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An all-too-unpleasant *Encounter With the Unexplained*

by [Gary P. Posner, M.D.](#)

To say that I am disappointed with the PAX-TV series [Encounters With the Unexplained](#) -- particularly its October 6 program "Is There Power in Prayer?" -- would be one of the great understatements of all time.

Last January, when Grizzly Adams Productions field producer/director David W. Balsiger explained to me how his new series' "Prayer" program (and the others) would be balanced with skepticism, I could not have been more pleased with his approach. Though I would have to drive from Tampa to Orlando for the interview, I accepted his invitation to be the show's featured skeptic to counter several claims that scientific evidence has proven prayer's miraculous healing powers. (He even offered me a \$250 honorarium -- \$100 of which I donated to TBS.)

Balsiger's questions, eight of which had been pre-faxed to me so that I could prepare pithy responses, were targeted to cover the show's main points. As an accompanying information sheet had explained, "We will be asking you a number of . . . questions about Prayer that will be cut into the show opposite proponents." As they say, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to grasp the concept: My responses (though perhaps not *all* of them) were being elicited for inclusion, as balance, in the program.

Nor does it take a genius to appreciate researcher Kari Lintner's e-mail from June, in which she told me that "David Balsiger was very happy with your [January interview] on the Prayer episode, and highly recommended you for this [additional] special [on Heaven and Near-Death Experiences]." Her note was soon followed by a fax from Balsiger's office, asking if I would come prepared to also "respond to some questions for . . . another show -- End Times [Prophecies]."

I gladly accepted, and drove once again to Orlando to be interviewed for those additional programs. While there, Balsiger expressed such satisfaction with my performance that he asked me a few "bonus" questions for his Noah's Ark and Shroud of Turin programs, in the event that he didn't find another skeptic in time (I recommended a few). As Balsiger put it to me, no matter how well I was doing, "We can't use you in *all* the shows!"

And I wouldn't expect, or even want, them to. So I was not upset in the least when I found out that I did not appear in the two "bonus" episodes (I also was edited out of the End Times show; the Heaven show will not air until next year). But when the Prayer show finally aired on October 6, I could hardly believe what I was seeing.

My performance, which had drawn such praise from Balsiger, had been reduced to a single, 17-second snippet, about 22 minutes into the hour-long show. I seem to recall another skeptic being shown for a few seconds as well (I can't bring myself to sit through the entire program again). But that was it as far as any semblance of "balance" was concerned. Sitting in front of my living room TV, I felt as if I was attending a church-sponsored function.

When my name and affiliation were flashed beneath my face, the graphic was then withdrawn so quickly that I could not even digest what it had said. Upon reviewing that three-second portion of the tape, I saw that I had been misidentified as the "Editor" of [The Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine](#). Balsiger was aware that I am one of a number of contributing editors (Dr. Wallace Sampson is the journal's editor).

I had to view my abbreviated appearance a third time to notice something else much more disturbing: The "M.D." had been left out of my name in the graphic. I was thus presented as but a magazine editor, whereas, for example, author [Larry Dossey](#) (*Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*), who appeared immediately before me (and elsewhere throughout the show), had his "M.D." credential intact. While I hoped that the slight had been inadvertent, by this time I couldn't help but begin having thoughts to the contrary.

Shortly after the show aired, I made my feelings known to Balsiger via e-mail, with a copy to several interested parties. I soon received a note from Barry Karr, executive director of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal ([CSICOP](#)), which publishes *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine and the *Skeptical Briefs* newsletter. By now I had already seen the [Grizzly Adams Productions website](#), which makes no bones about their desire to produce "Amazing Films" as opposed to balanced ones. But Karr had recalled Balsiger's name from years earlier, and pointed me to three items in *Skeptical Briefs* (March, September and December 1993), as well as articles in two 1993 issues of the humanist magazine [Free Inquiry](#).

My producer/director turned out to be the very same David W. Balsiger responsible for, among other similar programs, the notorious two-hour *Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark* special that had aired on CBS in February 1993. An "Open Letter to CBS" by Dr. Ivan Stanko (Mar. '93 *Briefs*) states that while that show had also been "advertised as a balanced account of evidence with skepticism," the two skeptics "who tried to contradict your 'experts' were set up, with their statements drowned out. They received a total of less than 20 seconds." An accompanying editor's box (titled "Media Menace") on the same *Briefs* page lamented about how "Every once in a while, a television program comes along that is so outlandish in what it presents as fact that CSICOP gets bombarded by letters

and phone calls from outraged viewers. [Such] is our great misfortune today . . . "

Upon reading anthropology professor Richard A. Fox's Summer '93 *Free Inquiry* article, it became apparent to me that my suspicions of game-playing with the on-screen credentials were not necessarily born of paranoia. One of several examples cited by him from the *Noah's Ark* program involved a proponent named Don Shockey, whose graphic labeled him as a "Dr." and a "professor of anthropology." According to Fox, "Shockey is not [listed] in the [American Anthropological Association] directory, nor is [he a] 'Dr.'" A statement issued by the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (sponsored by *Free Inquiry*), published as a sidebar to Prof. Fox's article, noted that "Dr. Henry Morris was presented as a 'hydraulic engineer' without reference to his association [as leader of] the Institute for Creation Research," a religious "creation science" organization.

But that's not the half of it. An actor named George Jammal had decided to test Balsiger's credulity by soaking a piece of native California wood, baking it in his own oven, and then approaching Balsiger with his "genuine" fragment of Noah's Ark. *Free Inquiry's* senior editor Gerald Larue (who was told by Jammal of his "sting" before the CBS show aired) reported in the Winter '93-94 issue that Balsiger himself had been warned *six months prior to air date* that Jammal's Ark-fragment story was fiction, yet proceeded to present it as fact on his network television special:

David Fasold, who has engaged in a critical evaluation of ark stories for years, states in the May/June 1993 (No. 13) issue of *The Noahide Society's Ark-Update* that in August 1992 he personally told David W. Balsiger, chief researcher for Sun International Pictures, Inc., that, having reviewed the tapes of an interview with George Jammal, "Jammal is lying through his teeth." . . . [To Fasold it was] clear that Jamal was not only contradicting himself but was unfamiliar with the locale.

Had Balsiger's Sun International company carbon-dated the piece of wood, its real age could have been scientifically determined. In fact, as Fox's article and the CSER statement both pointed out, Balsiger's program had misled viewers about another piece of wood retrieved in 1969 from Mount Ararat, the 4,500-year-old Ark's supposed resting place. It turns out that this fragment had already been carbon-dated by several independent labs, and was found to date back to only about 700 A.D.

The Jammal affair, and the program's aftermath, prompted Balsiger to issue an "Open Letter" of his own, dated November 12, 1993, which was reproduced in the Dec. '93 *Briefs*. Excerpts:

In one of Sun International Pictures' TV specials, which aired on the CBS-TV network last February, an interviewee shown on screen for three minutes executed a very clever hoax against us. He and his accomplice belong to various secular humanist organizations intent on getting not only our highly rated biblical-themed shows off network television, but also all of our CBS-TV productions canceled.

This past week, the hoaxer managed to turn his unethical deed into a victory by getting CBS-TV to cancel all of our shows in production . . . [including] our upcoming TV special on UFO phenomena.

There is something wrong with the ethics of the news media when they glorify the acts of

humanist hoaxers who intentionally and successfully deceive 40 million TV viewers and then blame the show's producer and CBS for not discovering their elaborate hoax. . . . [This is] one more example of humanists who tout themselves as "ethical humanists" being neither ethical nor honest when it comes to advancing their hidden agenda. . . .

Though seven years have since elapsed, Grizzly Adams Productions -- which closely resembles the old Sun International -- may consider itself in a perennial holy war with the infidels. In his response to my complaints, Balsiger says, "I also expressed my disappointment to the editor that you were used only 17 seconds. I urged everyone in the management flow that we need to give more time to our critics in all of our shows. Hopefully, this will happen in the future. . . . I often get [unfairly] blamed for a lot of things in our shows. . . . Sometimes [the editors] may listen and other times they pay no attention to my suggestions. . . . Some shows in the current series have aired without me seeing the show before or even during the broadcast."

Balsiger and company's most Grizzly sin, as I see it, is not so much in their programs' paucity of skeptical balance, but in their pretense/pretext of such. On the other hand, perhaps the editors consider twenty seconds or so to be a fair and reasonable amount of "balance" for their shows. After all, that's twenty more seconds of "balance" than one normally will hear in a church sermon.

Addendum: Following publication of the above article, Jim Lippard has made me aware of these two items that he wrote for [Skeptic magazine](http://www.discord.org/~lippard/skeptic/02.3.lippard-ark-hoax.html) in 1994:

<http://www.discord.org/~lippard/skeptic/02.3.lippard-ark-hoax.html>

<http://www.discord.org/~lippard/skeptic/02.4.lippard-ark-hoax.html>

Snippets



In an agreement reached between the Florida Attorney General's office and Access Resource Services of Fort Lauderdale, Floridians who wish to take a job as a "telephone psychic" will now be required to -- get this -- sign a sworn statement affirming that they are truly psychic! Bob Buchner, a well-meaning assistant Attorney General in Fort Lauderdale, says, "Consumers have the right to expect that the people [the psychic hotlines] hire claim to have psychic abilities." Although applicants who falsely claim to be "psychic" will be subject to perjury charges, employment-law attorney Bill Amlong notes that "It's going to be virtually unenforceable." The action was precipitated by complaints from former *genuine* "telephone psychics" like Barbara Melit: "[They] came in off the street . . . They had no experience whatsoever as being a psychic. . . . They had hit bottom and they

basically needed a job to keep them supplied with alcohol and drugs."

(AP via *Tampa Tribune*, Sept. 25; *Miami Herald* via *St. Pete. Times*, Oct. 6)

Brenda Dupre, a "fifth-generation psychic" who has reportedly assisted law enforcement officials in criminal investigations, has recently moved to St. Petersburg from Michigan. Her "gift from God" also allows her to perform Tarot card readings about relationships, health, and the like.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Oct. 26)

The Florida recount fiasco and its aftermath may not have been anticipated, but the underlying scenario had been accurately predicted -- in print -- three months earlier. Which of the world's greatest "psychics" nailed the election result? Actually, two of them -- Jacqueline Stallone's year-old miniature pinschers. According to Sylvester's psychic-astrologer mom, her pooches "channel messages from the spirit world and telepathically send them to me. I ask a question, close my eyes, and the first thing that comes into my mind is the answer." Reporter Roy Rivenburg of the *Los Angeles Times*: "Who's going to win the presidential election?" Spirits via the dogs via Stallone: "Bush, by a razor-thin margin of a couple of hundred votes." Jackie, take a well-deserved bow! Wow!

(*L.A. Times* via *St. Pete. Times*, Aug. 4)

TBS in the Media

As per last issue's advance notice, Gary Posner has been scheduled for some time to appear on ABC-TV's *20/20*, in producer Caron Shapiro's report on the recent spate of medical studies purporting to demonstrate the miraculous healing powers of intercessory prayer (unless the story has already aired by press time). And for better or worse, Posner did appear in the Oct. 6 episode of the PAX-TV series *Encounters With the Unexplained* (see above article).

Posner was also invited by compiler/editor Ronald Story to contribute the write-ups on the "Face on Mars" and "Philip Klass" for [*The Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters*](#), to be published in 2001 by New American Library (a division of Penguin Putnam).

King of the "Psychics"?

TBS recently received a telephone call from Scott Frank, a Homosassa "psychic" interested in our "[\\$1,000 Challenge](#)." Upon reading your "aura," he can tell you everything about yourself, and then cure your medical ills!

Unfortunately, the conversation was cut short when he ran out of pocket change (before getting cut off, we suggested he reverse the charges). One might think that anyone so gifted could afford to own a telephone -- but who's to say? And maybe he'll call back.

Abraham, Carl and Steve

On the night of Oct. 30, when he slipped silently away into Carl Sagan's co-op, Steve Allen left behind not only a family in mourning, but much of the nation.

Terry Smiljanich and I had the pleasure of chauffeuring Steve around town on behalf of TBS one day in 1989 during his book tour for [Dumbth](#), a term he coined for the muddle-headedness that infests our society. More than a comedian and prolific composer and author, Allen was a passionate advocate for critical thinking, and one of the best friends of the skeptical movement.

Although he won't recognize me when I eventually pay him a visit, he'll remember the conversation we had as I drove him from Waldenbooks in St. Petersburg to his Clearwater Beach hotel. Ever since that day, I considered him to be a personal friend. But I suspect that almost everyone who ever met him felt the same way. --G.P.

Letters to the Editor

Editor: I would like permission to copy the following extract from Terry A. Smiljanich's "[Chairman's Corner](#)" column in Tampa Bay Skeptics Report Online (Winter 1996-97): "A renowned magician has spent his most recent years exposing psychic fraud. . . . This magician has put on elaborate entertainments to demonstrate to the audiences the ease with which they can be fooled by chicanery. As a reward for his efforts, he has been hounded in the courts with frivolous lawsuits and vilified in the pseudoscientific community."

My intention is to use the sentences as an illustrative citation to accompany my entry on "chicanery" in a glossary of argumentation that I am preparing for my students. The glossary will be published privately in Hong Kong, in a print run of about 300 copies, and sold to my students at cost.

--Gregory James
Professor and Director, Language Centre
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Kowloon
lcgjames@ust.hk

Sounds like James Randi, but Terry was writing about Harry Houdini! Permission was granted, of course! --G.P.

Editor: I am working on an exhibition catalogue that accompanies a show entitled "Divine Mirrors: the Madonna Unveiled," which traces images of the Virgin Mary from the 13th century to present. The catalogue's guest essayist, Robert Orsi, Professor of Religion at Indiana University, mentions the 1996 Clearwater apparition in his essay and we would like to include a photo of it. I came across [your article](#) on the internet [TBS Report, Spring 1997], and saw the terrific photo by Guss Wilder III. I wish to ask TBS and Mr. Wilder for permission to use his photograph.

--Rebecca Mongeon, Curatorial Assistant
Davis Museum and Cultural Center
Wellesley College
rmongeon@wellesley.edu

Permission was again granted, of course! --G.P.

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