



# Tampa Bay Skeptics

# REPORT

VOL. 10 NO. 4  
SPRING 1998

• skeptic (n): a person who searches for truth through questioning and reasoning •

## Press promotes paranormal while slamming sweepstakes

by Gary P. Posner

The local news media have recently been in an uproar over the American Family Publishers Sweepstakes for its misleading mailings. All the while, the public continues to be served side orders of the paranormal along with the "news" and, at least in the case of the *St. Petersburg Times*, TBS's constructive criticisms and efforts to set the record straight appear to have made little inroad.

One *Times* article, "Keeping the Faith," followed up on the now-world-famous "Virgin Mary" apparition (see *TBS Report*, Spring 1997). Although the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg does urge caution in the article, an unnamed "glass expert" remarks, with regard to the shape of the image, "It could be an accident, or maybe it's divine intervention" (as if these possibilities are equally likely). The following "Letter to the Editor" from me (on TBS letterhead) went unpublished:

Your December 17 article about the Virgin Mary-shaped stain on Clearwater's Ugly Duckling Car Sales building indicated that the cause of the stain's shape is unknown. The building's other similar stains correspond to the height/shape of the vegetation in contact with the windows. On December 20 of last year [1996], your own newspaper carried a 1994 photo revealing that a palm tree, matching "Mary's" height, once abutted her image, which (although partially obscured) was present even back then. A somewhat squatter palm along the western facade now obscures the "Buddha," whose visitation will no-doubt draw millions to the area when that tree is removed.

The Dec. 30 *Times* carried two major feature articles on acupuncture. From one: "Skeptics called it 'quack-puncture.' They scoffed at the ancient idea of an invisible energy circulating through the body . . . and warned against something so alien to Western medicine. What a difference 26 years makes." Reporter Jeanne Malmgren then discusses at length the National Institutes of Health's recent positive proclamation on acupuncture. In a side article, she reports upon her own pleasant acupuncture experience. My/TBS's again-unpublished letter:

Your writer said that "in the name of science" she was willing to undergo an acupuncture session, but then went on to describe nothing even vaguely resembling a scientific treatment. The Tampa Bay Skeptics will pay \$1,000 (and

If you return the winning "secret" number, we will confirm that

## You have won \$1,000 in the TBS Sweepstakes

That's right! If you turn in your winning number to TBS by April 1, you will receive the \$1,000 Jackpot prize in the Tampa Bay Skeptics Sweepstakes. Your "secret" number is located within the TBS renewal form on page 7.

Lest you be concerned about the genuineness of this guaranteed giveaway, be assured that the Sweepstakes is fronted by two pillars of the Tampa Bay community, Clark Dickson and Manny McEd.

So don't delay! Return your winning number by the official deadline (preferably with a donation or renewal check) and the \$1,000 Jackpot will be yours!



Clark Dickson



Manny McEd

The Tampa Bay Skeptics Sweepstakes should not be mistaken for the American Family Publishers Sweepstakes.

Clark Dickson and Manny McEd might be mistaken for Gary Posner and Terry Smiljanich.

arrange a similar test for James Randi's \$1,000,000 prize) to any acupuncturist whose "trained fingers" can feel "nine pulses" in the wrist and thereby determine "whether an organ [such as the gallbladder] is working too hard or not enough" [as Malmgren reported].

The writer's accompanying article on the NIH's recent positive report on acupuncture would have been more instructive had it contained background information about the embarrassing history of the NIH's Office of Alternative Medicine and the "New Age" researchers associated with it. According to Stephen Barrett, M.D. (Contributing Editor to the journal *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine* and head of Quackwatch, Inc.), "These conclusions do not fit with science. Rather they reflect the bias of the NIH panelists who were selected by a planning committee dominated by acupuncture proponents."

(continued on page 5)

### TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS Statement of Purpose and "\$1,000 Challenge"

Tampa Bay Skeptics, Inc., is a nonprofit educational and scientific organization devoted to the critical examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims, and the dissemination of factual information about such claims. 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) and with other local groups like TBS throughout the United States and the world, though TBS is an autonomous group not formally affiliated with CSICOP or with any other organization.

TBS's "\$1,000 Challenge" is open to anyone claiming verifiable scientific proof of the reality of ESP, UFOs, dowsing, astrology, or any paranormal phenomenon. Please contact us for complete details.

*Tampa Bay Skeptics Report* is published quarterly. We welcome news clippings, and articles and letters for publication (subject to editing for length, clarity, and taste), and solicit opposing views. Please submit on 3 1/2" discs (in Mac or MS-DOS-ASCII format) or by modem or e-mail, if possible.

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

### TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS REPORT

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1113 Normandy Trace Road  
Tampa, Florida 33602-5771  
Phone/Fax: (813) 221-3533

E-mail: garypos@aol.com

Web: <http://members.aol.com/tbayskept/tbs.html>

Founder and Editor:  
Gary P. Posner

Membership Officer:  
Valerie Grey

Cartoonist:  
Don Addis

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# C h a i r m a n ' s O f r e r

by Terry A. Smiljanich

## The Ambiguous Virtues of Doubt

There is a difference between admitting that one may be wrong, which is to acknowledge one's fallibility, and treating that possibility of error as a genuine reason to doubt.

—Jonathan Adler, *Skeptical Inquirer* (Jan/Feb 1998)

In February, the largest Holocaust Museum in the Southeast is opening in downtown St. Petersburg. Having moved from small quarters located on the beach, the new museum will feature artifacts, scale models, and photographs depicting the darkest years of the twentieth century, if not the millennium: Perhaps the "numbers" are greater when talking about Stalin's purges, but the sheer cold-blooded efficiency with which the Germans and their henchmen went about the task of eliminating an entire race cannot be surpassed in horror.

Discussions of the Holocaust illuminate the ambiguous virtues of doubt. Healthy doubt and critical inquiry are enemies of dogmatism. As Jacob Bronowski proclaimed in his epochal public television series *The Ascent of Man*, the Nazi drive to eliminate the Jewish peoples from the face of the Earth stands as a monument to how mankind acts when it arrogantly believes it possesses absolute truth. The entire Nazi apparatus — from its scientists to its industrialists to its lawyers to its doctors — was devoted to the single-minded pursuit of the goals of the nation state.

There was no room in this system for questioning, for critical analysis, for doubt. Absurd silliness abounded. The Jewish race was a "pollutant." Personalities and intelligence were thought to be "shaped" biologically by the literal shape of the head or nose. The top leaders of government ascribed to numerous forms of occultism, astrology, and medical quackery. (There are exceptions, of course, but generalities must suffice for the length of only a few paragraphs).

In 1996, I took a trip to Eastern Europe. Two days stand out. On one, I stood at the very end of the rail line leading into the Auschwitz/Birkenau death camp in Poland, just a few short steps away from the ruins of the crematoria (blown up by the Nazis in a desperate attempt to destroy the evidence of their shameful past). Here, millions of Jews, mostly women, children and the old, were marched into gas chambers with soothing words about "delousing," etc. The dark soil around my feet was littered with tiny white bone fragments. The guide stated that no matter how much the ground is swept by wind and erosion, more bones appear.

On a second day, I was standing in a gilded room in a mansion alongside Lake Wannsee on the outskirts of Berlin where, in January 1942, Reinhard Heydrich chaired a conference of top government officials to discuss implementation of a "final solution to the Jewish question." Although separated by hundreds of miles, that ornate room with its huge mahogany table was intimately connected to the end of that rail line.

Now, fifty-some years later, small revisionist groups demonstrate the ugly side of "doubt." In pursuit of their own agendas, they claim that we should be "skeptical" about the very existence of the Holocaust. Thus does skepticism get yet another bad name. It is a fallacy to take "doubt" and "open-mindedness" and turn them into arguments that ignore evidence and favor improbabilities.

There is a difference between the serious doubt with which critical inquiry approaches claims of the extraordinary, and the absurd doubt with which Holocaust revisionists attempt to deny the evidences of history. As Jonathan Adler so eloquently expressed in the last issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* (see the beginning of this piece), the hypothetical *possibility* that the Holocaust did not occur (probably no less improbable a notion than is the existence of an advanced civilization inhabiting the "hollow" center of the earth) provides no *genuine reason* to doubt that it did.

The Nazis were abysmally and tragically wrong in their belief that they possessed absolute truth. Doubt is a virtue. But the bones of Auschwitz do not lie.

## Another Brazilian "healer"

by James Randi (excerpted from his "Hotline")

Alternative healer/guru Dr. Andrew Weil has mailed me a videotape of a chap named Joao Teixeira de Faria. . . . A book and video have been produced about him, both called "The Miracle Man of Brazil." He modestly calls himself John of God, and he claims that he has cured 15 million people in 35 years of practice. Sure.

The films of this man show that many of the "injections" he gives are . . . pure sleight of hand. The others I can't see because of the camera angles. Yes, he does make some genuine incisions. Very, very dangerous.

But look at the figures he claims. Working 8 hours a day, taking no lunch hour, 6 full days a week for 35 years, taking no holidays at all, he would have to "heal" *one person every 21 seconds* of every minute of every hour of every day . . . and no failures! Can you really accept that?

The "eyeball" stunt he does is very old. I saw it done in carnivals when I was a kid. There are no pain nerves in the sclera that would react to a knife being placed there. That is the most common thing this man does, regardless of the patient's complaint. (Refer to my book *Flim-Flam!* to see me with a knife under my eyelid.) This man prances about, very full of his own importance and power over his victims, apparently injecting everyone within reach, digging knives under eyeballs, and slicing into flesh at random. It's a circus act . . .

There are literally dozens of these healers in Brazil, each one with his own bag of tricks. I see no evidence at all in the film (other than anecdotal testimonials) that anyone has been healed by this man, ever.

Remember, when I investigated victims of the faith healers here, though every one of them claimed to have been healed, I found they fell into three classes: those who never had the illness in the first place, those who still had the illness, and those who had died of the illness before I got to interview them. That was 104 persons. . . .

What I saw in the films proved nothing. There was little control, the star of the film directed the action, and we were not offered anything that could not be accounted for by the usual sleight of hand. Perhaps Dr. Weil, who has the expertise of an M.D., can inform me about the possibilities of patients withstanding such assaults. Given the surroundings and the expectations of the "patients," I believe that such phenomena are possible without any paranormal/supernatural/occult interference. . . .

Do we have evidence that he heals people? Not, mind you, that people get better after they visit him, but that they get better as a result of his actions? I would very much like to send a medical team down there to look at the procedures he uses, and report back. . . . □

## Paranormal Ancestries: The Value of History

by Hugh H. Trotti (first in a series)

The following reference (and those to follow in future issues) represents an attempt to show how historical knowledge may be a useful adjunct for study by skeptics.

**POLTERGEISTS:** The pagan world had its share of poltergeists ("noisy ghosts"), although not always of the "noisy" type. There are accounts of the mysterious movement of objects, and the sudden lighting and burning of altar fires. Suetonius has an account (ref. *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Michael Grant, Penguin Books, 1979, p. 56) of a strange force guarding a nursery room of the emperor Augustus. This room — which was preserved from general use and never entered except out of necessity, and then only after "purification" — was chosen as a sleeping place by a new owner of the house. During the night he was hauled out of bed in his bedclothes by a strange force and thrown across the room.

At an earlier time, the bedroom door of Julius Caesar's wife suddenly burst open of its own volition before Caesar went to the Senate house and was killed — regarded by ancients as an omen of his end to come (ibid., p. 50).

Finally, various shrines to deities had their altars "mysteriously" burst into flame as a famous person passed near. This was regarded as a "lucky omen" by the ancients, and would contribute to the fame of the shrine and perhaps to the wealth of its priests. Such events occurred to both Augustus Caesar and his heir, Tiberius Caesar (ibid., pp. 105, 122).

### Dionne Warwick's "Psychic Friends" suffer unforeseen financial crisis

Excerpted from an AP story of Feb. 5 (via the Internet)

Perhaps they should have seen it coming. The operators of the Psychic Friends Network filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection this week. "They apparently made some bad decisions, and a couple of things happened that they had no control over," said James Olson, a lawyer for the network's operator, Inphomation Communication Inc. Inphomation listed liabilities of \$26 million and assets of \$1.2 million when it filed for Chapter 11, which allows a company to hold off its creditors and continue operating while it puts its finances in order.

The network, which has used singer Dionne Warwick as the host on its 30-minute infomercials, once had estimated annual revenue of \$100 million to \$125 million. Revenue has plunged to \$25 million to \$30 million in the last two years.

### TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

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## Snippets

The "Virgin Mary," whose image adorns a window on Clearwater's Ugly Duckling Car Sales building, has gotten herself into an even stickier situation in Olivet Memorial Park cemetery near San Jose, California. This time, a palm tree was not involved in the stain's creation, but a "Mary" pattern of tree sap has appeared on the trunk of a 100-foot-tall pine, about 10-12 feet above the ground, near where a branch was sawed off about two years ago. And, as in Clearwater, a "shrine" of sorts has been erected, with visitors streaming by and leaving behind offerings of flowers, medallions, rosary beads, candles, etc.

(*Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 21)

Dr. Richard C. Davis' Largo clinic, shut down briefly by the state, is once again employing "RheoTherapy" to treat macular degeneration, though under stricter supervision. At \$22,000 per patient, Davis cleans up by cleaning out "gunk" from his patients' blood that would otherwise deposit in the eye and contribute to blindness. Though it has a limited following in Germany, the remedy has been declared by state regulators to be unproven and potentially dangerous. As St. Pete. ophthalmologist Dr. Mark Sibley comments, "In America, we usually conduct medical research and prove that something works before we start charging \$20,000 for a treatment." Picky, picky.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Dec. 15, Jan. 30, Feb. 10)

From Walter Scott's *Parade* magazine column (and the parenthetical comment at the end is his — not ours):

Q: Is it true that Louis Farrakhan said he communicated with aliens? — J.A., Bloomfield, NJ

A: Sort of. On Oct. 24, 1989 . . . [he] told an audience of 10,000 that in 1985 he'd had a vision of being abducted by extraterrestrials and carried over Mexico in a spacecraft called the "Mother Wheel." He wrote about it in 1995. "I saw a city in the sky," said Farrakhan, and the UFO "brought me back to Earth and dropped me off near Washington . . . to make the announcement." (How convenient.)

(*Parade magazine*, Jan. 25)

And from Dave Barry's column summarizing the notable news events of 1997:

July: . . . In other space news, thousands of people gather in Roswell, N.M., site of what many believe was a 1947 UFO crash that has been covered up by the highest levels of the federal government in a massive conspiracy designed to provide plots for bad movies. The U.S. Air Force, seeking to debunk the UFO story, calls a press conference to announce that the recovered "alien bodies" were actually dummies dropped from experimental high-altitude balloons, but many people remain suspicious, especially when they notice that the Air Force "spokesperson" has five legs.

(*Dave Barry's syndicated column*, Dec. 28)

From our "If We Build It, They Will Come" Dept.: The international Realian Church has raised \$7-million for construction of an embassy designed to entice

extraterrestrials to visit Miami's trendy South Beach. The targeted aliens "are from a planet in our galaxy, but not in our solar system," according to Marie-Helene Parent, a Miami Raelian. She also notes that it was these aliens who created humans in their image — Genesis has been "mistranslated" in this respect. Question: Given the nature of South Beach's *earthly* invaders, if the ETs were to arrive there, how would they be recognized?

(*Charlotte [Harbor] Sun Herald*, Dec. 29)



And from that paper's major front-page story of the same date: The Rev. Jacoby Sumrall of the Punta Gorda Church of Light has made some "psychic" predictions for 1998. "I'm seeing a huge corporation moving into Charlotte County. . . . 1,000 to 2,000 jobs created." Well, perhaps. "Some of the oldies [celebrities] are going to be going to heaven, more than last year." Good bet. "Liz Taylor is going to be more visible in '98." Will she make more media appearances, or merely gain weight?

(*Charlotte [Harbor] Sun Herald*, Dec. 29)

Last, but certainly not least, from our "Has Sanity Ruled?" Dept: The U.S. Supreme Court has decreed, in an 8-1 decision, that trial judges should act as "gatekeepers" and disallow "opinion" testimony that is not supported by solid science, even if offered by otherwise qualified scientific "experts." This effort to remove "junk science" from the courtroom has met with criticism from some who feel that legitimate scientific opinions will be barred from the bar proceedings. Indeed, though the case at hand involved the alleged role of chemical coolants in causing cancer, Justice Stevens remarked in his dissenting opinion, "An example of junk science would be the testimony of a phrenologist who would purport to prove a defendant's future dangerousness based on the contours of his skull." We certainly agree. But whether Stevens feels similarly about the many other more-accepted "junk" theories, such as handwriting analysis or astrology, remains unclear.

(*L.A. Times via St. Pete. Times*, Dec. 16)

["Snippets" are derived from the referenced sources and rewritten by TBS's editor. Please send your clippings to TBS.]

## Alan Hale and Ann Druyan speak at local convention

by Valerie Grey

Astronomer Alan Hale, co-discoverer of Comet Hale-Bopp, and Ann Druyan, widow of Carl Sagan and co-author of several of his books, were the featured speakers at the Freedom From Religion Foundation's annual national convention, held in Tampa on December 5-7.

Dr. Hale showed many magnificent slides of the comet (the second brightest this millennium) and of other awe-inspiring astronomical phenomena. He deplored the present lack of science literacy in this country and said that the Heaven's Gate tragedy was "another victory for ignorance and superstition." He cited, as typical of the mainstream preference for astronomical fantasy over reality, the fact that only 4,000 people attended the Mars Pathfinder festival in Pasadena, California, while 40,000 went to Roswell, site of the alleged flying-saucer crash.

Hale touched briefly on the long history of comet scares. In olden times, he joked, a comet would appear, and then something bad would happen — post hoc ergo propter hoc (after this, therefore, because of this). He showed a slide of an indictment filed 50 years or more ago against the purveyors of a fake "comet pill," which was sold when the Earth was going to pass through a comet's tail. The pill was supposed to neutralize the effects of the poisonous gasses contained in the tail, all of which would compress to a mere cubic centimeter.

The nonsense about Comet Hale-Bopp began almost immediately upon its discovery, Hale said, despite the fact that the bright object above the comet in the famous photo banded about in the tabloids was readily identified as a star as soon as older survey plates of the region were examined. He said he received a lot of hate mail for being "a traitor to the Earth for withholding information about the spaceship," and that he and Bopp were accused of being government agents, who then vanished mysteriously into the desert. (He added that he and Bopp are still waiting for their government paychecks, which have also apparently vanished mysteriously . . .) He concluded his presentation by noting that Comet Hale-Bopp would be returning in 2,380 years. Will humanity be in another Dark Ages, he asked, or will it be out there in space, exploring?

Ann Druyan was honored as this year's "Freethought Heroine." She is actively involved in producing several television and motion-picture projects which she hopes will help to counteract the stereotypical image of scientists as "monsters who have sold their souls." Among her more interesting comments was her expression of hope that people would come to employ "baloney detection kits" to help counteract our evolutionary tendency (just like other primates) to seek out leaders and uncritically worship alpha males. She said that Carl Sagan's childlike wonder and awe at the mysteries and vastness of the universe, combined with an adult skepticism, was one of his greatest virtues, and that the willingness of scientific thinkers to abandon religion's narcissistic teachings about the universe suggests a growth toward the maturity of mankind.

## A TBS member responds to A&E's *Biography* of Edgar Cayce

Date: Monday, December 16, 1997  
From: rosenl@magicnet.net (Larry Rosen)  
Subj: Edgar Cayce Biography  
To: www.biography.com

Your Edgar Cayce *Biography* lacked a single knowledgeable skeptical source. Very few of your productions have been this unbalanced, relying on adoring family members or credulous followers for commentary. The narrator and others uncritically accepted claims for miracle diagnoses and cures that were, by any scientific standard, anecdotal and undocumented. Any charlatan faith-healer can point to apparent correct diagnoses and miraculous recoveries, ignoring his or her many failures. It was up to host Jack Perkins to attempt an admirable salvage job at the show's close, pointing out Cayce's miserable failures at predicting anything for which there was a reliable test for success or failure. You could have done much better than this!

### "Press promotes paranormal" (from p. 1)

Malmgren refers to the NIH as "one of the most venerable medical organizations in the United States." Such was once the case, and still is, except for the Office of Alternative Medicine. In *Skeptic* magazine (Vol. 5, No. 3, 1997, p. 51 — copy of item available from TBS for stamped return envelope), *Time* magazine's Leon Jaroff describes the OAM as "a festering source of embarrassment. . . . [NIH] held its collective nose when it was forced by Congress to establish the office five years ago. . . . Today the OAM stands out as a refuge for, and a comfort to, quacks and the medically illiterate." Jaroff recalls the pressured resignation of OAM's first (and rigorously scientific) director, describes some of the "scientific" investigations being carried out there, and challenges OAM to agree to testing of one of its pet therapies, such as homeopathy, by the James Randi Educational Foundation for its \$1,000,000 prize. As for whether OAM will ever agree to such a genuine double-blind, scientific test, Jaroff concludes his piece: "I think you know the answer."

The *Tampa Tribune* did a better job with its major feature on "Psychics" on January 26. Reporter Paulo Lima, whose regular beat is law enforcement, scouted out the monthly psychic fair at the Universal Church of Today on W. Waters Ave. His primary article offered a description of the general goings-on at the fair, with a neutral-to-positive spin. But his secondary article (which hopefully was read by all who read the other) emphasized how the "psychic" he selected, rather than employing genuine paranormal powers, instead appeared to "learn more from the frequent questions she peppered me with between prognostications. . . . Like when she asked me how long my girlfriend and I had been together. . . . Again, she prodded me with [more] questions. . . . I resisted the urge to spout, 'You're the psychic, so you tell me!'" □

### TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS CONSULTANTS

Judith Becker Bryant, Ph.D.  
University of South Florida (USF)  
Psychology Dept., Tampa

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Family and Environmental Medicine  
Crystal River

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Episcopal priest, Venice

Charles R. Mathews, M.D.  
Asst. Secretary for Health Services  
Florida Dept. of Corrections  
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Vincent E. Parr, Ph.D.  
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Daryl L. Schrader  
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### Other skeptical sources on the paranormal

#### • *Prometheus Books* •

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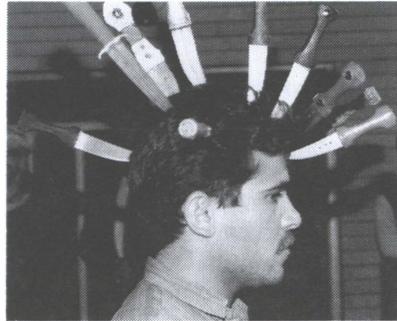
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818-794-3119  
skeptmag@aol.com  
www.skeptic.com

#### • *Skeptics UFO Newsletter* •

by Philip J. Klass  
404 "N" St., S.W. • Wash., DC 20024

• *James Randi Educ. Foundation* •  
201 S.E. Davie Blvd. • Ft. Lauderdale, FL  
33316-1815 • 954-467-1112  
randi@randi.org • www.randi.org



### Cutting-edge healing still (to some) appealing

Without comment, Dr. Jamal N. Hussein (of Amman, Jordan) has mailed to TBS an October 1997 *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (London) article, co-authored by himself and three others, entitled "Deliberately Caused Bodily Injury Phenomena." TBS had engaged in protracted negotiations with Louay Fatoohi, one of the co-authors, regarding the daggered duo's purported willingness to participate in a controlled test of wound infliction and spontaneous healing (see *TBS Report*, Fall '95 and Winter '95-'96).

Fatoohi ultimately ceased communicating with us and with James Randi (see Summer '96), and we had heard nothing further from him or Hussein until this recent mailing. The article ostensibly offers scientific proof of their claim that these "very unusual healing capabilities . . . if mastered . . . could [lead to] unprecedented improvement in the welfare of humanity."

### TBS in the Media

Gary Posner was quoted in a Dec. 15 story on "Faith and Healing" in the Health & Living section of ABC News' web site, and on the same theme in a two-part series in the *Florida Times-Union* (Jan. 30 and Feb. 6). He was also quoted in Sean Ledig's Jan. 10 *Tampa Tribune* article on "aromatherapy." Links to all three articles can currently be found at the bottom of Posner's web home

page (accessible via TBS's site).

A producer for America's Health Network (satellite/cable) called upon TBS to recruit a skeptical guest for their Dec. 7 two-hour program on "Near Death Experiences." Although we did so (Prof. Barry Beyerstein), the producer ultimately decided that the other guests represented a sufficient spectrum of opinion such that our "skeptic" would not be needed after all. She had earlier candidly informed us that the show is hosted by a devoutly Christian physician who believes NDEs to be genuine, and possibly manifestations of the Devil.

We also received a call from a producer for *The News with Brian Williams* (which airs on MSNBC and CNBC) requesting Noreen Renier's telephone number. They had plans for a live discussion on Jan. 14 between Joe Nickell (editor of *Psychic Sleuths*, which contains Posner's chapter on Renier) and a psychic (possibly Renier or Dorothy Allison, both of whom were profiled in the book). But the discussion was first postponed to a later date, and was ultimately cancelled — perhaps no "psychic" was willing to appear — and the show instead reran a Jan. 11 *Dateline NBC* story (featuring Nickell) that was highly skeptical of Allison.

### CSICOP/SI web site receives honor

*HomePC* magazine has recently listed the CSICOP / *Skeptical Inquirer* web site (www.csicop.org) as among the top 500 overall sites of 1997, and among the top ten for science.

### Have a web site of your own?

If you are a TBS member with a web site that is not already listed on the TBS site, please let us know. The TBS web site has registered nearly 700 "hits" in the past nine months.

## Letters • Readers' Forum

Editor: We just received the winter edition of *TBS Report*. I am, as usual, impressed by the quality of your newsletter. However, I have two points I'd like to discuss.

First, in reference to Terry Smiljanich's article, who says we skeptics don't believe weird things? Our groups are filled with nuts who believe weird things. We have communists, socialists, libertarians, anarchists, atheists, agnostics, humanists, deists, fetishists, conservatives, liberals, racists, nationalists, bigamists, relativists, acupuncturists, punctualists, pantheists, medievalists, futurists, objectivists, and one guy in Arkansas who plays with dowsing rods. The guy I work for — James Randi — he's a nut. He yells at his computer all the time. From my point of view we're all pretty nuts.

Second, the article about Ben Bova's speech is an excellent example of something one skeptic considers weird and another perfectly acceptable. The primary difference between the "predictions" made by Ben Bova (skeptic and a sci-fi nut) and previous empty promises by wishful thinkers is that nanotechnology actually has some merit to it. If you accept that (1) machines are getting tremendously more powerful, compact, precise and (2) that on a molecular level the human body is just a complicated machine, then barring any limiting physical laws, nanotechnology seems like a logical possibility. In his book *Engines of Creation* (with foreword by Marvin Minsky, skeptic and artificial nut), K. Eric Drexler (nano nut) first popularized the notion of nanotechnology, an idea originally put forward by the late Richard Feynman (physicist, skeptic, Nobel Prize-winning bongo nut).

As skeptics, we naturally become cynical towards extraordinary claims, as we should be. However, when a claim or a forecast is made about something that can be directly examined, it's our responsibility to look at the evidence before dismissing the claim or throwing it on to the heap of paranormal ideas.

Andrew Mayne Harter  
James Randi Educational Foundation  
Fort Lauderdale  
andrewharter@juno.com

*In this context, Terry intended "weird" to refer to the types of claims that concern TBS, not every controversial or quirky idea under the sun. Valerie does not reject nanotechnology as "paranormal," but does consider Bova's near- and intermediate-term projections to be terribly unrealistic. The full text of this letter (only excerpted here) can be found on our web site's version of this newsletter. —G.P.*

Editor: The Discovery Channel recently ran a program on UFO abductions that wasn't too bad — except for telling us that "four million Americans are sure they've been abducted"! That impossible figure (2% of the population) was in fact only the result inferred by the interpreters of the 1992 Bigelow/Roper Poll. I could never imagine how they could have gotten so enormous an overestimate — until recently, when the plethora of new Roswell claims suggested an answer: The "2%" must really have measured primarily the proportion of liars, who *falsely* admitted to having had all the strange experiences that the pollsters regarded as symptomatic of abduction. The true proportion of abductees, probably less than 0.1%, simply can't be determined by polling.

Alexander Mebane  
Venice

*I would estimate the proportion of true UFO abductees to be infinitely less than even your suggested 0.1% figure. Readers desiring a copy of my essay about the 1992 Bigelow/Roper poll may send a self-addressed stamped envelope to TBS, or it can be found on my web site at [http://members.aol.com/garypos/Roper\\_Poll.html](http://members.aol.com/garypos/Roper_Poll.html). And many, many thanks for your extremely generous financial contribution (once again) to TBS. —G.P.*

Editor: I wish to applaud you for your fine work on the e-mail "Updates" and on the ongoing growth of the web site. There was a time when I thought I was the only skeptic in the world. This organization (plus CSICOP and others) has given me much hope that there may be a chance for truth to win out.

Doug Johnson  
Lutz

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V10N4



*Announcing...*

Press and  
Public  
Welcome

## Tampa Bay Skeptics Quarterly Meetings

3rd Saturday of every March, June, September,  
and December (barring unforeseen conflicts)

Our next meeting will be:

**SATURDAY, MARCH 21 --- 10:30 A.M. - 1:30 P.M.**  
**AUDITORIUM (1st FLOOR)**  
**PUBLIC LIBRARY, 900 N. ASHLEY DRIVE, TAMPA**

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Followed by optional lunch and "spirited" conversation  
at the Village Inn on Dale Mabry (just north of Kennedy)

.....

## No Psychics Used Here



It was heartening to recently learn that the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Dept. puts no credence in psychic sleuths. A highly placed homicide detective who does not wish to speak for the department, but who says his opinion is widely held there, has told me that they do not seek out psychics. When they have had to work with psychics because of political considerations, my source says that not only were their leads unfruitful, but they were actually detrimental to the investigation, in that resources were diverted from more potentially useful areas.

—Glenn Thompson

### == Visit TBS Online ==

<http://members.aol.com/tbayskept/tbs.html>

If for no other reason, check out the web versions of our *TBS Report* articles for the occasional accompanying **graphics** not present in the original newsletters due to constraints of space. To find out at a glance about any significant additions/changes since your last visit, click on "**What's New on the Site**" at the top of the Home Page.

And, if you haven't already done so, be sure to send us your **e-mail address** (to [garypos@aol.com](mailto:garypos@aol.com)) so that we may add you to our electronic **TBS Update Service**.

### TBS and James Randi "Psychic" Challenges

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James "The Amazing" Randi has secured pledges totaling more than **\$1,000,000** for the first person able to successfully demonstrate paranormal power for him.

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