

ISTA 1995

by David Bloomberg

Longtime REALL members may recall that we had a booth two years ago, along with the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), Gateway Skeptics, and the St. Louis Association for Teaching and Education, at the Illinois Science Teachers Association (ISTA) annual conference in Collinsville. Anybody who has read my Chairman's column in the past few months knows that we were doing it again this year, here in Springfield.

I must say that this year's conference was somewhat less exciting than the last one we attended -- but excitement can be overrated, especially since, in Collinsville, it came in the form of a creationist yelling at us about how we were going to hell. But I digress.

I'd like to thank (in order of appearance) Ron Larkin, Frank Mazo, Bob Smet, Bob Ladendorf, and a special thanks to Romesh Kumbhani, a University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) student who answered an E-mail request for people with strong biological knowledge to attend in case anybody wanted to debate us. Thanks also go out to NCSE, who provided creation/evolution pamphlets, help in designing REALL's flyers (a copy of which you should find enclosed with this newsletter), and contributed to the cost of the booth; the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), who provided issues of the Skeptical Inquirer and Bringing UFOs Down to Earth (a skeptical UFO booklet by Phil Klass aimed at a young audience) to give away; and to the Skeptics Society, who provided copies of their article, 25 Creationist Arguments and 25 Evolutionists' Answers to hand out to the teachers.

Earlier I noted that the conference was a bit less "exciting" than last time. However, it was definitely good to have been there. We made contact with, and gave information to, a number of teachers, coordinators, and others interested in fighting creationism and other forms of non-scientific thinking. Since a main reason for REALL's existence is to disseminate information to the public, talking to science teachers, who can then pass it along to their colleagues and students, is one of the best ways to meet that goal.

Indeed, just letting them know that we exist is a good reason to be at these conferences. One of the first teachers we talked to on Friday said that he has not yet had any problems while teaching evolution (he was a bit surprised, actually), but wants to be prepared in case he ever does. Others told us that they already have encountered problems with parents and/or school board members and need factual information to help counter the pseudo-science presented by the creationists.

Of course, we also had several creationists come up to us, reacting to our presence with varying degrees of politeness -- though, as I indicated earlier, none started yelling at us, as happened last time. One thing that may have led to some confusion on the part of the creationists who approached us was that our booth apparently did not sufficiently demonstrate our views at first glance. It appears that the first words catching the eyes of many passers-by was the title of Ranse Traxler's article, "The Misconceptions of Evolution." The article (appearing in The REALL News Vol. 1, Number 3) was about common misconceptions that are held by creationists and some of the public about evolution. However, some people saw the title and assumed it was an attack on evolution -- exactly the opposite. Next to that article, we had copies of the Skeptics Society article, 25 Creationist Arguments and 25 Evolutionists' Answers, which seems obvious enough in its stance, but apparently that point didn't come through immediately. Next to that were the NCSE pamphlets with titles like Creation/Evolution, which don't make their position immediately clear either. As the day progressed, we added a couple of "examination copies" (we didn't have enough to hand out) of pamphlets with more direct titles, like Facts, Faith, and Fairness: Scientific Creationism Clouds Scientific Literacy in addition to a "Darwin fish" bumper sticker to make our position a bit clearer. Next time, I'd like something even more demonstrative -- anybody have a life-sized cut-out of Darwin we could borrow?

Of those creationists who didn't know our position and approached us, several left without any of the handouts as soon as they realized they had made a mistake. A few took the information anyway, though one specifically told me she wouldn't change her mind. There was only one creationist who is specifically worth mentioning. He is a teacher in Streator, Illinois, who said he is a creationist and teaches "both" in order to let the students "make up their own minds" (I can only imagine how well he teaches evolution, considering he thinks it's "based on faith" and believes it to be untrue). Our conversation started with him telling Frank Mazo and I that "many of the top scientists are creationists." I immediately challenged that claim, and he just as quickly retreated from it, saying that I may be right, but only because creationists weren't promoted because of their views. That still makes no logical sense, since there is no "promotion" to "top scientist"; it is a description of a person based upon their work and standing with their peers. However, logic didn't seem to be this person's strong point.

Next, he told us of his degree in microbiology. He said that he questioned his evolution professors at college, and they eventually "admitted it was based on faith." I told him that if that was true, his professors weren't very good. He replied that they were the top biologists in the world. Where did he go to school? Western Illinois University. Now, I certainly intend no sleight to Western, or any students or staff there, but I haven't talked to anybody (including graduates of that school) who could support this guy's claim that the top biologists in the world were at Western.

As he started getting in specific biological claims, Ron Larkin took over. The two of them talked for almost an hour, during which time Ron pointed out flaws in his logic and questioned him about his claims. This was a bit uncomfortable for the creationist, who is apparently used to questioning others, but not defending his own unscientific beliefs.

While a main reason for our being at the conference was the creation/evolution issue, we emphasized the entire concept of critical thinking and the scientific method, especially applying it to fringe science claims. We encouraged teachers to help students use the scientific method to look at events occurring outside the science classroom. Indeed, several teachers told us that they were interested in doing so -- one had been doing it for years with good success. We gave them some suggestions, and if any of our readers have ideas for incorporating the topics we deal with here into the classroom, please send them in to me so that I may pass them on to interested teachers.

The next ISTA meeting will be held in the Chicago area, so it is less likely that we will attend unless I hear from some volunteers to help staff a booth. If you're interested, please never hesitate to volunteer to help with something. Volunteer early, and volunteer often!

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

Note: In lieu of a column this month, I am squeezing in below Sources -- second in a series of information to help in your study of science and pseudoscience.

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

Sources

Creationism

The National Academy of Sciences has reprinted its excellent 28-page color 8.5 x 11" booklet, *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences*. The original was published in 1984 and has been out of print since then. The National Center for Science Education describes it as a "clear, concise summary of the issues," and says "it will be very useful to school boards or teachers tempted by the siren song of `scientific creationism.'"

You can order the book for \$4 (includes shipping) from NAS Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20418.

UFOs

The 20-page U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report on the supposed UFO crash at Roswell, titled *Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico*, (GAO/NSIAD-95-187) may be ordered

from the U.S. General Accounting Office, P.O. Box 6015, Gaithersburg, MD 20884-6015 or by phone at (301) 512-6000. The first copy is free, with additional copies costing \$2 each.

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

Boo!

Scared ya, didn't I?

Welcome to the time of year when ghost stories are taken more seriously, witchcraft is eyed suspiciously, and kids get massive sugar highs. Of course, by the time you read this, it should all be over until next year (Ok, Ok, so I'm running a little late again).

Surprisingly, there has been relatively little in the way of Halloween-related articles (in past years, I remember stories about witches who could make copy machines work better, for example), although WICS Channel 20 has a series of mini-pieces on "Central Illinois' Most Haunted" during their news for a few days. That doesn't mean there have been less articles of interest to REALL. Quite the contrary -- REALLity Check is overflowing this month but not with the standard ghouls and goblins fare.

Indeed, I find the item I picked on the most this month, the views professed by a school board candidate, to be scarier than any monster from our imaginations. Vampires may scare us, but people with anti-scientific and anti-critical thinking views who are put in positions to force those views onto others are the real terror.

Speaking of such powerful terrors, our next meeting (Tuesday, Nov. 7 at 7 p.m. in the Lincoln Library) features the recent Frontline show examining claims of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). Please note that this is not the four-hour-long show which looked into recovered memory claims a few months back, but a new show done by the same person. I haven't seen it yet, but I've heard it is extremely well-done (let's put it this way, I saw a message on the nets from a person who believes they've "recovered" memories of such abuse -- after watching this show, he's begun to question whether or not his "memories" are real).

Incidentally, for those of you who are receiving this issue of the newsletter because you attended the recent ISTA conference, I sent you each a letter and put in the incorrect times for our regular meetings. We generally meet on the first Tuesday of every month, so if your letter said something different, ignore it.

For everybody, our December meeting will not be on the first Tuesday, as the Library is busy that day. Right now, we have December 13 scheduled, but we may decide to have a lunch meeting instead. We will, of course, let you know in the next newsletter.

/s/ David Bloomberg

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

I think we're in the middle of what many people term "the silly season," so-called because reporters apparently don't have enough to report on, and so look into items that are, well, silly. I've heard this reference before, but hadn't noticed the magnitude until this past month. Read on, and you'll see what I mean.

Reach Out and Hoax Someone

I received a couple of complaints last month because I didn't include anything about the alleged alien autopsy (supposedly film taken after the Roswell crash, in 1947) video in my REALLity Check column. I have to be honest here: I didn't even watch it.

Why didn't I watch it? Well, one reason is that I just plain forgot. But also, I have been hearing about this video on the nets for months now -- it simply wasn't "new" for me. By the time Fox showed their special about it, even most UFO believers had come out saying it was a hoax. Besides, the show only had a few minutes of actual "autopsy" footage, with the rest being discussion among "experts" about what could or could not have been faked using special effects. That is all well and good, but I don't think it's where we should be focusing our efforts. Instead, we should continue to press the film's proponent, who refuses to allow the actual film to be tested for its age (he has sent a piece of film "leader" to be tested, but since it doesn't have any footage on it, there is no way to be sure it was actually from that film!). In addition, there are other testable portions of the film, one of which well-known UFO skeptic Phil Klass discussed in his most recent Skeptics UFO Newsletter (SUN).

According to Klass, Tom Holzel, a former AT&T employee (now a V.P. at an electronics company), saw the Fox show and wondered about the modern-looking telephone on the wall in the background of the autopsy. He found a book, *Once Upon a Telephone*, by Ellen Stern and Emily Gwathmey (published 1994), about the history of the telephone. That book verifies that the phone in question did not yet exist. The phone on the wall has a coiled phone cord; desk phones with coiled cords were first introduced in 1949, and the first wall phone with a coiled cord wasn't debuted until 1956 -- nine years after the autopsy was supposedly filmed.

Whoops.

For those who are interested (and if you're interested in the UFO phenomenon, you will like this newsletter), Klass's newsletter is published bimonthly, and you can subscribe for \$15/year by mailing a check to Philip J. Klass, 404 "N" St. SW, Washington, DC 20024.

Too Much Thinking!

The above is an example of critical thinking and problem solving. We look at the overall situation and investigate it to find the best answers. However, according to Springfield School Board candidate Laura Catherwood, we shouldn't be teaching children such things.

The Illinois Times (10/26) reported that Catherwood "wants the district to focus more on memorization of multiplication tables instead of teaching children critical thinking and approaches to problem solving." If there is one thing that I have noticed in my time with REALL -- especially writing this column -- it's that we don't teach enough critical thinking!

Perhaps a later statement in the article explains this, however. "Instead of supporting eliminating evolution from science classes, ... Catherwood thinks it should be taught side-by-side with creationism, and both should be presented as theories, 'giving only the facts.'" Indeed, the only way the schools can possibly put creationism into science class is to remove critical thinking from the curriculum. (I wrote about this in a letter to the editor which I hope to see in the November 2 issue.) Once again, we see creationists who don't know what a scientific theory means, or, apparently, how science works.

Being familiar with this topic, it unfortunately doesn't surprise me that there is a political candidate who doesn't understand science and who wants to put creationism in the public schools. However, I don't think I've ever heard of a School Board candidate who is against thinking.

Shoot the Moon

As you may have heard, several Asian countries were witness to a rare solar eclipse. To prepare for this occasion, Cambodia's government ordered police and soldiers not to fire their guns at the moon in order to scare it so it will spit out the sun. Women in the country put pots of lime on their abdomens and hid indoors to prevent "eclipse sickness" (mental retardation of their children). Etc.

Hmmm, if critical thinking were taught over there...

Milk It for All It's Worth

Nature (9/28) reported on India's "milk miracle," in which statues of Ganesha, the elephant god, appeared to drink

spoons of milk provided by worshippers.

According to the article, many of the people who lined up with their milk watched it disappear as soon as it touched the wet surface of the statues' trunks, though some had worse luck and were admonished by priests that their spoons remained full because they lacked the proper faith.

In response to these claims, the All India Scientists and Rationalists Association explained the phenomena as a "demonstration of capillary and surface tension at work." Scientists from the National Council for Science and Technology Communication showed the capillary action by adding red dye to their milk and following it as it was sucked into the idol and then dripped out. (It seems to me that if anybody was going to have a spoon that stayed full due to lack of faith, it would have been these guys. Amazingly, however, the "miracle" still worked for them.)

Leading scientists signed a statement calling on educated Indians to help ensure "that primitive obscurantism and superstition did not hold sway over a society on the threshold of the 21st century" (there go those scientists -- suggesting people think critically again). The Delhi Science Forum said the claimed miracle was a well-planned conspiracy and suggested that those who started the phenomena knew exactly what was happening; the ruling government has further suggested that the opposition was trying to stir up religious fervor through the supposed miracle in order to gain support in the upcoming elections.

Homeopathic Writing

The State Journal-Register (10/12) had a special insert, "Active Times" magazine, which featured alternative medicine as its main article. Unfortunately, the writer appeared to be practicing homeopathic writing, in which any substance became so diluted that the article ended up essentially saying nothing.

I can sum up the article in two sentences: Many people are looking to alternative medicine. Some people say it works, others say it doesn't. This is news? Actually, this is the type of article I expect to see in the Chicago Tribune Tempo section.

A couple of statements do deserve brief mention, though. One discusses a 75-year-old man who had colon cancer. He had surgery to remove it, and he said that a year later, "a CAT scan showed there could be something questionable about my liver." He didn't undergo any further testing, but changed his diet to one of large quantities of grains and vegetables, fermented soybean soup and small amounts of fish and fruit. Twelve years later, his check-ups show he is cancer free, and he apparently credits his diet. The reason I mention this is that it is a common way of "proving" that an alternative therapy works. The problem is that this man never underwent the additional testing to see if the "questionable" area was, indeed, a return of the cancer. Since we don't know that, we can't make a scientific judgment as to whether or not his change in diet actually did anything to help him. This is the case in many claims, where a person receives a preliminary test result and immediately runs to alternative medicine, thus leaving the final results unknown.

Several times, the author mentions people (mostly practitioners) talking about how homeopathy has no side effects. I have one thing to say to that: Of course not. When you dilute a chemical to the point that there is a negligible chance that there is even one molecule of it left in a dose, what kind of side effects could exist? The author fails to mention this, and also fails to mention that, similarly, there is nothing left in the dose which could actually help the patient either.

I know, I know. I'm just being picky and thinking critically again. Maybe I should just go memorize a multiplication table instead.

I Spy with My Third Eye

I have often been asked, regarding psychics, what it can hurt if people believe in them. Generally, I respond with a story about a woman who was taken to an empty lot in the middle of the night by two psychic detectives and told to dig in order to find her missing daughter. When her digging found nothing, the psychics "realized" that her daughter had been cut up into little pieces and burned, and that's why she couldn't find the body by digging. As emotionally hard-hitting as that story is, I now have another one to tell, one that hits people in a different place -- their wallets.

According to Jack Anderson's column in the State Journal-Register (10/29), the CIA and Pentagon have been spending

our tax money on psychic spies for several decades now. Perhaps the most amazing part of this column is that Mr. Anderson seems to completely believe the tales he relates. For example, his first paragraph says that the "psychic spies" "use a form of extrasensory perception to help gather intelligence in foreign countries." Not "allegedly" or "supposedly," he just states it as if it were absolute truth.

Apparently, this project began with help from Russell Targ and Harold Putthoff; some of you may recall that these are the scientists who tested Uri Geller at the Stanford Research Institute -- that should tell you something right off the bat. Anyway, our tax dollars have continued to support this nonsense while they come up with stories much like ones we are used to hearing from proponents of "psychics" -- in other words, tales which cannot easily be verified or falsified, and which may have undergone changes in the telling over time. Anderson lists a couple of these as "successes" that apparently prove to him that this unit is accomplishing its role.

Alas, Anderson must address the failures of this project -- its "Achilles heel," he calls it. However, he merely writes off those failures by saying that the rest of the CIA makes blunders as well. Oh, well, then it's OK. So, as usual, we see that the supposed "hits" are lauded and the "misses" are ignored. How typical.

As we have seen in the past, journalists who are skeptical of politicians fall all over themselves to buy into extraordinary claims.

(I have been told that there is more to this Jack Anderson/CIA psychics story, and I'm going to be getting more information soon. However, I didn't want to hold this entire piece for that info, so look for a continuation of this piece next issue.)

REALL Writing

It's not often that I get to write about a REALL member writing about a REALL member. In fact, I'd wager that this is the first time. But it's something I'm happy to do.

In this case, REALL Board Member Steve Egger wrote a book review of REALL member (and two-time speaker) Richard Walker's new book, *The Running Dogs of Loyalty: Honest Reflections on a Magical Zoo* (reviewed by me in *The REALL News*, Vol. 3, Number 7) for the *State Journal-Register* (10/8). Egger wrote, "[I] find more little tidbits" each time he rereads the book, and I, as well as several others I have talked to, have encountered the same phenomenon. The book may not be long, but it is packed!"

Egger said he plans to use the book in his class at the University of Illinois-Springfield because it is both a fun read and promotes critical thinking. Uh oh, there is that term again...

If you haven't gotten a copy of this book yet, I encourage you to do so -- especially since REALL members can get a discount if you order through us.

Masthead Information

Electronic Version

If you like what you see, please help us continue by sending in a subscription. See the end of newsletter for details.
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.

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