



Selected articles from  
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## **TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" yields chance results (once again)**

**by Gary P. Posner**

A TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" of Gainesville dowser James D. Moore, Jr., was conducted in the Green Room of WTVT-TV 13 in Tampa on September 10. Originally scheduled to be carried "live" on that day's *Your Turn with Kathy Fountain* portion of the noon newshour (from 12:30 to 1:00), the show was "bumped" due to late-breaking news regarding the 1997 Sabrina Aisenberg missing-child case (the parents had just been arrested).

But due to high public interest in the subject, Fountain decided to devote a future program to the Challenge, which had been recorded on digital video. The show aired on November 1, and the results of the Challenge turned out just as TBS had predicted. Out of 23 boxes, Mr. Moore correctly determined the contents of 12, and missed 11, exactly as would be expected from random guesswork.

The fifty-somethingish Moore (he won't tell) claims the ability to detect the presence of buried gold, silver and precious gems by use of a plastic divining rod, which he markets for \$39.95 as the "Crazy Rod." Moore had been referred to TBS by the James Randi Educational Foundation which, had Moore performed successfully for us, would have then tested him for its \$1,000,000 jackpot.

The test protocol resembled that used by TBS for our previous "\$1,000 Challenges" of "psychics" Joan Morin and Virginia Levy, except that one-ounce gold coins were placed in some boxes, and wafers of unfinished/uncoated aluminum in the other boxes (all objects were supplied by TBS). Mr. Moore supplied 23 open-topped boxes (made of lead) and the specially processed/cleansed sand that was used to cover their contents, as well as the plastic divining rod (containing no sensors or electronics of any kind). He was permitted to place the end of the rod within inches of the sand.

To "win" the Challenge, Moore needed to correctly determine which of the 23 boxes contained a gold coin, and which did not. The probability of being correct all 23 times, in the absence of genuine "divining" power, was 1 in 8,388,608 (1:2 to the 23rd power), since each box, like a coin flip, had

only two possible outcomes (gold or aluminum) and, like a coin flip, the probability of simply guessing any one box correctly was 1 in 2.

TBS was represented at the "\$1,000 Challenge" by Terry Smiljanich, Miles Hardy, videographer Glenn Thompson, and myself. Mr. Moore was accompanied by his girlfriend and several other friends.

Prior to commencing the Challenge, I explained TBS's position regarding the anticipated outcome (i.e., approx. 50% right and 50% wrong) and the reasons why such an outcome would be expected. Mr. Moore stated that he did not simply "believe" in his ability, but "knew" that it was genuine. Therefore, he was very confident that he would be 100% successful. If not, he said, he would get all the boxes *wrong* (i.e., his divining rod would react exactly *backwards* each time). When I asked how he would explain a "50-50" result, should it occur, Moore strongly affirmed that such would not happen. When further pressed for an answer, he could not come up with any explanation since, as stated above, if things weren't working correctly, the result would be 100% backwards, not a random mixture of correct and incorrect. Thus, TBS agreed that, should Moore get all 23 boxes wrong, we would award him \$500 and test him again (unless James Randi agreed to then test Moore for his foundation's \$1,000,000 prize based upon Moore's 100% incorrect performance -- a feat equally as unlikely as being 100% correct).

After the Protocol documents were signed, the first of the 23 boxes was placed on the floor in front of him. The boxes were approx. 6" x 6" (and about 2" high), made of lead, and open at the top. Two days prior to the Challenge, the boxes and the specially cleaned sand had been brought to me by one of Moore's friends. That evening I had buried a gold coin (one-ounce South African Krugerrand) in 11 of the boxes, and a thin wafer of unfinished aluminum in the other 12 boxes. The boxes sat in my home until I drove them to the Challenge.

Moore took an average of only 10 or 15 seconds or so to "divine" the contents of the 23 boxes. Although I had expected a more dramatic movement in his "Y" rod, I didn't appreciate any significant difference in the reaction between "gold" and "aluminum." But Moore confidently pointed each time to which side of the floor the box should be moved, before the next one was placed in front of him (as Thompson taped the proceedings, Smiljanich, Hardy and I took turns placing the boxes in front of Moore and then moving them aside).

After completing the 23rd box, Moore then passed his rod once again over all of his "gold" selections (constituting roughly half the boxes), and moving to the other side of the floor, did the same with his "aluminum" selections. He expressed confidence that he had done well and, when questioned, affirmed that he had not simply "guessed," but that his rod had definitely reacted differently to the "gold" boxes than to the others, just as in his practice sessions at home in which he claims to have enjoyed 100% success.

At that point, the TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" was officially certified as having been completed, and the time had come to begin divulging the results. One by one, the boxes were lifted onto the table, and Moore was asked to "fish out" the object buried in the sand. The first box, in which Moore's "Y" rod had detected the presence of gold, turned out to contain an aluminum wafer -- Moore had "lost" the Challenge. In all, Moore turned out to have been correct with 12 boxes, and wrong with 11, exactly as one would expect from chance guesswork.

Following the divulging of the results, Smiljanich, Hardy, Thompson and I all explained to the Moore contingent, once again, the meaning of the results from our perspectives. As anticipated, Moore was unwilling to entertain even the possibility that his "divining" abilities were not genuine (i.e., that due to a lack of proper controls prior to this test, he had simply been deceiving himself for years). Rather, Moore began rationalizing his failure in this experiment, inviting us to take a trip to a spot in Georgia where he claims a history of "one thousand percent" success in his previous efforts when objects were buried underground.

As for our own Challenge, only now did Moore claim that the "magnetic fields" in the boxes had been scrambled because the same person did not place all of the boxes in front of him, as he now said should have been done. He blamed his friend/associate (who had brought me the sand-filled boxes) for not having told us about this beforehand. But we countered that Moore had failed to raise this point earlier, even as he watched us placing the boxes.

Moore also claimed that he would have done better had the boxes been sitting in the Green Room for the past two days instead of in my home. But the purpose for having made the boxes out of lead, and for supplying specially processed sand, was to shield the buried objects from extraneous "vibrations" so that outside influences would not disrupt his ability to dowse. During the Challenge his rod seemed to him to be working just fine (he voiced no complaints about any ambiguous reactions due to interference). And, as he told us both before the test began and just before the results were divulged, if the results were to turn out "50-50," he would have no explanation, since (as previously discussed) the only two conceivable possible outcomes to him were 100% correct and 100% incorrect.

Despite our disagreements, there were no hard feelings expressed by anyone, and we agreed, at Moore's request, to follow up with him about the possibility of testing him again. In my opinion, a "50-50" result in a retest still would not shake Moore's belief in his abilities. But his friend/associate did acknowledge to me, in private, that our Challenge had already opened his own mind a bit as to the genuineness of Moore's abilities. And, for me, that's about all I could have hoped for.

[Also see [here](#) for photo, more]

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## **Psychic Mediums and Life After Death**

**by Gary P. Posner**

(A version of this article is posted [here](#).)

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## **CHAIRMAN'S CORNER**

**by Terry A. Smiljanich**

## "Hot and Cold"

On a recent edition of MSNBC's *Crosstalk*, several panelists, including our own Gary Posner, discussed a new HBO documentary on talking with the dead (see above article), which was hosted by self-described "skeptic" Linda Ellerbee and showed segments of readings by various spiritualists. Needless to say, with one notable exception the mediums appeared to score "hit" after "hit" as their edited readings seemingly discerned intimate details of the lives of strangers. Ellerbee related that she was no longer as skeptical as before, but rather now accepts that there was perhaps something going on that science can't explain. Gary withheld judgment and argued that people should demand more controlled tests and definitive proof. Ellerbee suggested that with such an attitude, Tampa Bay Skeptics might someday find itself akin to the "Flat Earth Society."

Well, let's accept the fact that many mediums demonstrate uncanny accuracy by revealing aspects of a person's life that would appear to be beyond guesswork. This is the bread and butter of mediums around the world. Talk to any person about skepticism and the paranormal, and you are bound to be given a personal example of a successful reading and the question: "How do you explain that, huh?"

Of course, demanding an explanation has it exactly backwards. It isn't up to us to explain away the seemingly impossible. Instead, it is up to the proponent to show us that all natural explanations for such "psychic" happenings can be eliminated. Demanding an explanation is somewhat like demanding that a person explain how a magic act worked. If you can't explain it, it must be true magic!

So, what are the possible explanations for this ability of psychics to read others? What questions should be probed fully in any credible exploration of this subject? Which of the following explanations sound likely or probable, and which sound less so?

1. A careful study of the reading may reveal that the psychic tried many obvious guesses, steering away from negative responses and zeroing in on positive ones. With a willing subject who wants to believe that something is happening (witness Lynn Darling in her reading by medium John Edward), the results can be impressive. This is the ancient art of "cold reading." Done by an expert, it can seemingly reveal uncanny "secrets" about a person. Death in the family is always a good starting point, since we all share that. It helps if the subject (or careful editing) ignores all the misses. To really test the medium, one would have to tightly control feedback from the subject and have a clear definition of what constitutes a "hit" or a "miss." (Is revealing that your grandmother died from a heart attack a "hit" if she died in a car wreck? Her heart did stop working, didn't it?)
2. A medium can pick up clues from careful observation or from simple inquiries about the person before the reading. In about ten minutes, anyone who knows how can look up a name on the internet and obtain incredibly detailed background information about that person (there are even "private eye" websites for this purpose). With these head starts, it wouldn't be hard to amaze someone with accurate demonstrations of your psychic abilities.
3. Persons with a strong emotional need to believe in the hereafter may even delude themselves and agree with a medium's suggestions about the dearly departed, even if they aren't really true.

4. The subject of a reading could be a "plant" whose purpose is to allow the psychic to thrill you with his/her incredible powers.

5. Or maybe psychic phenomena do exist, and some people are really able to talk to dead people who continue to exist (and who always seem to be anxious to assure us that they are in "a happy place"). That is always a possibility. And the Tampa Bay Skeptics' modest \$1,000 award -- not to mention James Randi's \$1,000,000, and eternal fame -- await the first person able to prove it under properly controlled conditions.

Given the above potential explanations, and there are undoubtedly more (e.g., a simple mistake in remembering what a medium said and when he/she said it), in the absence of incontrovertible evidence it makes common sense to withhold believing in the power of a medium to talk to the dead. If you didn't demand rock-solid proof, Linda, *you* might have ended up believing that the Earth is flat!

## Snippets



In Cassadaga, the eastern Florida town overflowing with spiritualists, the new millennium is being awaited with special apprehension. (Yes, I know, it won't really begin until 2001. But tell *them!*) Some of the seers believe that the new era will usher in a more "spiritual" way of life. Others are more concerned about an initial 12-year period of earthquakes, tidal waves and wars. One, Ernie Sekunna, plans to flee to the mountains of North Carolina before the "cleansing period" commences with a vengeance on May 5, 2000. None need fear an era of critical thinking that might render their services obsolete.

(A.P. via *St. Pete. Times*, Sept. 12)

Southwest Florida's elusive "Skunk Ape" (see "Snippets, [Winter 1998-99](#)) can breathe easy, even if those who purport to catch a whiff of its noxious odor can't. On August 30, the Collier County Tourist Development Council had given its thumbs-up to a \$44,000 grant request by David Shealy, a self-styled expert on the "Bigfoot of the Everglades." Shealy, who has been promoting the smelly simian's existence since 1997, hoped to be able to use the local tax dollars to fund two scientific expeditions to track the beast. But on Sept. 14, the Collier County Commission voted 5-0 to quash the quest for our sasquatch. Commissioner Jim Carter explained his position: "I don't believe this is the purpose of these [tax] funds." And Shealy expressed his: "What a bunch of liars. They led me on for two years. . . ." But has *he* learned *his* lesson about leading people on?

(*Fort Myers News-Press*, Aug. 31 & Sept. 15;  
Scripps Howard News Service via *St. Pete. Times*, Sept. 2)

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Speaking of critical thinking, Jeff Klinkenberg's article on "psychic" Myra Taylor no doubt has thousands believing that the 53-year-old from Reddick, Florida, can communicate telepathically -- and not only with people, but with animals. For \$35 per critter, Taylor will tell you what's troubling your python, llama, ferret, camel, or even your dog or cat. For example, here's an equine (her specialty) anecdote that she told the reporter:

Horse told me he had a broken heart. The little girl who'd rode him was gone. Turned out, the little girl had died. We didn't want to tell the horse; it would have made matters worse. I don't like to lie, but I did this once. I told him his little girl had gotten sick and had to move and wouldn't be back, ever. But I told him his owners were going to try to find him another little girl. That made him happy.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Oct. 19)

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## Shamanism Follow-up

TBS executive council member Jim Lett has been in communication with anthropologist William Lyon regarding the crafting of a protocol to scientifically test the claimed paranormal abilities of Dr. Lyon's shaman (see [Spring 1999](#)). Tentative agreement has been reached on a proposed draft, which is being forwarded to the [James Randi Educational Foundation](#) for its input. We hope that a formal test will ultimately result, with TBS's \$1,000, and JREF's \$1,000,000, to be awarded should the shaman succeed. Informational updates will be issued via our website as progress warrants.

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## Dr. Dossey and DCBD

(A version of this item is posted [here](#).)

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## Letter to the Editor

Editor: I became familiar with [CSICOP and \*Skeptical Inquirer\*](#) about 15 years ago while still in college. This eventually led to my discovery of San Francisco's Bay Area Skeptics group (I lived in that area for a few years). I attended only a few meetings but found them to be (usually) very interesting -- had the opportunity to see a dog that could (supposedly) perform advanced arithmetic (including multiplication and division) and watched live "psychic surgery" being performed. Great stuff! (You can't get that kind of entertainment at any price.) The CSICOP site eventually linked me to the TBS site -- apparently this is the closest skeptics group to me.

I always add a rather poignant footnote whenever I tell someone about the "mathematical dog" presentation: It turned out to be a rather sad affair (from my point of view). The owner of the dog was

quite elderly and honestly appeared to believe that his dog was given a special "gift." The dog made numerous errors (although a few "hits") for the owner, and, of course, was unable to perform for anyone else -- contrary to the owner's claims. It appeared to me that the owner left the dais saddened and distraught.

When it became obvious that the dog was doing rather badly, the skeptics backed off and did not "go for the jugular." I was amazed at the kindness the skeptical attendees showed. Valor indeed! I'll never forget this and the lessons it taught me.

--Peter Geske  
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