



REPORT

VOLUME 1 NO. 1 SUMMER 1988

Physician, Heal Thy Group

Gary P. Posner, M.D.

It seemed like only a bizarre dream. But given the fact that hundreds, or perhaps thousands, have suffered similar true experiences (after all, if we can't rely on the validity of claims in such national non-fiction best-sellers as Whitley Strieber's Communion, and Budd Hopkins' Intruders, what is this world coming to?), I must work under the supposition that mine was true as well.

I had flown to Miami on March 28, 1987, to attend an important meeting of the Sunshine Skeptics, a new local group with informal yet strong philosophical ties to the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), publishers of *The Skeptical Inquirer*. Much was accomplished at that working session, including election of officers (I was elected to the Executive Council), and formal changing of the group's name to the Florida Skeptics. Hopes were high that Florida would now have a strong nucleus for an active, influential group of skeptics, to help counter the forces of unreason that so flourish in our state (as everywhere).

Alas, more than one year later, organizational problems reigned supreme in F.S. Checks from prospective members remained undeposited, much correspondence went unanswered, and no further newsletters were forthcoming. The group has now officially declared itself defunct, and will no longer be listed in *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

Now for the part that, if not for Whitley and company, might seem implausible. I was awakened (wasn't I?) one night recently by a

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Reporter Drills "Psychic Dentist"

The Reverend Willard Fuller, Palatka, Florida's "psychic dentist" (see Chap. 12 of James Randi's The Faith Healers) took his traveling clinic to Port Charlotte on February 26, performing for a crowd of about 40. Sarasota Herald-Tribune health reporter Judy Ciarcia allowed the Reverend to lay hands upon her and, moments later, was proclaimed by him to have experienced "a miracle in her mouth and [she] saw a silver filling turn to gold" (his specialty). He later challenged her to report this "miracle" in her proposed article, which was subsequently published in the paper's Port Charlotte edition on March 3.

Ciarcia's dentist examined her on February 27, and explained that her silver amalgam contained up to 5% copper, accounting for the slightly yellowish hue, which did not resemble the color of a true gold inlay that she was shown. Ciarcia reports that "The 'gold' fillings I observed in others' mouths [at the service] looked exactly like mine...I now know that I did not see gold fillings in anybody's mouth."

Fuller, whose own choppers have seen finer days ("I don't get miracles", he told Ciarcia, "I just give them.") is under investigation by the state attorney's office in Putnam County at the time of this report, as a result of the persistence of Randi and Mark Plummer, CSICOP's Executive Director. Although he used disposable dental mirrors at this service (aware of a skeptical reporter's presence), he previously used a single mirror, passing it from mouth to mouth, with inadequate sterilization, adding the possible spread of disease to his repertoire of miraculous gifts.

While the wheels of justice grind and creak, Fuller's lucrative 'dental practice' brushes forward, to Miami, Key West, and wherever Crest, and brains, are underutilized.

G.P.

ASTROLOGY DISCLAIMER

In November, 1984, after a Gallup Poll revealed an alarming rise in belief in astrology, CSICOP wrote to the editors of every newspaper in the country, requesting that they carry a disclaimer with their horoscope column, such as:

"The following astrological forecasts should be read for entertainment value only. Such predictions have no reliable basis in scientific fact."

Initially, less than a dozen papers elected to heed CSICOP's call (21 now do so). To his credit, the St. Petersburg Times' Managing Editor Michael Foley was very receptive to my follow-up correspondence in 1986. Unlike so many editors who consider such a disclaimer as superfluous, or others who perceive our agenda as the eradication of "fun" from the face of the earth, Mr. Foley was highly receptive to rational persuasion, writing that "I share your concern about people who may take this stuff seriously. We print it for entertainment..." Beginning November 10, 1986, readers have been informed that "These predictions are intended for entertainment value only."

Recent revelations about Nancy Reagan's reliance upon the advice of astrologers, in organizing the President's work schedule, has reawakened this all-too-dormant debate about the potential dangers inherent in the uncritical acceptance of an unproven and unscientific belief system. Hopefully, the clamor will prompt even more newspapers to carry a disclaimer with their horoscope column. And perhaps a few might consider eliminating their astrology column altogether!

G.P.

Mensa Skeptics Service

Mensa, the "high I.Q." society, contains more than 150 Special Interest Groups (SIGS) and Member Services for the enjoyment and education of its members. Included among them are those entitled ASTROLOGY SIG, FORTEAN MYSTERIES, PAGAN/OCCULT/WITCHCRAFT, PARAPSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHIC SCIENCE INTERNATIONAL, and UFOS.

Although a skeptical group existed within Mensa in the past, the recent void was filled by *TBS's* Dr. Gary Posner in September, 1987, when he became Coordinator of the SKEPTICS service, serving as a resource to handle questions, reference requests, etc., from Mensans around the nation interested in being made aware of the availability of skeptical research material on paranormal topics.

In addition to answering specific questions, Posner encloses a packet of information about CSICOP and its journal, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and directs the respondent to the nearest local group in his/her area. Several dozen Mensans have inquired during the first months of operation.

TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS Statement of Purpose

The objective of *Tampa Bay Skeptics* is the critical examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and the dissemination of factual information about such claims to interested parties throughout the Tampa Bay area and environs. *TBS* does not reject claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective and critical inquiry. We share the philosophy of the international Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), although we are an autonomous local group, with no formal ties to CSICOP.

TBS anticipates quarterly publication. We welcome newsclippings, and articles and letters for publication (subject to editing), including opposing points of view. As we are not-for-profit, **stamped, self-addressed return envelopes are requested with all correspondence!**

Views expressed in articles and letters are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the *Tampa Bay Skeptics*.

TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS REPORT

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The Open Mind of the Skeptic

So often we skeptics hear the following refrain from those with whom we disagree:

"You are just a dogmatic disbeliever and debunker. You are closed-minded to the possibility that anything other than your own pre-conceived set of beliefs could be true. There's no way I could ever hope to convince you that [choose your favorite paranormal subject] is real, because no matter what I say, you'll just explain it away like you do everything else, so there's no point in wasting my time trying. But I know that it's real! I bet you don't even believe in God!"

Yet no matter how many times this argument is attempted in exasperation, it remains as spurious as ever. The type of skepticism to which CSICOP, and the *TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS*, are devoted is the epitome of **open-mindedness**. Although nearly all of us are employed full-time in other endeavors, and are highly doubtful that any such paranormal phenomena even exist in reality, we are so fascinated by claims of the paranormal that we spend a considerable amount of our free time learning of, investigating, writing about, and even organizing groups devoted to the discussion of and propagation of information about these claims. We search for the **one** case which may be able to withstand scrutiny without evaporating; the **one** psychic who can perform under controlled conditions (in which the possibility of cheating and self-delusion are eliminated); the **one** UFO report which cannot be explained in prosaic terms (and the **one** UFO abductee who can offer credible evidence that his report reflects physical reality).

The believer generally does not insist upon proof, and indeed often greets with hostility those who demand such. His/her belief in ESP, for

example, is unshaken when a particular psychic is found to be a fraud ("You may have caught him cheating this time, but that doesn't prove he cheats all the time, or that all the others cheat all the time."). He/she is unable or unwilling to design an experiment which, should it fail, would result in his/her admission that the phenomenon appears not to be real ("Maybe he couldn't perform his powers today, but that doesn't prove he didn't really perform last week.").

In sum, the believer is generally **closed-minded** to the possibility that his/her belief in the paranormal is without rational foundation.

Contrast this with the skeptic, who, formulating a scientifically-framed hypothesis, is willing to let the evidence determine whether or not the hypothesis is proven ("If psychic 'X' performs power 'Y' under these controlled conditions which eliminate the possibility of cheating, this shall constitute evidence of the existence of the paranormal phenomenon in question."). Thus, the skeptic, even though he/she may assume that the experiment is bound to fail, is willing to concede the reality of the phenomenon in question should the experiment succeed, and should the results be replicable (as is the methodology of true science).

The skeptic is thus **open-minded** to the possibility, however unlikely it may seem, that the paranormal is real, in any or all of its alleged manifestations. All we demand is the proof. And as in true science, the burden is upon the claimant of the novel hypothesis to prove its reality, and not upon the skeptic to prove its unreality ("Prove that I didn't spend last weekend on one of the moons of Saturn.").

G.P.





TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS GET-ACQUAINTED MEETING:

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29 --- 7:30 P.M.
AUDITORIUM, CENTRAL LIBRARY
900 N. ASHLEY ST., TAMPA

Only a block or two off the Tampa St./Ashley St. exit ramp from I-275. Bear right at fork in ramp for Ashley St. Library is 1st bldg beyond Barnett bank, on the right. Free parking on side streets, or use garage (1st bldg beyond library). Garage has a 2nd level covered walkway to library (in event of rain). **GENERAL PUBLIC WELCOME!!!**

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Without you, *TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS* will not succeed. Please join our efforts, as we endeavor to provide a forum for critical, skeptical inquiry and reporting of claims of the paranormal. Associate Membership in *TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS* is available for \$10/yr., including 4 issues of the **TBS REPORT**.

Please complete and return the enclosed questionnaire. We plan to form a full Council this summer, and to hold general membership meetings at least quarterly.



Next issue
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TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS
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non-human non-entity, which non-physically teleported me into its non-dimensional craft. After the obligatory physical examination by the alien physician, I was instructed to organize another Florida group! Although the non-entities had no mouths (no bodies at all, actually), I clearly sensed their terror at the prospect of their being elevated to a plane of true existence as a result of the unrebutted, harmonically-convergent wishful thinking of so many Floridians. Since the non-entities wished to remain only an unsubstantiated belief, their only hope seemed to be the formation of an influential group of skeptics within the state.

So, if only to placate our nebulous visitors, it is essential that Florida join the growing list of states with a functioning skeptical group. We may even find ourselves able to perform a public service for our own citizens as well, serving as a lonely yet strong voice of reason within a state well-known as a haven for purveyors of pseudoscience and fraud.

Because the state-wide effort appears to have been a bit too ambitious for an initial small group of organizers, we have opted to begin anew with a Tampa Bay group (although we certainly welcome all Floridians who wish to participate). With a little luck and a lot of enthusiastic support, we should be able to succeed locally. If we do, and should a void remain throughout the rest of the state, perhaps we may once again try to spread our wings as the Florida Skeptics. But for now, the *Tampa Bay Skeptics* is just fine with us. Our non-entity alien friends will just have to hang around west-central Florida for a while.