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Shamanism Revisited

by [James W. Lett, Ph.D.](#)

A test of the alleged paranormal powers of a Native American shaman, which the Tampa Bay Skeptics had hoped to conduct this spring as a TBS "\$1,000 Challenge," will not be taking place. After months of negotiation between the shaman's representative and the TBS Executive Council, the would-be claimants to the prize have withdrawn their bid, and now say they will never submit to scientific testing. In fact, in his final correspondence with us, the shaman's representative declared that he had decided to take the shaman's advice and to "stop 'fooling around' with 'skeptics' in any shape or form," thus ensuring that he will never expose himself to a rational evaluation of his paranormal claims.

More than a year ago, William S. Lyon, an anthropology professor from the University of Missouri at Kansas City, first wrote to TBS executive director Gary Posner after visiting our website. Lyon identified himself as a "senior professor of anthropology" who has been "doing research for the past 25 years with Native American shamans," and he objected to TBS's unsympathetic appraisal of alleged paranormal powers. Lyon claimed that "it has long been known by anthropologists that Native American shamans can easily locate lost bodies, lost items, etc., via their shamanic powers, and I have seen this myself many times during my fieldwork." Lyon concluded by saying that he was acquainted with a Native American shaman who might be amenable to being tested for the TBS "\$1,000 Challenge," but warned that anyone conducting the test who was "fraudulent in the heart" would "bring great misfortune upon himself for living such a lie." (See our [Spring 1999](#) issue.)

In my reply in same issue of *TBS Report*, I objected to Lyon's characterization of anthropology. "Anthropological textbooks do not endorse the objective validity of paranormal beliefs," I wrote; "on the contrary, they attempt to explain how such beliefs can persist in particular cultural contexts despite their falsity. A very small minority of anthropologists share Dr. Lyon's belief in the reality of paranormal phenomena; the overwhelming majority recognize that no paranormal belief offered by any culture anywhere in the world at any time in history has ever withstood critical scrutiny." I

concluded my account with this call to Dr. Lyon: "If he knows shamans who can perform paranormal feats, let him produce them. I will be happy to be personally involved in the design and administration of the tests."

Following the appearance of the article, I engaged in a lengthy e-mail correspondence with Professor Lyon in an attempt to arrange for a suitable test of the shaman's powers. Although Lyon and I have widely divergent perspectives on the reality of paranormal phenomena, our correspondence was cordial, and we made slow but steady progress towards designing a mutually satisfactory test. Finally, in early December, Lyon agreed to the test protocol drafted by the TBS Executive Council.

Under the terms of the agreement, Lyon was to travel to Tampa accompanied by a gentleman named Godfrey, a Lakota shaman who lives on a reservation in South Dakota. During the test, Godfrey would demonstrate his shamanic powers by performing a paranormal feat with the assistance of "spirit helpers." These are the highlights of the test protocol agreement reached between Professor Lyon and TBS:

Dr. William S. Lyon ("Claimant"), an anthropology Professor at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, agrees to present for scientific testing a shaman who is allegedly capable of locating hidden objects with the assistance of a "spirit helper." . . . The shaman, with the assistance of the "spirit helper" during the course of a Yuwipi ceremony, is prepared to identify with specificity the hidden object and the object's hiding place. To prove his ability, the shaman will either have the object paranormally removed from the hidden location and brought into the room by the "spirit helper" during the test/ceremony, or will describe the object and its hiding place with such specificity that there can be no doubt that he is correct (e.g., "a soft drink can hidden in a bank safe deposit box"). . . .

Prior to the commencement of the formal testing, TBS shall surrender its \$1,000 check . . . to a party mutually agreed-upon in advance. . . . The test object will have been selected in advance . . . appropriately marked, and hidden anywhere (within an hour's drive of the test location). . . . The object should be relatively small, in the event that, during the course of the test/ceremony, the "spirit helper" decides to transport it from its hiding place and into the room in which the test is being conducted. . . .

A precise description of the object, and its secret location, shall be recorded in advance, in writing, on a piece of paper . . . and sealed in an opaque envelope. Prior to the commencement of the test, that sealed envelope shall be handed to a representative of TBS, who shall immediately place it in a metal box . . . and then immediately lock the box. . . . The padlocked box will not be in the test room during the ceremony, but will be kept outside that room, securely under the observation of representatives from both sides. . . . The box shall be unlocked by the TBS representative, in the presence of all observers, only after the conclusion of the test/ceremony. The sealed envelope shall then be removed and opened by a party mutually agreed-upon in advance . . . in order to reveal to all the nature of the hidden object and its secret location. . . .

Should the shaman "win" the Challenge . . . TBS shall be obliged to . . . immediately have the check presented to the Claimant/shaman. . . .

All signatories to this agreement declare that the above conditions have been mutually agreed upon, are fair, and appear to constitute a valid means of scientifically testing for the shaman's alleged paranormal ability.

I was both pleased and surprised that Dr. Lyon had agreed to the test protocol: pleased because it struck me that the protocol would provide a fair and definitive test of the claim, and surprised because I knew that it would be enormously unlikely for the shaman to succeed in the test. After all, no one had ever demonstrated any such paranormal ability under similarly controlled conditions, and I was confident that we had eliminated the possibility of trickery. Thus, along with the other members of the TBS Executive Council, I was eager for the test to take place. That's when the trouble began.

Dr. Lyon had expressed reluctance to travel to Florida merely for the chance at the \$1,000 prize offered by TBS. Instead, while in Florida, he wanted to be tested simultaneously by the [James Randi Educational Foundation](#), so that his shaman would also have the chance to win Randi's \$1,000,000 prize. To accommodate Dr. Lyon, the TBS Executive Council attempted to coordinate a simultaneous test of the shaman with JREF, but the Randi Foundation requested a more stringent protocol (as standard procedure, for example, they require all claimants to submit to a preliminary test before the final test protocol is developed). When Lyon and his shaman balked at the JREF requirements and refused to travel to Florida for our "\$1,000 Challenge" alone, it was back to square one.

In an attempt to conduct the test without having the shaman travel to Florida, Gary Posner sought the assistance of the Kansas City Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, a group whose goals are similar to TBS's. It was hoped that representatives from KCCSI would be able to conduct a test of the shaman in Kansas City, under the terms of the previously agreed-upon protocol. However, negotiations between KCCSI and Dr. Lyon and the shaman eventually collapsed over logistical difficulties; the two groups were unable to arrange a mutually satisfactory time and place to meet, and unfortunately the communication between the two was marred by a lack of cordiality on both sides.

In his final communication with Posner this past March, after it was clear that no test of the shaman's abilities was going to take place, Dr. Lyon admitted that even a negative result in the test would not have convinced him to abandon his beliefs in the shaman's paranormal powers. "In fact, shamans, like physicians, often fail in their efforts," Lyon wrote. "So even a failure with your test would have more than likely been interpreted by me as a failure of the ceremony, not a failure of the powers of the shaman." As Posner appropriately replied, it is apparent that Lyon's mind is closed to the possibility that Godfrey's powers might be illusory. After 25 years of research with Native American shamans, it is understandable that Professor Lyon would be reluctant to admit that he may have been repeatedly duped by sleight-of-hand artists.

"As to Godfrey," Lyon concluded, "he said that he will make these powers known to the general public in due time, so there's no rush in that regards." I would add, "Don't hold your breath waiting for it to happen." As an anthropologist, I consider Dr. Lyon's professional judgment about the abilities of Native American shamans such as Godfrey to be irremediably flawed. And, I must say, as a scientific colleague, I find his gullibility disappointing. Along with the other members of TBS, I remain highly skeptical of his claims.

The burden of proof falls upon Dr. Lyon. If his shaman would like to make his powers known to the general public, we stand ready to help with an agreed-upon test protocol. Whenever you're ready, Dr.

Lyon. Show us the magic, and we'll show you the money.

Another dowser, another "1,000 Challenge" failure

by [Gary P. Posner](#)

Last year, the [James Randi Education Foundation](#) referred a dowser to TBS for evaluation. And, as we dutifully reported in the previous two issues of *TBS Report*, James D. Moore's "Crazy Rod" failed to detect the presence of gold any more effectively than chance guesswork would account for.

Well, it's happened again. Earlier this year the Randi Foundation referred to us a Mr. William Pierce of Prescott, Kansas. Bill, age 70, claims the ability to do Mr. Moore one better -- he says he can divine the presence of hidden gold remotely, from a Polaroid photograph! And, like Moore, he claims a 100% success rate: "I have dowsed dozens of pictures for a friend of mine in Alabama, and have got every picture right."

Bill and I worked out a mutually acceptable protocol, involving 23 paper plates spread across the ground, with a one-ounce gold coin hidden under approximately half of them. Bill would need to correctly divine all 23 plates from two Polaroid photos (13 on one, and 12 on the other). Due to an error on our part, we actually used 25 plates, and had Pierce eliminate two of his choosing. As explained in our Winter issue, we use 23 items, each with two equally likely outcomes (e.g., gold or no gold), to achieve odds of approx. 10-million to 1 against success by chance alone.

I also proposed the following to Pierce: "To keep us 'honest' . . . I would recommend that Kathy Fountain be involved with us in certifying what is [hidden] where. She is a news anchor at WTVT-TV 13 in Tampa, and host of her own show. She has devoted several shows to our skeptics group, and, I'm sure, would be agreeable to having you dowse the photos live on her show, if you were interested. You wouldn't even necessarily need to travel to Tampa -- you could probably do it from an affiliated station in your own city."

Pierce replied, "Gary, I trust you. You do not need to get a witness because I know what I can do. [And] I live in a small farm town quite a distance from any TV station."

So, on March 26, TBS vice-chairman [Miles Hardy](#) spread out the paper plates in his back yard, hiding a gold coin under approximately half of them. As attested to in writing by another witness, the test was carried out exactly as agreed upon, with Miles documenting the locations of the gold coins, taking photos of the two sets of plates, and then forwarding the material to me. I in turn mailed one set of Polaroid prints to Bill for him to "dowse."

On May 17, I received Bill's final results by e-mail: He eliminated plates #20 and 24 and selected the following as covering a gold coin: #3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 21, 22 and 25. However, the gold was actually hidden under #2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 14, 15, 20 (eliminated), 23 and 25.

Although his 15-for-23 performance was somewhat better than 50:50, this single demonstration fell far short of demonstrating something so remarkable as to suggest true paranormal abilities. We have extended to Bill an invitation for a retest, which he says he plans to accept when his currently hectic

work schedule permits.

Jesus' appearance on a Bay-area church wall and my appearance on Ch. 13's *Your Turn* with Kathy Fountain

by Terry A Smiljanich

On May 18, [I appeared on WTVT-TV 13's *Your Turn*](#) as a panelist discussing miracles and apparitions, along with Sarasota pastor Mark Carr and USF religious studies lecturer Max Maya. Host Kathy Fountain asked about the recent [image of Jesus](#) which "miraculously" appeared on a church wall in Bradenton, Florida, and also brought up the Vatican's revelation of the "third secret of Fatima," in which the 1981 assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II was supposedly predicted. Pastor Carr stated that these miracles might be signs from God or signs from the devil. I stated that perhaps God likes to draw himself on brick walls, but as long as there are possible simpler explanations (a spray cleaner had just been used on the wall), there was no reason to leap to supernatural conclusions. Maya argued that whether they were miracles or not wasn't as important as what people "did with it" in improving their lives. I responded that "the truth should matter." As for the "third secret of Fatima," I pointed out that it wasn't much of a prophesy, since it wasn't revealed until after the fact, and was thus a matter of fitting a vague description of "gunfire" to a past event.

Snippets



Following a four-year investigation, Japanese police have finally put their foot down and squashed the leader of a bizarre cult, along with 11 of his acolytes. Hopefully, the cops didn't injure their soles -- and thus their souls -- in the process. According to Ho-no-Hana Sanpogyo teachings, colorations on the soles of the feet, and marks on the toes, provide information about the person's spiritual and mental health. For \$960, one can quickly find out, for example, if death is right around the corner and, if so, whose fault it will be (for example, a mark on the little toe implicates the great-great-great-grandparents -- but you probably figured that out logically). And for a mere \$190,000 more, a pinch of the Buddha's ashes can prevent the disaster. The cult is said to have duped followers out of a staggering \$800-million. So far, former cult members have filed lawsuits totaling \$50-million in damage claims.

(The Guardian via St. Pete. Times, May 10)

Miami seer Madame Francisca, host of a local cable-access TV show, didn't see the light until she could also smell the gas. But, by then, it was too late. Her longtime boyfriend had already doused her with a bucket of petrol and tossed her a match. Admitted to the hospital in extremely critical condition, it is unknown whether or not she had been aware of her lover's previous conviction, and 25-year prison sentence, for second-degree murder.

(AP via *St. Pete. Times*, Feb. 28)

John Monti skewered on *Inside Edition*

The May 11 edition of *Inside Edition* included a critical exposé of "psychic detectives," including now-Florida-based [John Monti](#) and his involvement in the [Tiffany Sessions disappearance case](#). In 1992, Monti was still based in New York.

TBS's Gary Posner had been telephoned several times by producer Michael Corn for information about Monti, and supplied to Corn the video footage of Monti that was aired (for which TBS received a [prominent credit](#) at the end of the program). Monti refused to cooperate with *Inside Edition* for the piece.

Tiffany's mother accused Monti of "extortion," telling *Inside Edition* that the day before Monti was to accompany her to Gainesville to try to trace the trail of her long-missing daughter, he insisted on \$2,000 up front from her or he would cancel. Due to profound embarrassment (according to Corn, during one of his phone conversations with Posner), Mrs. Sessions had never before revealed this to anyone, including WTVT-TV 13's Kathy Fountain, who had interviewed her extensively in [Nov. 1991](#) and [Jan. 1992](#).

A tape of this scathing report, which also included a "sting" of another "psychic detective" and comments from James Randi, will be among the videos shown at the upcoming TBS quarterly meeting.

Noreen Renier "chat" on Court TV website

Florida's more-famous-than-Monti "psychic detective" [Noreen Renier](#) was the guest of honor for a "chat" session on the Court TV website. The full transcript of the undated session is available at http://www.courttv.com/talk/chat_transcripts/psychic.html.

The moderator says Renier "teaches at the FBI academy, and she is referred to police departments by the FBI." Renier mentions that she once "found a missing airplane for an FBI agent's wife. . . . [This] was validated in the courts by FBI agents and the people in the search." And she said she has "a very big rule, having worked with the police all these years -- never solicit."

For a critical analysis of these specific, oft-repeated claims, see [Gary Posner's chapter on Renier](#) in

Psychic Sleuths: ESP and Sensational Cases. Posner's e-mail to Court TV, offering to assist in correcting the record, went unanswered.

Letters to the Editor

Editor: Excellent Spring issue -- particularly your story on dowser Moore. I would like to try for the TBS "\$1,000 Challenge," based on my ability to distinguish between ELEPHANTS and WHITE MICE -- neither of which will be put in boxes but will sit on the stage, i.e., in the open (my dowsing rod will have peanuts on its tips).

--[Philip J. Klass](#)

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