



Selected articles from
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TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" retest of Bill Pierce: Same old same old

by Gary P. Posner

[As we reported](#) in our Summer 2000 issue, dowser Bill Pierce, who first contacted the James Randi Educational Foundation about its \$1,000,000 prize and was in turn referred to us, claims the ability to divine the presence of hidden gold remotely using Polaroid photographs. The 72-year-old Kansan boasted a 100% success rate before failing the TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" that spring. He later requested a retest, which was recently carried out as per a mutually agreed-upon protocol.

On April 2, TBS vice-chairman Miles Hardy once again laid out paper plates across his lawn, some with a hidden gold coin beneath and others not (determined by a coin flip). Polaroid photos were taken and mailed to Pierce, who e-mailed his selections to us on April 13.

The "Challenge" was divided into two parts. Success in Part 1 would require getting at least 19 plates correct out of 24 (a 1-in-303 feat by chance alone). Part 2, to be conducted at a later date only in the event of success in Part 1, would require at least a 22-for-26 performance (1-in-3,749) -- for a combined 1-in-1,135,000 test.

In his sworn affidavit, Miles Hardy revealed that a gold coin had been hidden beneath plates 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 21 and 24. Pierce's selections for the gold were 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19 and 20.

Thus, of the twelve plates that had gold under them, Pierce correctly identified three (5, 11 and 17). And he was correct regarding six of the twelve plates with nothing beneath (1, 2, 14, 16, 22 and 23).

Pierce's 9-for-24 performance was well within chance expectations for a test in which "gold" or nothing were equally likely events. Combined with his last effort, in which he was 15 for 23 (employing a slightly different protocol not divided into two parts), he is now 24 for 47, about as

close as possible to a purely chance result. Wild guessing should yield correct selections half the time.

Each Polaroid print encompassed eight plates. Of the three photos, Pierce indicated that he was most confident about photo #1 (plates 1-8) because the plates were a bit further apart. However, he got only three out of eight plates correct in that photo, which is exactly how many he got correct in each of the other two. He later had Miles Hardy set up one more photograph -- though not for an official "Challenge" -- using only six plates spread a bit further apart. The result: He got two of those wrong.

In his most recent e-mail to us prior to learning the results of this "\$1,000 Challenge" retest, Pierce told us, "If I failed the test it will show a weakness in my dowsing and I want to know if there is." Yet, in [an April 30 posting](#) on a treasurenet.com forum, Pierce says, "There were a couple of people that I informed ahead of time I was going to fail the test on *purpose*." (Emphasis in original.) In response to my inquiry about that claim, Pierce told me, "I got upset [at the person whose posting I was replying to] . . . and when I get stressed I do crazy things and sometimes it doesn't come out like I want it to. . . . I am not looking for an excuse. . . . You have always been honest with me and I respect that."

Talking to the Dead?

by Jack Robinson

Can psychic medium [George Anderson](#) really talk to the dead? The ABC-TV program, *Contact: Talking to the Dead* (on Monday night, April 22), strongly implied that he can.

Earlier that day I had read *Tampa Tribune* TV writer [Walt Belcher's article](#), "Spirits Soar in ABC Special . . .," and later I watched the show in question. Belcher's article was much the better of the two! In fact, the newspaper piece was highly educational as well as entertaining. Among other things, it included information about Tampa Bay Skeptics.

Many people would consider the idea of talking with the dead controversial -- I consider the idea fallacious, not controversial. But the TV program was entirely one-sided, and that alone makes it suspect.

Belcher's article presented very well both sides of the issue. He even contacted Gary Posner beforehand, gave him an advance tape of the TV show, and then in the article quoted some of Posner's crucial remarks, e.g., "Any good magician or psychologist could perform readings that are just as convincing" and "It may make people feel better to hear these kinds of messages, but if it's not genuine, then it's deception and that's wrong."

Belcher properly included qualifying words: "Psychic George Anderson *claims* to contact Bonnie Lee Bakely . . . who was found shot dead in [actor Robert] Blake's car last May." And "Bakely's *alleged* message from the spirit world . . . is like most of the messages Anderson receives: She's in a happy place, having found peace in the spirit world." (Emphasis added.)

One of Belcher's comments that amused me was, "Anderson reportedly has helped police solve crimes, but in this case the alleged spirit isn't willing to share how she died or who killed her." If that really was Bonnie Bakely's spirit, don't you think she would have been eager to vindicate Blake -- her husband -- if he's innocent, or to give information that would help convict him if he betrayed her?

The following is Gary Posner's commentary about the show:

The host claimed that Anderson didn't know ahead of time who the subjects would be (all Anderson attested to on air was that he had never before spoken with, in this case, Mackenzie Phillips). But I suspect that Anderson knew in advance. After all, given the absence of any skeptical input and the editing out of all but the most positive "hits," it was obvious that the purpose of the program was to showcase Anderson's alleged abilities, not to challenge him with a task that he might fail.

[When I appeared with Anderson](#) on a live MSNBC discussion show in 1999, he agreed with my observation that magicians and psychologists are able to perform readings that are just as convincing. I also mentioned [James Randi's \\$1,000,000 challenge](#) for proof of the paranormal, which Anderson could win in five minutes. All he would have to do, to convince Randi and the scientific community, is come up with the names of the deceased loved ones for several complete strangers (not celebrities who he could research in advance). Instead of saying things like "The one male claims he's a granddad, do you understand?" or "We're all here with you" (which he did on the show), let him say, "This is your grandfather Maurice from Cleveland" or "Your Aunt Katherine and Uncle Ray are here." But there's no way Anderson would ever agree to such a test, because he couldn't succeed unless he was genuine.

"Star Goddess" Janet Sciales profiled in *St. Petersburg Times*

by Gary P. Posner

The May 9 *St. Petersburg Times* showcased local astrologer Janet Sciales in an article entitled, "To Lutz woman, the stars tell life's story." Sciales, who is billed as the "Star Goddess" on her highly rated, every-other-Monday radio appearance on FM 98.7's *The Freak Show*, has been Tampa Bay's most prominent astrologer for at least as long as Tampa Bay Skeptics has been around.

Ironically, Sciales was among the inaugural TBS members upon our founding in 1988. I had arranged to see her at her office one Monday that summer, with an invitation to address the second meeting of TBS. Not only did Sciales enthusiastically accept, she handed over a check for membership, explaining that while she knew from experience that "astrology" was real, she agreed with TBS's philosophy with regard to "psychic" power and the rest of the pseudosciences. (In later years I would occasionally see her billed as a "psychic astrologer.")

I had previously seen Sciales on television a number of times. So, the night before that Monday encounter, I was struck by her resemblance to the woman featured in Diane Sawyer's *60 Minutes* story about the widow of an Air Force "Top Gun" pilot whose F-16 had crashed into a mountain in South Korea. The widow, Janet Harduvel, had won a multi-million-dollar jury award in 1987 against General Dynamics, alleging a flight instrumentation malfunction due to frayed wiring as the cause of the crash. The verdict would ultimately be overturned, not on its merits, but on the basis that federal defense contractors enjoy blanket immunity from such lawsuits.

When I mentioned the uncanny resemblance, Sciales acknowledged that she was indeed Janet Sciales Harduvel (her personal story is detailed in the recent *Times* article). She then went on to regale me with an anecdote about how, in the process of becoming friends with Diane Sawyer, she predicted, through astrology, that Sawyer would soon fall in love with a man of Germanic descent. Indeed, Sawyer would shortly thereafter meet and ultimately marry director Mike Nichols.

Sciales also told me that she had prevailed upon her attorneys to time certain crucial legal actions, such as the filing of papers with the court, based upon the astrological charts. And she credited such timing with her successful jury trial outcome (despite her defeat on appeal). Though the *Times* article does not mention that, it does contain another anecdote that Sciales did not tell me: She supposedly had been forewarned by the stars that she was destined to be widowed, and, more specifically, that something terrible would happen to her husband on that final mission. Yet, as compelling as that anecdote is, all mention of astrology had been deliberately kept out of the *60 Minutes* program.

And something of even more relevance to TBS was deliberately left out of the *Times* article. An earlier, somewhat lengthier version of the same article (titled "The Star Goddess," May 3) had appeared only in the "North of Tampa" section of the northern Hillsborough editions. That version contained the following three paragraphs missing (along with several others) from the shorter May 9 version that appeared in all editions:

On the respectability side, Sciales faces the world scientific community, which considers astrology a "pseudoscience."

"A horoscope can be harmless fun, if you don't call your astrologer before your doctor," says the director of the National Science Foundation.

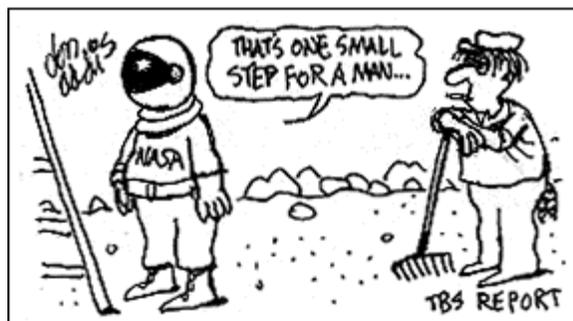
But in the 1980s, Sciales spoke before the Tampa Bay Skeptics, who share that view. She even dickered with them about setting up a scientific test of astrology, but the two sides couldn't agree.

The breakdown of communication was not for lack of trying on TBS's part. In a revealing quote contained in a May 7, 1989, *Times* article about TBS, Sciales said, "I'm not going to put my reputation on the line if they're not going to do the same thing. Why should I?" But as I pointed out in a follow-up letter to the editor (published May 13), ". . . Janet is fully aware [of] our \$1,000 prize, which we would . . . award at a press conference [should she succeed in a test]. . . . Despite this, Sciales has [elected] to cancel her appointments with us."

[For related information from a 1993 article written by me, [click here](#). The Winter 1988-89 *TBS Report* contains a discussion of Sciales' appearance at that October's TBS meeting. Brief excerpts from the videotape of her lecture,

including a testy, and telling, Q&A exchange between Sciales and me, will be shown at the June 29 TBS meeting.]

Snippets



Sweden's [Jesper Parnevik](#), who plays professional golf on the U.S. PGA Tour, is a notorious eccentric known for his pink slacks and the upward-flipped bill of his hat. But he makes Pierre Salinger sound like an amateur when it comes to conspiracy theories. You see, Parnevik believes that America's Apollo moon landings were a hoax. Speaking about the author of some book that makes this preposterous charge, Parnevik says, "He's been collecting evidence [of the hoax] for ten years. If you read [the book], you'd think there's no way it happened." And he's read the book. So, 'nuff said.

(*St. Pete. Times*, March 7)

The umpire cried, "Strike three!" The referee's count reached "10." The bell rang, the whistle blew and the buzzer sounded. The fat lady was singing her heart out. Yet, incredibly, the fake lady is crying out for more! Though "psychic" infomercial queen "Miss Cleo" failed to show her face, on April 24 her attorney announced, after a two-month hibernation, that the alleged Jamaican shaman is "for real" and the innocent victim of a witch hunt. Hurling chunks of semi-half-truths to the reporters gathered at his Fort Lauderdale office, William Cone, Jr., proclaimed, "She was chosen. She has talent. She had the ability to be a shaman. She is a shaman. She has the gift." She's actually Youree Dell Harris, and she ran an acting troupe in Seattle until moving to Florida for her latest gig. No matter. Cone spewed seven hypothetical and mutually exclusive scenarios to finesse the fact that Harris's birth certificate establishes that she was really born in Los Angeles -- not Jamaica -- to American-born parents. They included:

"A child is born in America and leaves shortly after birth to live in Jamaica, returns many years later with the Jamaican culture and accent."

"Child is born in a country where births and deaths are not recorded as efficiently as they are here. Child is raised from four years on in the United States."

"Biological father is Jamaican, mother is American, stepfather adopts the child at birth,

and he is American. What goes on the birth certificate?"

Charged Cone, "It does not take a crystal ball to see that the allegations against Miss Cleo may be politically motivated." Yeah. And mayonnaise might be made from horse pucky. But what goes on the jar label?

(*South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, [April 25](#))

TBS in the Media

Gary Posner was quoted in an April 1 [San Antonio Express article](#) by Richard Marini about "Prayer and Healing."

Tampa Tribune TV writer Walt Belcher quoted Posner in his April 22 article about the recent spate of TV shows dealing with talking to the dead (see above). Posner was also quoted on the same theme in [an April 21 article](#), by Virginia Rohan, in a northern New Jersey newspaper called *The Record*.

And an earlier-published version of the May 9 *St. Petersburg Times* feature article (page B-1) on local astrologer Janet Sciales (originally in the May 3 "North of Tampa" section for northern Hillsborough editions) mentioned TBS (see above).

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