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Healthy skepticism

By **Tim Gorski, M.D.**

Concerning Antioxidant "Nutritional Supplements"

According to one of several speculative hypotheses about the cause of aging and senescence, cumulative damage to cell structure leads to progressive degradation and impairment of function, as well as disorders which are disproportionately prevalent in old age such as cancer. It has been further postulated that the proximate causes of cell damage at the molecular level are free radicals and oxidizing substances. These, for the most part, are extremely reactive bits and pieces of ordinary molecules which can become disrupted by any number of means.

Although these ideas remain somewhat speculative, there are very good reasons for taking them seriously. There is excellent evidence, for example, that many cancers arise through the cumulative acquisition of cellular mutations. And it appears that the tendency to develop certain cancers consists of the prior possession of such genetic defects, which can be passed along to one's descendants. It also happens that diets high in fruits and vegetables, which contain a variety of antioxidants and other naturally-occurring substances that are capable of quenching free radicals, reduce the risk of some cancers.

These are the facts that have led many to advocate the use of "nutritional supplements" of Beta-Carotene and Vitamins C and E (alpha-tocopherol). Others rely on such ideas to claim that these substances can be depended on to prevent cancer and lengthen one's life span. But, apparently, as is the case so often, things are more complicated than the supplement promoters would like to believe.

Earlier this year, for example, the Alpha-Tocopherol, Beta Carotene Cancer Prevention Study published the results of its 5- to 8-year follow up study of 29,133 male smokers in Finland. These subjects were chosen because, if there are any anti-cancer benefits to be had from taking such supplements, they ought to be most easily discernible among those at highest risk. Surprisingly, no reduction in the incidence of lung cancer was found. Instead, there was a statistically significant 8% excess mortality among those who took the beta-carotene supplement. [*The New England Journal of Medicine*, 330:1029, 1994.]

A case-control study was also published some years ago which found an increased risk of cervical dysplasia (the abnormality for which pap smears screen) among women with a high intake of beta-carotene. [*International Journal of Epidemiology*, 20:603, 1991.]

And just last month, the results of a multi-center trial of the same supplements were published in which the incidence of colorectal was studied. Among four groups of 751 individuals taking either placebo, beta-carotene, vitamins C, E, or all three supplements, this research showed no reduction in the occurrence of these precursors of invasive cancer over four years. [*The New England Journal of Medicine*, 331:141, 1994.]

Now it is possible, of course, to pick apart virtually any research study, and the proponents of "nutritional supplements" have been doing exactly that with both of these published reports. Concerning the Finnish study, for example, it's been argued that the study subjects who developed cancer had already progressed through the earliest stages of carcinogenesis during which antioxidant supplements exert their effects. And, with all such studies, it's possible that the dosages were either too high or, as the most vociferous critics allege, too low. It's also possible that the results in any or all of the studies were due to chance.

None of these are unreasonable criticisms, but it seems that they're seldom made when research results could be construed as supportive of the "nutritional supplement" pushers' claims. Skepticism itself is suspect when it's so selectively employed. For what is more often the case is that the flimsiest connection to what is merely suggested by the most preliminary of scientific studies is seized upon as if it were divinely-inspired scripture by many of the self-proclaimed health and longevity "experts."

But even a far less free-wheeling approach to reporting on scientific research is decried in a *Journal* editorial accompanying the third of the above-referenced articles. The editors cite the apparent flip-flops over the health benefits of oat bran and margarine, of sugar versus saccharin, and even exercise, in addition to the new findings concerning beta-carotene and vitamins C and E. They quote from a *New York Times* editorial opining "no wonder health-conscious Americans often feel they just can't win," and paraphrase the general question being asked as: "Why can't researchers get it straight the first time?"

The answer offered by the *Journal* editors is that "what medical journals publish is not received wisdom but rather working papers. Each of these is meant to communicate to other researchers and to doctors the results of one study. Each study becomes a piece of a puzzle that, when assembled, will help either to confirm or refute a hypothesis. Although a study may add to the evidence about a connection between diet or exercise and health, rarely can a single study stand alone as definitive proof." They then go on to cite a number of confounding factors that can distort the puzzle pieces and remind their readers that even "the now overwhelming evidence that cigarette smoking is extremely dangerous was accumulated bit by bit over many years."

"For this reason," they point out, "the practice of medicine, as well as clinical research, is inherently conservative. ... But because of the public's keen interest in new medical findings, the media may be less conservative. They are serving a public that believes passionately that the more we can learn about what to eat or how to live, the longer we will live." As a result, "the media reports are exaggerated or oversimplified."

The *Journal* editors recommend that the media "pay closer attention" to these four caveats:

- "An association between two events is not the same as a cause and effect."
- "Demonstrating one link in a postulated chain of events does not mean that the whole chain is proved."
- "Probabilities are not the same as certainties."
- "The way a scientific result is framed can greatly affect its impact."

They also urge the public at large to "become much more sophisticated about clinical research" but acknowledge that this "is unlikely to happen as long as science education in the United States is so poor."

"Although we would all like to believe that changes in diet or lifestyle can greatly improve our health," the editors note in conclusion, "the likelihood is that, with a few exception such as smoking cessation, many if not most such changes will produce only small effects [which] may not be consistent [and] will almost inevitably involve some sort of trade-

off."

An attitude of "moderation," not just towards diet and exercise, but "in our response to news of clinical research" is called for, suggest the *Journal* editors. "People who feel betrayed when they learn of a new study showing that vitamin E and carotene do not protect against cancer should ask themselves why they so readily believed that antioxidants had this effect in the first place and why they now believe that there is no such effect."

Finally, to muddy the waters just a bit more on the subject of antioxidants, there is the work of researchers at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago. There, Mark Gurney and colleagues appear to have found an animal model for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, the same crippling neurological disorder from which cosmologist Stephen Hawking suffers. According to a report in *Science* [264:1663, 1994], the animal model is a mouse into which a gene for a mutant Cu,Zn superoxide dismutase (SOD) has been introduced. SOD is an enzyme which eliminates superoxide radicals by converting them into hydrogen peroxide, which is, in turn, converted to water and oxygen by another enzyme, catalase.

But, so far, the indications are that the mutant SOD is not simply disabled. Gurney himself has declared that "We now have genetic proof for the mechanism. It's a dominant gain of function." Just what that "gain of function" is remains to be discovered, but there is some evidence already that SOD does more than break down superoxide radicals. Compare that to the recently-discovered fact that nitric oxide, a highly reactive chemical species, actually serves as an important neurotransmitter which is involved in, of all things, penile erection.

All these considerations should serve to remind us that there is still a great deal still to be learned about the metabolism of free radicals and other highly reactive molecules. Anyone who knows anything about chemistry, moreover, should know that many chemical reactions are freely reversible. Thus, although vitamins C, E, and beta-carotene can act as antioxidants, they can also *produce* free radicals. Thus, there are very good reasons to question the simple-minded supposition that, where these and similar substances are concerned, if a little is good, then a lot must be better.

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000. Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and a North Texas Skeptics Technical Advisor.

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Skeptical News & Views

OPEN FORUM *This column is the "readers' forum", open to any and all! Please send your items to the Editor by the 15th of each month for inclusion in the next month's issue. —Ed.*

Evolutionary View

Creationists are fond of pointing out that even Darwin was puzzled by how an organ such as the eye could have evolved by small and incremental stages. They rarely add that Darwin went on to say that:

"Yet reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from a perfect eye to one very imperfect and simple, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist; if further, the eye does vary ever so slightly, and the variations be inherited, which is certainly the case; and if any variation or modification in the organ be ever useful to an animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, can hardly be considered real."

Darwin is vindicated in these remarks by the work of researchers Dan Nilsson and Susanne Pelger, who have published the results [in *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, B256:53, 1994] of their computer simulations in which they study the evolution of what begins as a light sensitive layer sandwiched between a transparent protective layer above and a pigmented layer below, a kind of primordial eye. Their program allows random variations in the local refractive index of the transparent layer and physical deformations of not more than 1% per iteration. The only other constraint was that

the calculated visual acuity of the system must improve, simulating the selective pressure to see better.

"The results were swift and decisive," observes Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins, who reviewed the findings in *Nature*. [368:690, 1994] "A trajectory of steadily improving acuity led unhesitatingly from the flat beginning through a shallow cup to a steadily deepening cup. The transparent layer thickened to fill the cup and smoothly curved its outer surface. And then, almost like a conjuring trick, a portion of this transparent filling condensed into a local, spherical subregion of higher refractive index - not uniformly higher, but a gradient of refractive index such that the spherical region functioned as an excellent graded-index lens."

Nilsson and Pelger, notes Dawkins, "chose values of heritability, coefficient of variation and intensity of selection from published observations from the field ... [and] for each assumption they made, they wanted to err in the direction of overestimating the time taken for the eye to evolve. They even went so far as to assume that any new generation differed in only one part of the eye: simultaneous changes in different parts of the eye, which would have speeded up evolution, were banned. But even with these conservative assumptions, the time taken to evolve a fish eye from flat skin was under 400,000 generations ... a geological blink."

— Tim Gorski, M.D.

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Pseudohistory: Proving the Holocaust

The Refutation of Revisionism & The Restoration of History

By Michael Shermer

Excerpted with the kind permission of the author from Skeptic, Vol. II, No. 4, published by The Skeptics Society.

If we are going to live up to Spinoza's Dictum (one of the mottoes of this magazine) "I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them" then it is not enough to dismiss revisionist's claims as anti-Semitic pornography. We must understand the claims, the revisionists, and the Holocaust itself, in order to understand how and why they want to revise it.

Does the Holocaust need to be proven, as my title implies? On one level, no, because it has already been proved by historians over the past 50 years of archival research, oral histories, and physical site inspections. But on another level a scientific one (and history can be a science) every knowledge claim must be proved and improved. There are no self-evident truths in science, and no doctrines that should be taken on faith. The Holocaust, like evolution, is robustly supported and generally accepted by all but a fringe minority, but it must nevertheless be continually tested, regularly revised, and constantly improved.

This essay is divided into four parts: ... (4) illustrating how history can be distinguished from pseudohistory *the rewriting of the past for present or personal purposes*. I am no Tolstoy, nor am I a Holocaust specialist. As a professional historian (with research interests in the history of science and the philosophy of history) and publisher of *Skeptic*, I do not intend to prove the Holocaust so much as to demonstrate how the Holocaust is proven. This is an exercise in historical and scientific methodology to demonstrate that pseudohistory cannot succeed when scientific methodology is applied to studying the past.

Common Methodologies of Fringe Groups

In examining the revisionists' history and literature I am struck by similarity of their methodologies with other fringe groups. Since they are not consciously modeling themselves after, for example, the creationists, this may be an evolutionary sequence and ideological pattern of many, if not most, fringe groups trying to move into the mainstream.

1. Early on, there is a wide diversity of thought and members, representing the extreme fringes of society. They have

little success in entering the mainstream (creationism in the 1950s; revisionism in the 1970s).

2. As the movement grows and evolves there is an attempt by the more conservative members to disassociate themselves and their organization from the radical fringe and establish scientific or scholarly credentials (creationism in the 1970s when it became "creation-science;" revisionism in the 1970s with the founding of the IHR, and their recent break with Carto).
3. During this drive toward acceptability there is a change in emphasis away from anti-establishment and toward a more positive statement of beliefs (creationists abandoned the anti-evolution tactic and adopted the "equal time" rhetoric; revisionists are at present trying to divorce themselves from their racist, anti-Semitic past).
4. To enter public institutions such as schools, fringe groups will use the First Amendment and claim their "freedom of speech" is being violated when they are not allowed to be heard (creationists legislated equal-time laws in several states in the 1970s and 1980s; Bradley Smith's ad campaigns in college newspapers).
5. To get the public's attention they shift the burden of proof from themselves to the establishment, demanding "just one proof" (creationists asking for "just one fossil" that proves transitional forms exist; revisionists demanding proof that even one Jew was killed in a gas chamber).

Common Fallacies of Fringe Groups

The parallels between the fallacies of reasoning of revisionists and other fringe groups, especially the creationists, are also eerily similar.

1. They attack their opponents' weak point, concentrate on their mistakes, and rarely say anything definitive about their own position, so they cannot be attacked (creationists hammer on the gaps in the fossil record; revisionists on the inconsistencies between eyewitness accounts).
2. They find errors made by scientists or historians and exploit these as if *all* their conclusions are wrong (creationists love the story of the pig's tooth that was wrongly labeled as *Hesperopithecus*, or "Nebraska Man;" revisionists adore the human-soap myths; they cling to Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer's reinterpretation of the Wannsee conference as only a "stage" in the Final Solution; they call attention to the historians' reduction of the number killed at Auschwitz from four million to one million, calling it "the incredible shrinking Holocaust," as if historians never make revisions).
3. They quote, usually out of context, leading mainstream figures to buttress their own position (creationists quote Gould, Eldridge, Mayr; revisionists quote Hilberg, Bauer and even leading Nazis).
4. They mistake genuine, honest debates between scientists and scholars for a debate about the veracity of the entire field (creationists cite the gradualism-punctuated equilibrium debate as an argument about whether evolution happened or not; revisionists use the intentionalist-functional debate about the development of the Holocaust as an argument about whether it happened or not).
5. They focus on what is *not* known and ignore what *is* known, carefully selecting data that fit, and ignoring data that do not fit (creationists continually ask for new transitional forms and pass over those that are discovered; revisionists concentrate on what we do not know about the gas chambers and disregard the eyewitness accounts and forensic tests that support the theory).

Convergence of Evidence: The Key to Historical Proof

Neither evolution nor the Holocaust can be disproved by minor errors or inconsistencies here and there, for the simple reason that they were never proved by these lone bits of data in the first place. To understand why, we must consider the nature of proof in the science of history. How do we know *anything* happened in the past?

In 1840, the English philosopher of science, William Whewell, published his classic work on *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*, in which he talked at length about inductions, or generalizations drawn from specific facts. But to prove a theory one must have more than just one generalization. And these multiple inductions must all point to a definite conclusion, building upon one another independently but in conjunction. Whewell said of these injunctions that they "jumped together" to establish the veracity of a theory. A fond coiner of words (e.g., "scientist"), Whewell called this method of thinking a *consilience of inductions*.

A less cumbersome phrase might be a *convergence of evidence*. Evolution, for example, is proved by the convergence of evidence from geology, paleontology, botany, zoology, herpetology, entomology, bio-geography, anatomy, physiology

and comparative anatomy. No one piece of evidence from these diverse fields says "evolution" on it. A fossil is a snapshot. But a fossil in a geological bed, with other fossils of the same and different species, compared to species in lower strata and upper strata, contrasted to modern similar organisms, juxtaposed with species in other parts of the world, past and present, and so on, turn that snapshot into a motion picture. Each set of inductions from each field jumps together to a grand conclusion: evolution. This is how narrative history becomes scientific history. The process is no different in proving the Holocaust.

The Restoration of History

Pseudohistory *the rewriting of the past for present personal or political purposes* takes many forms, Holocaust revisionism being just one. The question is, why now? Several answers are proffered by Lipstadt and others. People associate fascism with the Nazis, and the Nazis with mass murder. Disprove the Holocaust, and fascism loses this stigma. Also, victims of inhumanity are granted a certain amount of moral authority: strip them of that and you take away their power.

There are other, deeper reasons, I believe, that underlie the revisionist movement, having to do with the larger movements of pseudoscience and pseudohistory. Reason and rationality, as skeptics know too well, are under attack on all fronts. No claim, no matter how absurd, is immune from belief by someone or some group.

History empowers, so it is acceptable to deconstruct the history of those in power, and reconstruct it for those who are not. The solution to the problem of pseudohistory is not *just* in refuting the claims of pseudohistorians. We must also treat history as a scientific discipline, concerned not only with names, dates and narratives, but with analyses and methodologies. We saw that the Holocaust is proved through a convergence of evidence: a concept taken from a philosopher of science. But this is, in fact, how *any* historical event is proved.

There is a convergence of evidence that comes together from different sources to tell a story. Whether the story is told in a narrative form or an analysis is irrelevant, as long as the facts are presented and the interpretations are made within the boundaries of the evidence. If one practiced history as the revisionists do in trying to challenge the Holocaust story, there would *be* no history. The past would dissolve into a Rorschach-like blot in which observers see whatever they like. For this reason, we need now, more than ever, to make history a science. If we do not, it could be the end of history.

Michael Shermer is an Assistant Professor of History of Science at Occidental College, the Director and CEO of The Skeptics Society, and the publisher and editor-in-chief of Skeptic. © 1994 by Michael Shermer. Reprinted by permission of the author. Address subscription inquiries to Skeptics Society, 2761 N. Marengo Ave., Altadena, CA 91001.

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The third eye

by Pat Reeder

I am swamped with work and six days beyond deadline, so I shall dispense with the fancy stuff, such as clever segues, snappy metaphors and accurate punctuation, and just throw out a bunch of stuff for you to chew on until next month.

For about ten days in July, the airwaves were clogged with truth watchdogs. It all started when President Clinton accused Rush Limbaugh of not having a "truth detector" on his show. Limbaugh responded, "I AM the truth detector!" A self-appointed media watchdog group called "FAIR" (Fairness And Accuracy In Reporting) then released a list of Limbaugh's alleged "lies," and suddenly, everyone from the New York *Times* to CNN was pontificating on who was honest and who was not.

Now, I write a nationally syndicated news and comedy service for radio stations, which means I spend many hours each day scouring all types of news sources from around the world. I will not use a story unless I have a reliable source for it, and preferably two sources. I'm so well-informed, if it rains tadpoles in Rwanda, I know about it, brother! So I believe I

am uniquely qualified to weigh in on who is getting the story straight.

First of all, as for President Clinton: I have given up on holding politicians to standards of accuracy. When politicians speak, they aren't trying to inform you, they're trying to persuade you. So I'll let him off the hook on general principle.

As for Rush Limbaugh: I hear his show regularly, and while I hardly agree with everything he says, I find that his sources are generally pretty reliable. He cites papers such as the Los Angeles *Times* and the Washington *Post*, not tabloids and right wing conspiracy rags. Many of the stories he runs I have already seen at least 24 hours earlier and can verify that he gets his facts straight most of the time ... at least, as straight as the original reporters got them. While he certainly tends to concentrate on stories that support his point of view, he tells you up front that he is an advocate for a certain position, and if you don't like it, turn off the radio. Fair enough.

Okay, so if I'm letting both Clinton and Limbaugh off the hook, who am I going to savage? Would you believe ... FAIR? While this self-righteous group is encouraging the media to attack other people's accuracy, nobody is looking into their's. Frankly, I think FAIR is just another example of a disturbing trend in news: groups with a particular political or social agenda give themselves an innocuous-sounding name and start releasing bogus statistics, which are quoted verbatim by lazy reporters who don't bother to check their facts.

FAIR (which if it were really obsessed with accuracy would call itself FAAIR) was formed as a liberal counterpoint to AIM (Accuracy In Media), a group dedicated to proving there's a liberal bias in the media. FAIR is dedicated to proving there's a conservative bias in the media. Therefore, both of these self-proclaimed guardians of journalistic integrity admit up front that they have determined their result before they've done their research. Now THERE'S objectivity in action!

I spent about 30 minutes checking the list of "lies" of which FAIR accused Limbaugh, and turned up one inaccuracy after another. For instance, FAIR accused Limbaugh of getting his information on global warming from fringe publications owned by Lyndon LaRouche. I grabbed Limbaugh's first book and turned to the chapter on the environment. The information, agree with it or not, was plainly noted as being taken from a book by ex-Atomic Energy Commissioner Dixie Lee Ray and articles in *The Washington Post*. FAIR also accused Limbaugh of lying by spreading an inaccurate story about Chelsea Clinton's school assigning the essay topic, "Why I feel guilty to be white," and claiming it came from CBS, which CBS denied. Well, the story may be bogus, but Limbaugh didn't make it up. It did originate on a CBS-owned newswire (which CBS later admitted). I got the story, too, but not from Limbaugh: it appeared on several wires and even popped up in *Playboy*, which I guess is now owned by Lyndon LaRouche.

By the way, those who remember last month's column about bogus statistics might be interested to know that in 1993, FAIR actively participated in a week-long media blitz (even appearing on ABC's *Good Morning America*) to help promote the claim that wife-beating jumps 40% on Super Bowl Sunday. A Boston *Globe* reporter finally pointed out to FAIR that the statistic was a complete sham, at which time FAIR withdrew their support. Apparently, it never occurred to these "watchdogs" to verify the claim themselves.

As Jack Nicholson might say, "Can you HANDLE the truth?!" Well, here it is: I have worked in radio and television for 18 years, and been up close and personal to many stories that have made headlines. And in all that time, I can honestly say I have never once seen a news report that was absolutely, 100% accurate in every detail. Even good reporters make human errors, and lots of bad ones slant the news to fit their views. So just be skeptical of everything you hear ... particularly shocking statistics, and ESPECIALLY if the source is a group that has endowed itself with an innocent-sounding acronym like "FAIR," "TRUTH," or "TRUSTMEIMABOYSCOUT."

And if you simply must have a media watchdog, read me. Woof!

...

Speaking of wildly misnamed lobbying groups, the Center for Science in the Public Interest is out scaring the citizenry again. After telling us that we were facing certain death if we ingested a plate of fettucini or munched a little movie popcorn, they have now turned their hysterical gaze on Mexican food. To quote Bugs Bunny, "Of course, you realize:

this means war!"

It turns out that ... brace yourself ... Mexican food is fattening! Stop the presses! Now, don't get me wrong: I'm sure there are people on certain diets who find this information useful. And if I thought the CSPI people seriously had nothing better to do with their time than sit around counting fat grams in burritos, then I would just pity their social lives and move on. My problem with the CSPI is their unscientific scare-mongering and blatant media manipulation. When the Mexican food study was announced on radio, the CSPI spokeswoman yammered on endlessly about how a chili relleno exceeds your entire daily allowance of fat grams! You could practically hear her finger wagging at the microphone as she scolded us for ignoring the danger. It's this sort of fat fetishism that drives people to buy into things like the Susan Powter diet, so expertly dissected on these pages by Dr. Tim Gorski.

I have also noticed that they have some sort of butter phobia over at the CSPI. Every food they examine is described, voice all a-quiver, as being "like eating a stick-and-a-half of butter!!" Well, let me tell you something, guys: I've eaten a lot of chili rellenos. And I've eaten a stick-and-a-half of butter. The only similarity is that they both require lots of napkins.

As is typical of the CSPI, warning those who care is not enough: ALL Mexican restaurants must now alter their menus to cope with this new public menace! They must start serving low-fat cheese, whole wheat tortillas, steamed vegetables, etc. They apparently never consider that if I wanted that stuff, I wouldn't be at a Mexican restaurant in the first place, or that I might prefer living 65 years eating enchiladas to living 75 years eating tofu. They are flush with victory that their scare campaign against movie popcorn (they yelled "Fat!" in a crowded theater) has pressured many theater owners into selling only air-popped corn, which is suitable primarily for packing breakables. They now wish to tell us what we are allowed to eat at Mexican restaurants, too. They apparently dream of a world in which Mexican restaurants offer diners bowls of rice cakes with carrot juice salsa, and you'll eat it whether you like it or not.

Well, this time, they have gone too far! I hereby serve warning on the Center for Science in the Public Interest: if you want to discover the fastest way to die in a Mexican restaurant, then stand between me and my chili relleno.

•••

And now, let's grab a biscuit and sop up some remaining news globules ...

Showtime will soon begin running a made-for-cable movie called "Roswell," all about the alleged flying saucer crash of the 1940s. Advance reviews say it's well-made, but watch it as a sci-fi movie, not as a documentary. I doubt they'll bother telling you that one of the startling "new witnesses" who recently came forward to flesh out this old wheeze was actually one of the discredited old witnesses who just changed his name.

The only source I have for this next story is Jim Hightower's radio show, but he claims it got it from the New York *Times*: Hightower says that G.M. is sending their Oldsmobile dealers on weekend New Age retreats, in which they get in touch with customers and each other by skipping through the woods, chanting mantras, and for some inexplicable reason, pressing their noses to each others' wristwatches. You might want to leave the Rolex at home. Wear the waterproof Timex instead.

Some good news: *Spy* magazine is back from the dead, after going under for several months! Their comeback issue contains some hilarious stuff, including a review of several bestselling books detailing near-death experiences. Note that despite their claim that they are revealing the ultimate truth, the authors' descriptions of the afterlife do not match. So who's right? Let's dig up a dead book critic for an expert opinion.

Speaking of brain death, a group of "immortals" (people who have rejected the concept of death and therefore will live forever) met out west recently. What they had to say to reporters was worthless. All you need to know is that since their last confab, three "immortals" have kicked the bucket (they must've ordered the chili relleno). Hope they're really dead, or it's going to be awfully boring living forever in those coffins.

About 300 people gathered at the University of California at Santa Cruz recently for the convention of the American Association of Dowsters. One woman claimed she uses dowsing when buying makeup, to determine whether it contains anything she's allergic to. In addition to the traditional nonsense, the convention also offered such classes as "Dowsing and Past Lives" and "Interspecies Communication" ("Fetch the stick, boy!"). If they really want to prove that dowsing works, why not schedule their convention for Death Valley, then try to find water once they arrive?

The Knight-Ridder newswire recently carried a long story about a guy who is traveling around the country (he was in Florida at the time) conducting fire-walking seminars in conjunction with New Age paraphernalia stores. After preparing his clients mentally with several hours of psychobabble, and lightening their step by emptying their heavy wallets, the teacher leads them in a quick barefoot stroll across some not-nearly-as-hot-as-they-look coals. One man got three blisters, but this was because "he lost his concentration." Nowhere in the long, credulous feature did the reporter point out that this is a ridiculous scam. Skeptics groups across America have duplicated the same stunt, leading hundreds of laughing volunteers across the coals without benefit of a three hour B.S. session. The only thing that burns me is that we didn't think to charge them \$300 apiece.

KDFW (Channel 4) News seems to be trying to redeem themselves, after a series of goofy pro-pseudoscience reports, with an expose by Ole Anthony of W.V. Grant's fundraising methods. The story revolves around Grant's ALLEGED (gotta make the lawyers happy) letter to his followers, asking them to send him money to repair nonexistent tornado damage to his humble, \$840,000 mansion in DeSoto. This is certainly a better use of your money than giving it to the real victims of the Lancaster tornado, many of whom were acquaintances of mine who lost everything they own. If W.V. Grant wasn't hit by a tornado already, I wouldn't be surprised if it happens soon.

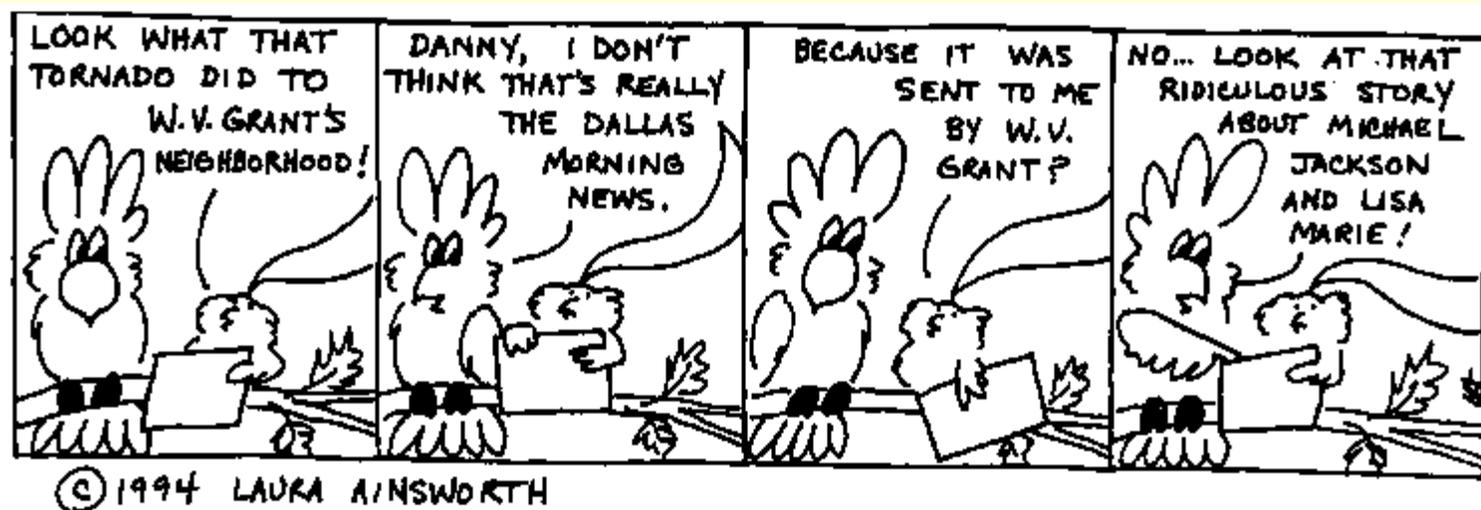
Speaking of good works in the name of religion, I'll leave you with two quick stories. Moderate Muslims in Paris have denounced the "Middle Age practices" of fundamentalists, as well as lax government regulations, after a 19-year old Muslim woman was tortured to death by her brother and two clerics during a five-hour "exorcism." And before you start feeling like a smug, superior American, you should know that last spring, Elsiah, Illinois, experienced the biggest measles outbreak in the U.S. since 1992. Almost 200 people were stricken, all but two of whom had never been vaccinated. The area is home to large numbers of Christian Scientists.

And how was *your* month?!

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Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth



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