

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

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In This Issue

From the Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

A Matter of Life and Near-Death -- Robert E. McGrath

Probe D'roid -- Martin Kottmeyer

REALLity Check -- David Bloomberg

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, Kevin Brown; Newsletter Editor, Bob Ladendorf; At-Large Members, Prof. Steve Egger, Wally Hartshorn, and Frank Mazo.

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

REALL

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From the Editor

-- Bob Ladendorf

Having recently returned from a study vacation in England and Wales concerning British crime in fact and fiction, I had to immediately plunge into editing this newsletter. In reviewing the articles, including the criticism of John Mack's new

book on alien abductions in Martin Kottmeyer's "Probe D'roid" and Chairman David Bloomberg's "REALLity Check" column, I was reminded of a funny sight in England. I was starting my climb up the Glastonbury Tor (large hill) near the castle destroyed by King Henry VIII when I started to walk past a VW bus with a large "Tarot Readings" sign propped up against it. (The tor is a supposed magical place.) As I walked past, I saw two guys intensely playing chess in the van. Could tarot readers be closet skeptics or critical thinkers?

On a more serious note, the line between real sexual abuse and hoaxes gets harder to draw. On the one hand, there was a court victory clearly demonstrating that false memories could be instilled in alleged victims. (See David's "REALLity Check", and don't miss his discussion of the subject at this month's REALL meeting.) On the other hand, books like Mack's Abduction allege that alien abductions (and repressed memories of them) are real.

And don't miss the lead article by Robert McGrath, who, like Kottmeyer, is a frequent contributor to this newsletter. McGrath provides an extended review of Susan Blackmore's book on near-death experiences. You might remember McGrath's profile of the senior lecturer in the October 1993 issue of the newsletter.

Hope you can take some time out from this long hot summer for some REALL news.

From the Chairman
-- David Bloomberg

There wasn't quite the turnout I'd hoped for at last month's meeting, but elections took place anyway. The Board stayed exactly the same, but Wally Hartshorn and Kevin Brown traded positions so that Kevin is now the Secretary/Treasurer and Wally is an at-large member.

I'm hoping to see a much bigger turnout at our next meeting on June 27th. I will be giving a presentation on "repressed memories" and their relation to the claims we've seen of childhood sexual abuse, satanic ritual abuse, and, of course, alien abductions. It will be at 7 p.m. at the Lincoln Library in Springfield. Please notice, for those of you not familiar with Springfield, Lincoln Library is not the library at Sangamon State University, but rather is Springfield's public library. We have plans to meet there for at least the next three months. Remember that we always welcome topic/speaker suggestions for future meetings!

On a completely different topic: As the Chairman of REALL, I often get interesting documents, both solicited and unsolicited, in the mail. Many of these, I must say, are crackpots seeking attention. They claim to be "skeptics" who are "skeptical" of science today. For example, I recently received a hardcover book which claims to hold the grand unification theory. Sounds very scientific, until you read it and realize that it's actually a religious book which is pretending to be science.

Some of these might or might not be crackpots, though. In particular, a Canadian UFO investigator who I know through the computer networks asked me to look at a document he had received, purporting to be a "unified theory of UFO technology, behaviors, close encounter effects, physical traces, and origins based on a speculative interpretation of weak nuclear force violation of parity conservation." Whew! He asked me to read it and see if I could figure out 1) what the guy was talking about, and 2) if it made sense. I tried, but I never was very good at quantum mechanics and particle physics. To figure out if the guy actually may have a good point or is a total loon, I have to first be able to figure out what he is saying!

So, I'd like to put out a call to any readers who think they might be able to figure this out. If you'd like to take a shot at it, please give me a call or drop me a note, and I'll send you a copy of the package.

Also, remember folks that we still have the 20% discount available on Prometheus Books! We only need a few more books to send it in, so hurry up and get your order to us ASAP!

/s/ David Bloomberg

A Matter of Life and Near-Death

by Robert E. McGrath

Susan Blackmore, Dying to Live: Near-Death Experiences. Prometheus Books, 291 pp, hbk, 1993, \$23.95.

In the last 20 years there has been an explosion of interest in Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). Books and articles have reported dozens of cases of people who, while apparently unconscious and near death, had amazing, life-transforming experiences before returning to life. They recall leaving their body, flying through a tunnel toward a bright light, meeting luminous beings, and then returning to life in their body. After a NDE, the person's life is changed forever, and they strive to live each day to the fullest.

Similar experiences are reported around the world and throughout history. It is widely believed that these experiences are evidence of a spirit or soul which exists in a higher or alternate reality. In this view, the NDE occurs when this spirit leaves the dying body and shows that the soul continues to exist after death. These contentions appear to fly in the face of materialistic science, and NDEs seem to offer objective proof of a major paranormal phenomenon. Can science take up the challenge, and provide an alternative account of NDEs?

Susan Blackmore, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of West England, takes on this difficult task, requiring a careful examination of the NDE, setting forth a theory to explain the facts, and evaluating the competing explanations. Blackmore does all three, and in doing so provides a dandy example of how to ask good questions, what sorts of answers are useful, and how to think critically—even about life, death, and self-awareness.

What, if anything, is a NDE? Blackmore reviews the evidence and finds that there is a recognizable phenomenon, as described in the NDE literature. The NDE is a complex set of experiences, although not every NDE includes all the elements. The features include:

- a feeling of sublime bliss and peace
- a feeling that time stops
- a feeling of leaving the body, that is, an out-of-body experience (OBE)
- flying through a "tunnel" toward a bright light
- meeting departed loved-ones or other spirit beings
- reliving episodes from life.

These, then, are what needs to be explained.

Blackmore shows that most of the elements of the experience are not unique to the NDE but are known to happen in other conditions, such as drug-induced hallucinations, epilepsy, and mystic trances. This suggests that there are common mechanisms responsible for the experiences. For example, the classic "tunnel" experience is reported from OBEs when the person is not near death, and from drug trips. In fact, Professor Blackmore herself has had such an experience.

Many people who have had a NDE give accurate reports of events during the time they were unconscious. These reports are difficult to confirm because the people involved were usually in a life and death struggle at the time and not carefully recording all the details. It does seem true, though, that people can sometimes perceive events around them, even while apparently unconscious. These perceptions, Blackmore says, appear to be limited to what one would expect if the normal senses were still partly working. Blackmore could find no solid evidence of paranormal perception during a NDE. This is consistent with her findings about OBEs in her earlier book, *Beyond the Body* [1].

As an alternative to the popular "afterlife" explanation, Blackmore constructs a theory of the NDE based upon brain physiology, cognitive psychology and her own previous work on OBEs [2]. The NDE is, she says, the experience that happens as the brain slowly dies. She explains what is understood of how the healthy brain works, and what happens as, suffocating and cut off from normal sensory input, the brain struggles to survive and maintain a coherent model of the world. This death struggle, she argues, produces the abnormal experiences of the NDE.

Blackmore hypothesizes that the "tunnel" experience is due to abnormal activity in the visual cortex caused by slow anoxia, or oxygen starvation. The feelings of peace and bliss are probably due to a flood of endorphins released in response to the trauma of dying. Endorphins may also cause seizures which trigger the vivid memories of life events. Thus, some of the elements of the NDE are probably due to the physiology of the dying brain. What about the more complicated experiences, such as the OBE and the psychological transformation so frequently reported?

The OBE is, according to Blackmore's theory, a malfunction of the way that the brain normally maintains a model of "me in the world". This model is responsible for the everyday experience of being "in the body" and perceiving the "real world out there". As the dying brain is cut off from sensory input and starts malfunctioning, the model of "me" and "the world" disintegrates. The brain fights to live, though, and builds replacement models using the best data available: fragments of perceptions, memories, and imaginative reconstruction. These elements play a role in everyday perception of the world, but in the absence of external data, the model produced may depart quite a bit from actual events. Blackmore theorizes that the best model available is experienced as "reality", no matter how weird by normal standards.

Blackmore's theory explains the relationship between the NDE and other related phenomena, such as OBEs, drug hallucinations, and mystic experiences. It also explains the everyday "in-the-body-experience", and offers deep insight into just who the "I" is that inhabits "my" body. There is no "me" inside, Blackmore concludes. The experience of "me in the world" is what the brain feels as it models reality. Blackmore suggests that in some NDEs and in certain mystic states there is a time when this model is broken down. This is the feeling of "timelessness", she says, and this experience is what transforms the life of the person. It is a glimpse past the everyday illusion of "me in the world", and normal life can never be "real" in quite the same way after this experience.

Blackmore's first book, *Beyond the Body*, was the definitive examination of OBEs, and this new book is the definitive examination of NDEs. Professor Blackmore shows that science can not only address the issues raised by OBEs and NDEs, but that by doing so, we are led to important scientific understandings. Further, these understandings have deep implications for what it means to be human, and how to live and die well.

References

Beyond the Body. Heinemann, London, 1982. American paperback edition, Academy Chicago Publications, Chicago, 1992.

"A Psychological Theory of the Out-Of-Body Experience", *Journal of Parapsychology*, Volume 48, 1984, pp. 201-218.

Probe D'roid
by Martin Kottmeyer

I was flipping through John Mack's new book, *Abduction*, while in the bookstore yesterday, looking at the pictures, and one of the first things I stopped on was a pair of drawings on p. 264 which showed a probing instrument grabbing the familiar round bee-bee implant commonly reported in abduction experiences. The drawings, Mack observes, "were made independently," and we are implicitly meant to be impressed by their similarity. They both possess four wire-like grabbers that are all bent at mid-length and emerge from a thicker cable or tube. What puzzled me was not their similarity, but the fact that they were different from earlier drawings of nasal implant probes connected to the cases of Betty Andreasson (*The Andreasson Affair*, 1979, p. 58) and Virginia Horton (*Missing Time*, 1981, pp. 162-3), neither of which had those grabber tines.

Mack notes that the instruments used in alien medical procedures "do not resemble those with which we are familiar." (p. 393) However, I had not even gotten home from the bookstore when I remembered where I had seen this probe before. I popped a copy of the video *Total Recall* into the VCR, did a little fast-forwarding, and, sure enough, there it was. The Arnold Schwarzenegger character, Quaid, picks up a device which he is being told he must use to remove an electronic bug that had been planted in his head by Mars Intelligence so they could keep track of him. He activates it to test how it works and out come four wire tines just like those in the drawings by Mack's abductees, Dave and Julia. Quaid shoves it up his nose as instructed. There is a crunching sound. He twists and pulls with great agony as his nose gives birth to a ping-pong ball-sized "bug." It's painfully funny.

Total Recall pulled in an impressive box office of \$118 million in 1990. It precedes by two years Dave's regression involving the wire-cage probe which Mack dates to August 14, 1992. He describes the probe being used in a Communion-style anal rape rather than for nasal implantation. Julia was present at this regression and supportively mentions after the session that she also recalled such a wire-cage probe from her own alien experiences. We are not told whether or how it was used on her, nor whether she drew or described it in earlier sessions with Mack. Saying the drawings were made independently may be a dicey statement given Julia's presence at Dave's verbal description and the

absence of details about the context of her drawing. Even if they had never met, the significance of the two drawings' similarity is marginal since such a wire-cage implant grabber cannot be considered uniquely alien if it had already been seen by tens of millions of people in the culture at large due to a major motion picture.

I must add that it strikes me as ironic that such a movie as Total Recall, which plays with amnesia, excessive violence, and the uncertain reality of memories, should find itself connected to the ambiguities of alien abduction memories.

[The printed version of this newsletter had a copy of the sketches from Mack's book, and a sketch of the probe used in Total Recall. Obviously, we cannot reproduce those in this, the electronic version. If you don't want to miss future graphics, be sure to send in the membership form at the end of this file!]

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Who's Crying Now?

The St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church in Cicero, Illinois, "officially" houses a miracle. That is the finding of several church officials in this case of a weeping icon of Mary, according to the Chicago Tribune (5/6).

Wow! That's great! We have an official miracle in Illinois!

Maybe we need to slow down a bit. Surely those who have stated this to be a miracle tested it, right? Well, I guess that depends on your definition of a "test." When Bishop Basil, the official assigned to affirm or debunk the "miracle," saw the weeping icon, he wanted to make sure it was a real miracle. So he subjected it to scientific testing, right? Well, not exactly. He gave it only a " cursory physical examination" and performed an exorcism on it, to make sure it wasn't actually Satan creating a false miracle. When it didn't stop, he became convinced that it is an "authentic" miracle. As the Tribune said, "the determination of authenticity is more a matter of faith than science. No laboratory tests were conducted on the painting, and there is no evidence that would meet the standards of scientific inquiry."

I suppose we could hold out hope for such inquiry, but I think it would only be false hope. Again, as stated by the Tribune, "the lack of tests has not stopped thousands from streaming into the Cicero church over the last two weeks to behold the 'miracle' for themselves."

I realize that many are eager to believe in miracles, but wouldn't it seem better for them to at least make sure it's authentic?

FMS Lawsuit

One of the biggest pieces of news to hit this past month was the result of a false memory syndrome-related lawsuit. This suit involved, for the first time, the person accused of sexual abuse (Gary Ramona) suing the therapists of the person making the charges (his daughter, Holly).

Briefly: Holly sought help from a therapist for bulimia. The therapist wrongly told her that 80% of eating disorders are caused by sexual abuse. Thus started a whole series of events leading to the use of sodium amytal (wrongly called a "truth serum") to put Holly into a "hypnotic" state, in which she accused her father of sexual abuse. Her mother believed her and divorced Gary, and, when word got out, he also lost his high-paying job.

So Gary sued the therapists for destroying his life. He won, though he did not get even close to the sum of money he had requested. The jury ruled that the therapists should have been more skeptical and challenged Holly's beliefs rather than simply accepting her "recovered" memories as real. The foreman also said they found it hard to believe that the abuse could happen over 11 years, and have all of it repressed (including one supposed episode involving the family dog).

This case received a great deal of media attention. Dateline NBC featured a segment on it in their May 17 show. Reporters interviewed several of the main players and managed to catch them in a variety of mistakes (the "80%" figure is one of them). The therapists said it was a setback for the profession, but others, including myself, think it is a boon for the profession, which will hopefully make them more careful.

One of those others is the (Springfield, Illinois) State Journal-Register. Its May 19 editorial pointed out that this case should serve as a warning to those therapists using unscientific methods. One paragraph of that editorial, in particular, deserves repeating here: "Ours is a nation prone to pop psychology and pseudoscience. Self-help books aimed at 'survivors' of long-forgotten child sexual abuse abound. And far too many practitioners of memory therapy have no more background in the subject than what they've gleaned at weekend seminars."

On the Other Hand...

Then there's the Illinois Times. On May 12, it featured an article complaining about the Illinois legislature's recent attempt to replace the statute of limitations for charges of childhood sexual abuse (see "REALLity Check," Vol. 2, #4). The author apparently only talked to people on one side of the issue—those who oppose the reimposition.

As we see all too often, some claims are made which are nowhere near the truth. In particular, Polly Poskin, the director of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, claimed that "a number of high-profile incidents [have] fueled a backlash against sensitivity to the seriousness of sexual abuse."

I wrote a letter, published the next week, which pointed out that I know of nobody who doubts the seriousness of sexual abuse, or is insensitive to it. However, I know of many psychologists who doubt the methods used to "recover" these supposed memories. I also reminded the author that there are a number of people he could have talked to about the many sides of this issue, and sent him, specifically, a packet of information (including issues of The REALL News) about FMS. Alas, I haven't heard back from him yet.

Mack Attack

Harvard psychiatrist John Mack has been making the rounds for his new book, *Abduction*. There have been stories about him in many major newspapers, magazines, etc. The vast majority of them have looked critically at his methodologies and his abandonment of the scientific method.

Then there's the Chicago Tribune...

In its Tempo section (5/24), the Trib ran a "he said - she said" story without bothering to actually investigate any of it. In other words, they treated this story much like they treat their stories on alternative medicine. For a paper that is capable of good investigative work when it comes to other subjects, I can't understand why they routinely ignore that kind of journalism when it comes to fringe science.

One of the news organizations that did take a closer look was Dateline NBC (5/24). While I don't think it did as good a job as they have done with alternative medicine stories and the story on the FMS suit mentioned above, the program at least did better than the Tribune.

As usual, Mack stated that he simply can't find any other way to account for the stories, other than that they really happened. Psychologist Robert Baker can, and he explained several possibilities. He also mentioned that Mack only works with patients who are already convinced they've had alien encounters, and Mack never challenges that. Anybody remember, a few paragraphs ago, why the jury ruled against the Ramona therapists? Yup, that's right, because they didn't challenge her supposed memories.

Dateline also showed a hypnosis session with Mack. The patient was concerned about 40 minutes of "missing time" which occurred at 4 in the morning while he was on a couch in a hospital waiting room. Mack never even suggested the possibility that just maybe he fell asleep! In addition, there is some pretty obvious lapse in technique when Mack says things like, "You mean [these experiences] add to ourselves? Is that what you're saying?" If that isn't a leading question, I don't know what is.

As I said, they could have done a better job, for example, by connecting its story of a week earlier, about the FMS lawsuit, with this story. The methods are extremely similar, as skeptics have been pointing out for quite a while. For more information, don't forget to come to the REALL meeting on June 27, where I will go into greater detail on the whole area of false memories.

A Nod to Our Patrons

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Letters to the Editor

We at REALL encourage letters to the editor about any article or topic covered in The REALL News. We want to make this a forum for all our members. (Letters may be edited if too long. Name, address and phone number must be included with the letter.)

Predictions for Future Issues

The Eyes That Spoke

Looking into the Sun -- and other tabloids

Loch Ness Hoax

The Baby Train

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