

The REALL News

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, 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).

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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

One of the great things about skeptics is their willingness to share information with other like-minded individuals and organizations that advances critical thinking in a world full of irrationality. Many of REALL's articles have been reprinted in other newsletters or publications, and we occasionally reprint others.

This month, we feature an article from the North Texas Skeptics newsletter (called The Skeptic) that reminds us what does and does not constitute skepticism. (Thanks also to the NTS for providing us with some skeptical thoughts from scientists and others.)

We also feature Chairman Bloomberg's regular column on media criticism (and occasional praise!) called REALLity Check and a special column on the prospects for the Fall TV season.

As we approach the end of the year, we anticipate making a few changes in the newsletter while retaining its monthly informative articles about rational thinking. If you have any further comments or suggestions, please send them to me at REALL's address listed elsewhere on this page, or send us e-mail at the following addresses:

Bob Ladendorf -- robertcl49@aol.com

David Bloomberg -- david.bloomberg@f2112.n2430.z1.fidonet.org

We always like to hear from you!

/s/ Bob Ladendorf
From the Chairman
-- David Bloomberg

We had a great meeting last month, and I want to thank Robert McGrath. There were a lot of new people there, including one who may come back and speak to us at a later date. We did some pretty good publicity for this meeting, including a short article in the State Journal-Register and an interview on WMAY news. Also, I've been spreading around flyers at the library and Sangamon State University to catch the attention of those who might be interested in REALL but just don't know about us yet. If any of you have other ideas on how to get REALL more exposure, let me know. Also don't forget that you can give three issues of The REALL News to a friend for only \$3! You know your friends better than we do, and we've already gained several new members this way.

Coming up, we have a lunch meeting on Sunday, October 16th, at 1 p.m., at Shakey's Pizza & Buffet. We often seem to go off on tangents (often because so many things seem linked), so there is no set topic. If you'd like to join us for lunch (sorry, separate checks) and some great conversation (no charge!), or even if you just have a question you've been dying to ask, come meet us for pizza!

And when you come to the meeting, don't forget to bring your book orders. We are only 2-3 books away from a full order. Remember that members get 20% off all orders, and pay only a buck for shipping. Order now, because once we get this one out, I have no way of knowing when the next one will go.

/s/ David Bloomberg
Rational Skepticism
by Joe Voelkering of the North Texas Skeptics

Rational skeptics routinely question claims to truth. They demand 1) explicit definitions; 2) consistent logic, and 3) convincing evidence before accepting them as being valid beyond a reasonable doubt. (Those claims are not regarded as valid beyond all possible doubt, however, since future discoveries may dictate a reevaluation.)

The philosophy is an essential part of objective scientific inquiry or any other search for an extremely reliable level of knowledge. (Virtually all progress has been guided by those willing to question, to reevaluate and to continuously seek more valid answers.)

It is not limited to scientific disciplines, per se. It's a methodology for acquiring knowledge. (While it is essentially the

same as the "scientific method" which was derived from rational skepticism, that methodology can be applied to many subjects.)

Rational skepticism tends to produce highly reliable results. It also promotes flexible decisions and value-weighted opinions since freedom from certainty is the element that enables us to make value-type judgments. (Credulity, on the other hand, produces dogmatic-type decisions and opinions, unreliable results and is potentially very dangerous.)

Skepticism cannot endanger real truth. If a contention is valid, even the most demanding questioning should only produce additional confirmation. If it's wrong, we gain an opportunity to discover the correct answer. (Either way, we come out ahead; sincere questions should be welcomed, not avoided.)

What Rational Skeptics Are Not

There are a number of misconceptions about skeptics. The most common ones seem to be that they are:

Indecisive -- Skeptics are simply realistic. They're aware that their decisions and opinions are typically based on the best available information and they proceed accordingly. (In the flying business, that's called "having a strong sense for self-preservation.")

Cynical, hyper-critical or "negative" - Actually, skeptics tend to be very open-minded. No ideas are rejected "out of hand." (Objective questioning is not "criticism" - and criticism should not be confused with critical thinking.)

Atheists -- There is no (known) objective test for a Deity, so rational skeptics concede that there's a finite possibility either way. (They may have opinions as to the probabilities, however, which can, likewise, be either way.)

Advocates of the the paranormal, "fringe" science, etc. Skeptics spend a fair amount of time evaluating such claims, but that's simply because there are so many of them. Uncritical acceptance of them can be hazardous, so a very critical, but fair, evaluation seems to be dictated. Interest in evaluating a subject does not imply [that] one is, in any way, an advocate of it.

[Jan Voelkering is President of the North Texas Skeptics (NTS). This edited article, which appeared in NTS's The Skeptic (July 1994), is reprinted with permission of NTS, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas, 75011-1794.]

"I believe that much 'knowledge' is indeed merely 'memory,' and that this is why so many misconceptions persist for such a long time Because so many people are so thoroughly schooled in the common misconceptions, however, only the most brilliantly skeptical of them will ever discover a mistake. And event then, it will likely be denied for generations to come."

-- Marilyn vos Savant

"A skeptic is one who is willing to question any claim to truth, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic, and adequacy of evidence. The use of skepticism is thus an essential part of objective scientific inquiry and the search for reliable knowledge."

-- Paul Kurtz

"Science . . . looks skeptically at all claims to knowledge, old and new. It teaches not blind obedience to those in authority but to vigorous debate, and in many respects that's the secret of its success."

-- Carl Sagan

"An optimist thinks the glass is half full; a pessimist thinks it is half empty; a rational skeptic wonders if it is simply double the required capacity.

"Evaluate the other possibilities."

-- Jan von Glieker

The New Fall Season
A REALLity Check Extra
by David Bloomberg

This Fall's new TV season has already brought us a large share of items which may be of interest to REALL members. From talk shows to cop shows, paranormal and fringe science issues have hit the small screen.

In July's REALLity Check, I mentioned an article by researchers Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, indicating that talk shows overemphasize the deviant.

Oprah Winfrey decided to take on the researchers in a two-part season opener (9/12 and 9/13). While she did admit that she went too far on occasion, it was apparent that she disagreed with the researchers in general, as did most of the audience. As an example of "going too far," she showed a part of her show on "womb regression." Essentially, people are "hypnotically regressed" back to their birth, and use what supposedly happened there as an excuse for their actions as adults. Some of us just might point to this as yet another example of false memory syndrome, since there is absolutely no scientific evidence of which I am aware indicating that we could have memories from when we were in the womb. But there was this guy, rolling around the floor, supposedly reliving his c-section birth, and complaining that he was ready to be born "normally" when the doctor took him out and accidentally cut his knee. He blames this for his current inability to finish anything he started.

I agree with Oprah on this one: She did go too far. Or, at least, she should have had skeptics on to present the scientific evidence. But then, I'd say that about almost any of the talk shows.

Speaking of talk shows, another piece of bad news for skeptics is that there are two new pro-paranormal shows coming to television with the new Fall season. One, *The Other Side*, is a daytime talk show on NBC, hosted by a therapist/minister/comic (interesting combination). While other talk shows have, of course, hit on these topics, this one will specialize in it. TV Guide describes it as "a New Age talk show with an otherworldly twist."

The other is a late-night syndicated show, *The Extraordinary*, which talks about the paranormal experiences of celebrities and "regular" people. The producers have assured TV Guide that all stories are "legitimate and documented." Forgive me, but considering some of the previous shows which have assured us of similar things, I remain a bit skeptical.

As if these weren't bad enough, the horrible *Sightings* program has been reincarnated as a made-for-syndication program (airing in Springfield on NBC at midnight on Saturdays). The really depressing thing is that I've already heard information leading me to believe that they have not changed their "research" methods any from when they were originally a FOX show a couple years ago. Also, *Encounters* is back as an early replacement show. They've added a subtitle, "The Hidden Truth." Well, with that addition, I'm sure it will be so much more scientific than before.

As far as the shows which acknowledge that they are fiction, two had season premieres dealing with fringe science issues. *Picket Fences*, dealt with the issue of creationism in public schools. While they dealt with the legal issues accurately, the same could not be said for the scientific ones. The judge, generally portrayed as the most intelligent person in town, made a speech at the end which might as well have come from the mouth of a creationist parrot. He said things like "they still haven't found the missing link" and "there are no transitional fossils." I wish they would have taken a little more time to look into this one, or made it clearer that the judge did not know what he was talking about here.

On a brighter note, *Law and Order*, premiered with an episode about a woman selling an "alternative" cure for breast cancer. I thought they handled both sides of the issue quite well, with most of the major points made by both those for and against alternative medicine being made in a respectable manner. I was also quite happy with the outcome, in which that woman was convicted of manslaughter for portraying her concoction as a "cure" and therefore turning a woman away from traditional treatment. Yeah, I know, it's fiction, but it's still nice to see that at least some people are realizing that alternative medicine can, in fact, be downright dangerous.

apparently also gouging out her eyeballs.

All three sisters claim they cannot remember how the one lost her eyes, but she does not think her sisters did it. The court disagreed. The two convicted sisters were sentenced to 10 years of probation.

I guess it could have been worse; they could have doused her with gasoline, and burned the devil out of her.

Causes of FMS

Newsweek (9/26) had a nice article about how the brain forms false memories. It mentioned two new books coming out, and links false memories to the "recovered" memories of childhood sexual abuse, satanism, and UFO abductions.

The article explains that memories are stored in separate parts, and that if the linking gets lost for whatever reason, parts of dreams, actual events, books, movies, etc. can all get pieced together into what seems to be a real past experience. Suggestion and hypnosis are two of the factors which can play a role in causing the mixing of such memories. Such techniques can cause the formation of "memories" rather than recalling them.

Two new books are mentioned in the article, *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria*, by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, and *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, by Elizabeth Loftus (winner of CSICOP's In Praise of Reason Award this year). Ofshe and Watters present information indicating that strong emotions (such as witnessing a parent murdered) create strong memories, rather than creating a wall around it.

One psychiatrist opposed to FMS is quoted in the article as saying "we have no way of judging independently [reports of] childhood experiences." The article points out that while this may be ok to say in a therapy situation, it is certainly not ok when these "memories" are sending people to jail. I would add that the psychiatrist is simply wrong in some cases. Sometimes it is, indeed, possible to judge whether or not the childhood "memories" are true, such as when the memories involve supposed harm, like stab wounds, done to the person making the claims (as are often contained in satanic accusation). We should never simply assume it's impossible to independently judge a claim.

Plants are People Too

Malcolm Wilkins, a British botany professor, claims that plants have feelings and even cry out for help. Well, they make inaudible crackling noises when they want water, anyway, according to a Chicago Tribune editorial (9/20). The editorial asks the important question: "How he knows they make noises that are inaudible is another matter."

They were being funny, but it does pose a good question. Even if he has detected such noises in plants that need water, what makes him think they are motivated by any kind of "feeling"? Dead wood cracks as it dries, too; does that mean even dead wood has feelings? Also, what evolutionary purpose would this serve, if it were motivated by feelings? In the wild, either it rains or it doesn't. Crackling certainly wouldn't help them get water sooner. And even now, he says it's inaudible, so why do they bother?

In space, nobody can hear you scream. I guess the same is true here on Earth, if you're a plant.

Supplemental Battle

In the last days of this Congressional session, it looks like they actually passed a decent law (it was bound to happen sooner or later). This legislation will require manufacturers of vitamins, minerals, herbal products, and amino acids to follow strict rules on health claims for a four-year period.

This bill (President Clinton is expected to sign it but hasn't as of this writing) sets the first safety standard for such dietary supplements. First and foremost, they must not pose a "significant or unreasonable risk" of injury when they are used as directed. Also, they have to show the FDA proof that they are safe 75 days before they go on the market. In addition, the supplements must comply with rules restricting the kinds of health claims they can make. The current FDA standards (which are, surprisingly, not applied to such supplements), require significant scientific agreement on the benefits of a product before it can make a claim. Manufacturers claim those rules are too restrictive.

This bill creates a presidential commission to study the issue and decide how to handle such health claims. I don't really

see what's at issue -- if you want to make a claim, you should have to prove the claim true, otherwise it's fraud at the very least. But then, I'm not an elected representative, so I must be missing something of great importance. Maybe I wasn't lobbied enough. Oh, did I mention the \$2.5 million the industry spent to fight the original version of the bill?
Organizations of Interest to Skeptics

Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)
P.O. Box 703
Buffalo, NY 14226-9973
Ph.: (800) 634-1610

False Memory Syndrome Foundation
3401 Market St., Suite 130
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Ph.: (800) 568-8882

National Center for Science Education (NCSE)
P.O. Box 9477
Berkeley, CA 94709-0744
Ph.: (510) 843-3393

National Council Against Health Fraud
P.O. Box 1276
Loma Linda, CA 92354
Ph.: (909) 824-4690

St. Louis Association for Teaching and Education (SLATE)
P.O. Box 462
O'Fallon, IL 62269-0462

Skeptics Society
2761 N. Marengo Ave.
Altadena, CA 91001
Ph.: (818) 794-3119
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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

Looking into the Sun -- and other tabloids
Cancer Clusters
Bovine Growth Hormone
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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, UFO, and FMS 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, scientific, UFO, FMS, evolution/creation, and urban legend text files.

The Temples of Syrinx -- (217) 787-9101
Membership Form

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Bring to a meeting or mail to: REALL,
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