the percentage to be lower. It was interesting to see that only about 5.5 percent of the officers knew that their department was currently using psychics.

This percentage is most likely inaccurate as 25 percent of the officers did not know if their department was using psychics or not. This percentage could also be affected by officers from the same department participating in this survey.

The types of investigations where psychics had been used was pretty predictable: homicide and missing person cases added up to about 92 percent. One area I found particularly troubling was the high response (41 percent) of police officers who called in the psychic to assist in the investigation. Prior to this survey, I had felt that the psychics volunteering themselves would be number one, followed by the family calling in the psychic.

The 13.5 percent response that the psychic had given the police useful information was equally troubling. This figure is most likely inaccurate as 36.5 percent responded that they did not know if the information given was useful or not. Of the five written in responses regarding what specific information was given, three of the responses dealt with locations. Without further explanation, these responses are too vague to make any type of accurate conclusion. The two remaining responses were confusing. The one response that said the psychic helped remember a license number and vehicle color does not make sense. I suspect the officer confused a hypnotist with a psychic. The remaining response dealing with the social behavior of the victim and his girlfriend was a mystery.

I am not quite sure what the officer was talking about, or do I understand how that type of information could be useful.

Among command personal (commanders and above), the responses were quite skeptical, with only 1 in 8 responding they would use a psychic. Running second as skeptical were detectives/investigators with about 25 percent responding they would use a psychic.

Department size seemed to show little difference in across the board responses. Past surveys and studies have shown that smaller departments are more apt to use psychics than larger ones.

A few problems do exist regarding the accuracy of this survey. In certain areas, such as rank and department size, I felt there were not enough participants to give an accurate conclusion. The number of patrol officers participating also influenced the results of this survey. As is often the case, patrol officers are not privy to follow-up investigation procedures. One should also consider that many patrol officers surveyed may have only been with the department a short period of time, thus having no idea of their department's history in using psychics.

Lastly, question 10, asked: "Would the case have been solved without the assistance of the psychic?" No one answered, no! [Det. Bruce Walstad is President of Professionals Against Confidence Crime (PACC) and is a frequent REALL News contributor. This article is appearing in a current issue of the PACC Bulletin.]

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REALLity Check
by David Bloomberg

Well, contrary to last month, this month was rather slow. But that's just fine with me--it gave me time to recover!
Nessie the Sub

As I'm sure most of you have heard by now (especially since our Editor scooped me and put it into his column last month--he has a later "due date" than I do), two British Nessie "investigators" are claiming that they were told that the famous 1934 photo of the Loch Ness Monster is a hoax (_Chicago Tribune, 3/14; State Journal-Register_, 3/16). According to a report published in the British weekly newspaper, The Sunday Telegraph, these two were told about the hoax by the last living "conspirator" just before he died back in November. Christian Spurling supposedly told them that he made the "monster" out of a toy submarine and some cement.

I say "supposedly" because I do not want to jump to the conclusion (as our esteemed Editor may have done) that everything we are now hearing is true. For one thing, I am loathe to believe "deathbed confessions" without other substantiating evidence--especially when those reporting them have waited at least four months before mentioning it! There are several other reasons for my, ahem, skepticism, and I have asked REALL's Nessie expert, Robert McGrath, to see what he can find out. Hopefully, we will have a further report on this next month.

There has definitely been a hoax, but the question remains of just which claim is part of it.

Memories and the Law

The State Journal-Register had two articles recently dealing with false memories. The first (3/21) discussed much of the information that readers of this column already know. One thing the article specifically points out is that the American Medical Association and American Psychiatric Association have both cautioned against use of a number of techniques which may cause false memories.

In a direct response to these problems, state lawmakers are now considering the restoration of a "cap" on the length of time a person can wait before filing abuse charges (3/26). They removed this cap only last year but have now seen what can happen in cases like that of Cardinal Bernardin, and they are raising questions about the quality of such evidence. Some supporters of last year's bill are quoted as saying they only heard half of the story then, and must review all of it now. Somewhat predictably, Rep. Virginia Frederick, a co-sponsor of the bill last year, has "angrily blamed" the right wing for the repeal effort, saying that "they know nothing about" these cases. To the contrary, it sounds like they knew nothing about "repressed memories" last year, and are now finding out that they do not stand up to scientific scrutiny in many cases.

What's That Smell?

As usual, the Chicago Tribune printed an article on "alternative medicine" (3/29). This time, it was aromatherapy. The article, which was rather long, skipped around between strange medical claims, the use of scents to improve work production, supposed skepticism by users of the therapy, and finally a little bit of good information.

The supposed skepticism came in when several proponents of aromatherapy were interviewed. Each claimed skepticism about uses for the "therapy" other than those they favored. Funny how that works. One even said that people shouldn't try this at home but should use "trained" aromatherapists only. Well, the first part is right, anyway.

The final three paragraphs finally get to the heart of the matter, though. One of the researchers studying the mood-altering effects of smells was quoted as saying, "We don't have any proof of medical gains from aromatherapy." He adds that, "in general, using fragrance to treat an illness can't do harm, but if the hope that aromatherapy will cure them prevents them from getting medical treatment that we know works, then it is harmful."

This is exactly what skeptics have been saying for years about any number of "alternative" treatments.

Book Capsules Flim-Flam, James "The Amazing" Randi, Prometheus Books, New York, 1982, 342 pages. Randi investigates many facets of paranormal beliefs, from dowzers to the Bermuda triangle. In each example, he details either how simple research can provide facts that contradict alleged paranormal activity, or how he and others designed and executed tests for those who claimed such power. Randi pulls no punches in his discussions, and simply tells it like it is. A good book for those just getting interested in skepticism. -- David Bloomberg
The Hundredth Monkey and Other Paradigms of the Paranormal, Kendrick Frazier, Ed., Prometheus Books, New York, 1991, 400 pages. The latest of the collections of some of the best Skeptical Inquirer articles, this volume contains discussions on various aspects of the paranormal. Astrology, crashed-saucer claims, medical controversies, fringe science, critical thinking, and other areas are all covered, often by several different articles. As this volume covers so many different areas, I have found it a useful resource in varied discussions about the paranormal. -- David Bloomberg

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