

# SWIFT

"...the chief end I propose to myself in all my labours is to vex the world rather than divert it."  
Jonathan Swift



jref

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*Kari Coleman – actress, skeptic and our West Coast remote viewer – recently played the part of a psychic for Penn & Teller's Sin City Spectacular variety show (Sunday night at 10, Monday night at 9 [Eastern time] on cable TV's FX channel). If you think being a psychic friend would be a piece of cake, your crystal ball must be smudged. Here is Kari's firsthand account.*



## *My Psychic Adventure*

by Kari Coleman

I'm sorry to say that my time of skepticism has come to an end, as – much to my surprise – I am a psychic. Yes, it is hard to believe, but you must let yourself go and be one with your psychic power, as I did last night. Well that, or get hired to play the part of a psychic and be horrified at how easy it is to make people believe.

I am taping a bit for *Penn & Teller's Sin City Spectacular* (the most skeptical show on TV) and I needed to be able to fool people with cards, palmistry and other “psychic” talents. Caesar's Magical Empire, a major Las Vegas magic showcase, allowed me to work in character as a

psychic Tarot card reader to get some practice. Oh, man.

I was dressed in their “Spurina” costume: a flowing purple gown with built-in breasts that created more cleavage than I have had the joy of knowing, this black kind of Las Vegas-conception-of-Cleopatra-looking wig and a lot of makeup. (I was to be the psychic advisor to Caesar, and judging from the costume, he enjoyed more than my “powers.”) I was set up to either walk around or use one of the tables in the “spirit bar.” I'd be working in the hub area with the pyrotechnic show: 30 foot flames, 3 adolescent close-up magicians in tights and me.

I was so nervous. I walked around for a while with my stupid Tarot cards in my hand going over my memorized lines and trying to

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# RANDI RANTS

**OPINIONS FROM  
THE PUBLISHER**

by James Randi

## WINGING IT

**W**ill wonders never cease? A local member of the JREF dropped by to show us the photo you see reproduced here. The chap being snapped was quite unaware that he was being observed by a “guardian angel” that hovered over his shoulder, equipped with an economy-sized crucifix held in its left arm. The close-up reveals remarkable detail.

Alas, no miracle. The evergreens in the background were bordering a sunlit area beyond, and the up-pointed branches produced the effect of a flowing robe and an outstretched wing. From a slightly different point of view, we’d probably not have had a shape we could relate to. This photo provides an excellent example of how easily we can

find meaning in chance configurations, in much the way that viewers of the well-known Rorschach “ink blots” can find various figures – and even words – in essentially random but symmetrically-replicated shapes.

And – not to be picky-picky – but angels don’t have wings, anyway. What? Of course angels have wings! *Au contraire*. Look at any concordance of the Bible, under “wing,” and you’ll find that only birds have wings, in Holy Writ. Only birds, and one other class of critters – demons. Yep. The wings-on-angels notion arose when medieval painters began putting butterfly wings on the shoulders of angels to differentiate them from ordinary folks, and those wings just grew and grew over the years, like so many other ideas.

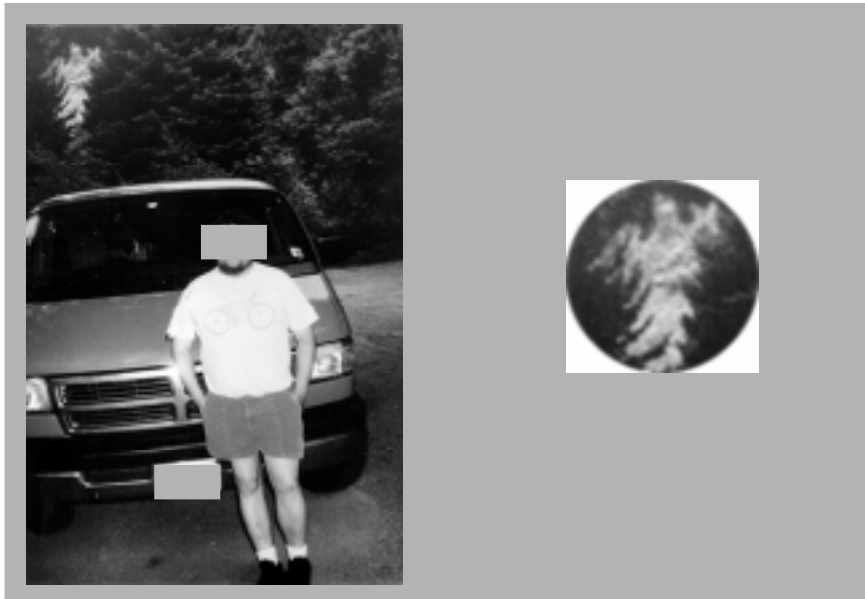
Wait a minute! Maybe those winged guardian angels that so many folks all over the world have been seeing are actually demons? The Dark One has so many tricks.....!

I was amused to see how the U.S. Postal Service goofed on one of their popular Valentine’s Day “Love” stamps. It’s the one showing what purports to be the chubby Cupid with multicolored wings. Wrong. That’s taken from a Raphael painting known as The Sistine Madonna, and it’s a cherub. Cherubs are second-order angels, often shown as children with wings. Cupid is the Roman (pagan!) god of carnal love, who does have wings and a bow-and-arrow. He’s definitely not an angel.

Life – and love – is difficult, isn’t it?

## BIG COVERAGE, WELL DONE!

**H**aving done literally hundreds of TV and radio interviews over the years, I’m always a bit sensitive to what the producers and editors can do with the raw material I provide. The final product is often an unpleasant surprise, and even such reputable shows as CBS-TV’s *48 Hours* have used “creative editing” to lessen the impact of my investigations, as they did with their treatment of James Van Praagh, the man who says he speaks with dead folks. So, when Univision, the rather ubiquitous Spanish-language television network, approached JREF and asked to do an interview, a soft alarm buzzer went off in this old head. Since Spanish is not a language I handle at all well, I



could see the possible pitfalls I might encounter. Knowing that the colorful Walter Mercado, astrologer to literally millions of Hispanics around the world, was closely connected with the network, I felt that the JREF and its goals might not be well represented on Univision. Forgive me my pessimism, but it is based on previous experience.

### **Lights, Camera, Action!**

The Univision people moved in with lights, cameras, microphones, cables, reflectors, and the very attractive Maria Celeste Arrarez. This perceptive woman was to do the interview. I hit her up front with my fears that the JREF might be edited into a position that could be less than satisfying for us, and asked her what kind of treatment we might expect. Ms. Arrarez was straightforward and understanding of the problem. She assured me that the producer, Paula Gomez, was determined to allow us to say our piece, and since we had promised them José Luis Alvarez, the performance artist who created the "Carlos" character for Channel 9 Australia years ago, they could do at least that part of the interview in Spanish. I was somewhat reassured, but reserved judgment.

Well, things went swimmingly. Mr. Alvarez was even asked his opinion of Walter Mercado, though that comment was not in the final cut of the show. The finished job was, in all respects, a huge success for Univision and for JREF. It was strong, fair, penetrating, and satisfactory in every respect. It featured a live interview with Mercado, who started out strongly, agreeing that the JREF was doing the right thing

### **"CARLOS THE CHANNELER"**

The "Carlos Caper" was a hoax in which José Alvarez created a "channeler" character at the request of the Australian version of *60 Minutes*, in order to show that any reasonably-skilled artist could do a character that would convince the unwary public, even if glaring inconsistencies were built into the scenario. He invented cities, authorities, periodicals, and media sources that one phone call could have established as being bogus. That phone call was never placed, since there was a danger of spoiling a perfectly good story. Alvarez's hoax worked perfectly, and was disclosed in full on Channel 9 TV in Sydney. — J.R.

#### *A personal added word from José Luis Alvarez...*

In November, Univision TV did a segment featured on the highly-rated show *Primer Impacto* dealing with supernatural beliefs, specifically in the Latin-American community. Presenter Maria Celeste Arrarez interviewed me concerning the "Carlos" affair, feeling that it was important to expose Latin-Americans to this work, since it had not previously been shown in that venue. This presentation established a new platform for open discussion of these matters. Well-recognized "psychic astrologer" Walter Mercado, who also works for Univision, was closely questioned by Ms. Arrarez. You should know that the government of Puerto Rico recently named Mercado their official "Messenger of Love & Peace." Such questionable claims being validated by governments is alarming indeed. Pressed by Arrarez, Mercado stated that he didn't need to answer to Mr. Randi, since he was "touched by God." Hopefully, this program is the beginning of further productive interaction between Univision and the JREF. We were informed that *Primer Impacto* received one of its highest ratings ever: 21 points. The producers told us that it was their most effective show of 1998. The show was repeated on Sunday, January 3. — J.L.A.

exposing the fakers, but of course exempting himself from that crowd. When he was asked how he could prove that what he did was genuine, he flustered about, invoking God and assuring viewers that his myriad of followers was all he needed in the way of validation. He referred to me as "only a magician," and declared that before he could discuss these weighty matters with me, I'd have to spend four years studying at a university in order to understand the ancient "science" of astrology. It was not one of his better moments.

#### **Humdrum Past Lives**

The program closed with Brian Weiss, the very successful author who "regresses" his psychiatric patients into former lives and manages

to extract from them marvelous tales of UFO abductions, careers as brave warriors and royal personages, and every sort of Gothic romance connection the hack writers of such material have ever placed on the newsstands. His subjects, fortunately for him, never have humdrum former lives. Weiss was, in our opinion, unconvincing, and rather a bad tapering-off for the show. But, after all, he's a scientist. I'm only a magician.

This program reached many millions of Spanish-language viewers internationally, and might well have been their first exposure to the JREF and our work. We could not have asked for a more competent and ef-

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efficient handling of the subject matter. Our sincere thanks to producer Gomez and host Arraraz. You came through as promised, and the JREF will not hesitate to sit for further interviews. You met your promises, and you served your viewers well. You're good media!



## THE MATTER OF DOWSING

By far the most common claim made for the Pigasus Prize – the one-million-dollar award offered by the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) – is dowsing.

Dowsing is – as strictly defined – the claimed ability to discover underground sources of water or metals by means of a “dowsing rod.” Another term used is “divining.” However, this terminology and its scope have been expanded and is now used with a far greater range of meanings. Dowsing now includes the claimed ability to discover almost *anything*, from water and minerals to missing children and archaeological sites. Each dowser will have his or her specialty. The device any dowser will use ranges from the traditional forked stick to just the bare hand. Pendulums, bent wires, wands of various sorts, and swiveled rods and housings are commonly encountered. In every case, the device used is a system in a state of unstable equilibrium, something that cannot easily be kept in a steady condition, and which is subject to very slight

tremors, twitches, or changes of inclination. We've seen an astonishing variety of metal springs, coils, wires, balls, threads and bobbing elastic devices, all trembling and vibrating freely, used as dowsing machinery.\*

### Little Agreement

Dowsers seldom agree on the basics of their claims. Some will insist that rubber footwear – or footwear made of other insulating materials – *must* be used by the operator, while an equal number insist that such materials inhibit the effect, and *must never* be used. Those who use stiff wires bent at right angles and held in each hand parallel to the ground, may say that the wires will cross one another when the sought-after object or substance is encountered; just as many say that the wires will diverge. Every dowser has his or her own personal theory, rules and preferred techniques.

Some claim that their power is divine in nature. Some say that dowsing is a learned art. Most claim that *anyone* can dowse successfully, while others say that it is an inherited gift. Some deny that it is in any way “paranormal,” while some embrace that definition. Dowsers will often scoff at the claims of other dowsers, and will have a very limited set of parameters that they will accept as viable. Some say that they can only perform successfully if

there is a real “human need” present; others are not so inhibited. Many say that they can find *any* object or substance, while others say they can find, for example, only flowing water moving underground, but not in pipes. Some are specifically pipe-locators, they say, and some only look for metal pipes, not plastic.

Most dowsers claim 100% accuracy. Very few claim anything less than 90%.

### A Wide Spectrum of Claims

Water dowsers are by far the most common variety we have encountered, and they, too, exhibit a wide spectrum of claims. Some only look for fresh/potable water. With some, it must be moving water. Some cannot detect water in pipes, only “natural” water. Most say they can tell how far down the water is, and at what rate it will be delivered, once tapped. Water dowsers – as well as some less specialized – say they can be thrown off by magnetic fields, nearby electricity, machinery, buried meteorites, masses of metal, or other underground rivers that intersect their path. The list of elements and situations that they say can inhibit their performances is endless.

The bottom line is that they *all* fail, when properly and fairly tested. There are no exceptions. Even after they have clearly and definitely failed, they *always* continue to be-

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\*Currently, several “scientific” versions of dowsing rods which purportedly contain actual electronic circuitry, are being sold to government agencies in the USA for very high prices, as much as \$14,000. One such stick, known as the “DKL LifeGuard,” is endorsed and validated by scientists who certainly should know better.

lieve in their powers. Why should this be so?

### **The Ideomotor Effect**

We are witnessing here a very powerful psychological phenomenon known as the “ideomotor effect.” This is defined as, “an involuntary body movement evoked by an idea or thought process rather than by sensory stimulation.” The dowser is unknowingly moving the device of choice, exerting a small shaking, tilt or pressure to it, enough to disturb its state of balance. This has been shown any number of times to be true, but the demonstration has meant nothing to the dowsers, who will persist in their delusion no matter how many times it is shown to them that dowsing *does not work*. The defensive reaction of most dowsers, following their failure, is to claim that they should not have submitted to any test, and will never do so again. And most will say that dowsing comes under special rules that deny that it can be tested, ever. The discouraging fact is that no dowser is *ever* convinced, as a result of proper double-blind testing, that they cannot dowse. Their need to believe is so strong and so ingrained, that they will refuse to accept any quality and/or quantity of good evidence. They have adopted a philosophy that shields them against reality.

There appears to be a feeling on the part of the dowsers that if they’ve been self-deceived, it indicates that they are therefore stupid or naive. This is certainly not the case. Any person, regardless of education, IQ, sophistication, or social

position, can fall for the ideomotor phenomenon. An indication of that is that a great number of scientists – mostly physicists – have embraced belief in dowsing, in spite of their superior knowledge of how the world works. But this is an effect of the mind, a different matter from the workings of the common everyday objects and situations we encounter in our lives.

### **A Compelling Belief**

Please be aware of this, however: though you may be puzzled over this seemingly strange conviction embraced by the dowsers, unless you have actually *experienced* the ideomotor effect at work in yourselves, you cannot have a proper appreciation of how absolutely compelling and irresistible it can be and is. In fact, dowsers are insistent that the disbeliever should try the effect and thereby become convinced of its efficacy; they assure you that once you’ve tried it, you’ll change your mind. And they’re often right in that respect; the dowsing device really seems to move on its own, in response to some sort of external signal or force. As a result of some imagined or real hint from nature – water dowsers are often familiar with the topological or geographical signs or conditions that indicate the probability of water in any given spot – the operator unconsciously tilts or impels the device, and believes that it is indicating the presence of the sought-after material. That is simply not true. It’s a trick of the mind, a *very* convincing trick, but a self-deception nonetheless.

Now, I am fully aware that the dowsers will read this discourse and will manage to completely ignore it. I regularly receive expressions of pity from them, for my inability to accept the reality that they have discovered. Many applications that are received at the James Randi Educational Foundation from dowsers will express great wonderment at why the million-dollar prize has not already been awarded, when dowsing is such an easy thing, they say, to demonstrate. Many are amazed that dowsing is eligible for the prize at all, since it is so widely accepted and believed in. And each dowser assures me that they are going to be the one to show me the error of my ways, and to dazzle me with a simple demonstration.

### **Excuses, Excuses**

Each dowser goes away from any trial of their powers, dismayed by their failure, puzzled at the reasons for the failure, but *always* capable of coming up with a reasonable – to them – excuse. That excuse may be any one of many. It may be an unfortunate arrangement of the planets, improper temperature or humidity, a problem of indigestion, too much ambient noise – or too much silence – or a poor attitude on the part of the observers. These are not invented excuses; they are all drawn from my personal experience in testing these folks.

I must say that of all those who have ever tried to win the Pigasus Prize, and of those who I have otherwise tested in every part of the world, no claimants even approach

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the dowzers for honesty. These are persons who are genuinely, thoroughly, self-deceived. In only two instances – one in Australia and the other in the U.K. – did I ever encounter any cheating being tried by dowzers. And those cases were easily solved and immediately terminated.

I ask all those who wish to claim the prize based upon their dowsing skills to first try a double-blind test of their abilities. We at the JREF can advise you how to design such a test protocol. You will find, I assure you, that the description above of the ideomotor effect will be proven valid. And I know full well that you, as a dowser, will refuse this advice and believe that, for you, such a procedure is not necessary. I base this conclusion on my many years of handling dowsing claimants.

If you wish to see a full account of the most definite set of dowsing abilities ever conducted, you may find it in the first two issues of *Swift*, the newsletter of the JREF. Numbers 1 and 2 of volume 1 may be purchased for US\$6, postpaid, from the address on page 32. We sincerely recommend that you *read this account* before proceeding with your application. ■



remember the stuff I researched about the cards, in case I encountered a client who had read a Tarot book. For my preparation, Jamy Ian Swiss, the magic consultant for *Penn & Teller's Sin City*, sent me a bunch of material on cold reading prior to my practice run. Psychologist and reformed palm-reader-turned-skeptic Ray Hyman gave me some great expert phone time, and I winced through a tape of James Van Praagh (direct link to heaven and one evil jerk) provided by *Skeptic* magazine publisher Michael Shermer.

**Research**

I had done lots of reading – not readings – to complete my research. The hardest part about this whole setup was going to the newage (“rhymes with sewage”) bookstore. I bought some Tarot cards, and then I went to the used-book section and picked up books on palmistry, Tarot, astrology and graphology so I could be versed in the lingo. The Bhodi Tree Bookstore makes me sad. A place filled with dazed-looking losers, and there I was buying crap just like the rest of them. It would be so nice if everyone there was doing research for a Penn & Teller bit, but I don't think so. Ugh. I had to go home and shower.

**The Cards Tell A Story**

Now it was time to go to work in my makeup and padded bra at the Magical Empire. I sat down, fanned out my cards and tried to look all-knowing. One of the guides brought

over my first “client.” My heart was ready to leap out of my chest, and I was sweating in my Spurina padding. The woman sat down, and I went into my spiel while I was looking her up and down. I said all the stuff that makes them want to help and gives me an out when I'm wrong, like, “The cards tell me a story. I receive pictures and images that will not mean anything to me, but perhaps are very significant to you. If you remain open, then we can explore together and find insight into your destiny.” Then I launched into the usual statements that appeal to everyone.

She was into it. I looked at her and for some reason she looked like a nurse to me. I had a zillion outs if I was wrong, so I took a chance and asked her if she was. I was correct, and she was amazed. Sometimes nurses look like nurses. Lucky guess= major hit. I was golden.

I was rolling the rest of the night. The standard stuff would hook them and then I would start making guesses based on my observations and their feedback. One person wrote up on a comment card that I was a terrific addition and amazing, and two people summoned the manager to tell him how I knew stuff I couldn't possibly have known.

Jamy, who was lurking in the background, watched me read a man who was skeptical at first. I hit him hard. Why would a guy surrounded by his wife and another couple (all kidding him) sit down at my table? His question isn't going to be anything sexual (his wife either already knows or he doesn't want her to know – why push his luck?). Men,

as a rule, don't voluntarily sit down for a general reading, so I guessed something big was weighing on his mind. I gave him my opening, while looking for the card that was supposed to represent him. The next card I flipped over I put my hand on as if I was getting something from it. I looked him right in the eye and I said, "you have dreams and aspirations that seem unrealistic to you. You are taking steps to make them a reality and you are frightened." Then the catchall, "Does this mean anything to you?"

Of course it did, he's obviously either quitting his old job and starting his own company, getting a job doing something he's always really wanted to do but was afraid, whatever... I pretty much knew it had to do with his occupation and a big move he was considering. It's the only safe question he had in front of his friends. I gave him the "you're frightened" because I knew it would make him uncomfortable and scare him into thinking I might say something personal in front of everyone. I had a hit (his wife was going crazy smacking his arm and giving me all the signals I needed), and I really had his attention. His face no longer masked anything from me and the rest of the reading was a cinch. Jamy followed him out (I'd become a stalker) and listened to him telling his wife that usually these things are just generalities, but that this woman was different.

### **Evil Woman**

Now I was evil. All the acting training was paying off, and I was

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I just can't believe how easy it was to make this happen. I did a week of research and then made people believe I could "see." Man. It freaked me out.

getting really good, really fast. I started out being "okay" and by the end of the night I had a woman cry on me. I gave her the standard "There are untapped resources you have yet to put to your advantage." She said, "Like what?" I said, "Something you do alone, an endeavor of some sort," to which she replied, "It's not really an endeavor, it's a search." Well, who does a late thirtish woman search for? Either a kid she gave up, or some sort of relative, right? Fifty-fifty, I turned over a card that was male, and said, "It's a boy," thinking she gave up a child. She started to cry and nodded. Meanwhile, I turned over two knights and said, "Who are the two men?" figuring that everyone has two men in their lives, and she would define them for me. Sure enough, she cried and said, "My husband and the half brother I'm looking for." Well, at that point I knew that I was wrong, but to her I was right on the money. She will forever recall that I came up with the fact that she was looking for her half brother.

So, now what could I do? She wanted to know if I could see him, and I told her that I couldn't have any connection with him because she didn't know him and that all my vision was through her. (I'd gone too far with her, and I couldn't confess

everything without causing a huge scene in a place where they were doing me a favor to let me practice.) Then I figured the only good I could do was give her some good advice, so I told her, "Your search is a noble cause, and you can continue it, but remember what is most important: that which you have control over and that is your children, your husband and your home." I tried to give her some encouragement, but also let her know not to be obsessed with an exciting search for a missing person, a search that could destroy her own home life.

### **Make Your Own Magic**

The whole night was like that. I really did try to end all the readings with stuff like, "You have good instincts. Trust yourself. You make your own magic." These were words that at least alluded to self-responsibility. I just can't believe how easy it was to make this happen. I did a week of research and then made people believe I could "see." Man. It freaked me out. I had to keep taking breaks and sitting alone to get my head together.

People just want to hear positive things about themselves. That's all it is. Tell them what they want to hear. Make some guesses and keep going when you miss. I made some

big misses that were killing me. One time I turned over a card with a queen that has a cat seated at her feet, so I thought, what the heck: “Do you have a cat?” The woman replied, “no.” “Does a friend, or someone you know have a cat?” “No.” (What are the chances of that?) “Okay,” I said, “keep that,” and moved on. At the end of the reading I smugly stated, “In two weeks, when that cat shows up, you think of me, okay?”

I’m charging Penn & Teller more because I have real gifts.

Psychically yours,  
Spurina



### The Taping

It is the end of the day. We finished the taping today and I’m kinda nuts right now, but I need to get this out. What I did today was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I’m hoping that what I did today was right, but I don’t know. I’m crying as I type this, so I don’t think I’m that good a judge right now.

Today we set up the location with a phoney book signing event with fake posters and cameras and a director and many production people around. I was presented as a psychic. The first “book” and the first sign had my name on them and said that I was a Tarot card reader. I was dressed a little goofy, but nothing even close to my night at Caesar’s. I was a real person. It was my name up on the board. One by one, I read people’s cards and palms, or held an object and “talked to the dead.” I made a few “hits,” worked in the standard paragraph that we’d prepared, and then asked them on camera how I did. I asked how suited to them the reading was, or how much it applied only to them. They all responded favorably, and I called for the cameras to shut down.

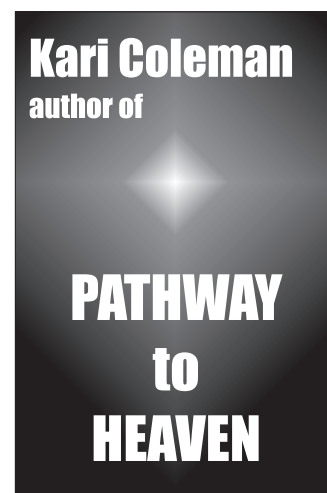
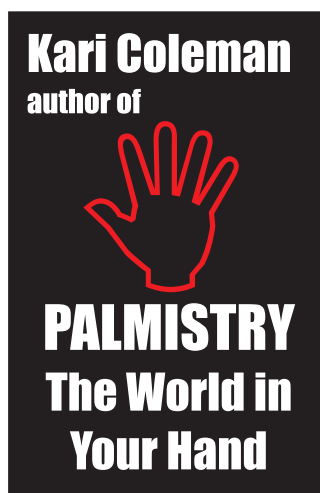
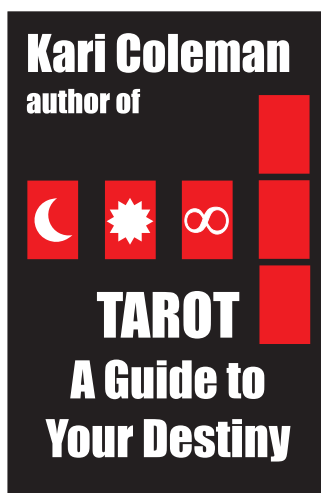
### “I Am Not Psychic”

At that point, in each case, I took hold of their hand and explained exactly what had just happened. I looked them right in the eye and told them everything. I said, “What you have experienced is called a cold reading. I am not in any way

psychic. The techniques I used on you are techniques that all psychics use. It’s a psychological profile that all of us respond to. You are not alone. I’ve said the exact same thing to all these other people and they responded favorably as well.” In some cases, the crew had fed me information, and I confessed to that.

What you cannot know until you’ve done it is that when you are reading someone, they trust you. They open themselves up to you, and you tell them nice things about themselves. Sometimes they offer up very personal hopes and dreams. This happened several times today. I then had to face them and tell them I’d lied. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

I was successful in doing Van Praagh. I convinced a man that I was in contact with his dead mother who he had helped care for. The first lady I did cried, and we can’t use that in the TV program – real tears aren’t appropriate in a comedy-variety bit. The second man I was able to keep positive and it all worked out. In the two cases where this kind of reading was attempted, I then took a



walk with the person and really talked with them for a long time. Speaking with both of them, I cried. I said, "I'm going to tell you something that you will find hard to hear, and I am finding very difficult to tell you. What has just happened is not anything supernatural. I am not psychic and we did not contact your dead relative. What I did was a cold reading. Everything I said to you is information that we all have after we lose someone. I lost my Granny last year. After watching people take advantage of the grieving, I decided to fight back. This is my way of doing that."

### **I'm Getting An M**

I said to the man who lost his Mom, "To me, it is an insult to your memories to have someone tell you that you need them to talk to your Mom. I always thought if there were an "other side," then my Granny would do anything possible to contact me and talk to me. She would not need to go through some idiot who can't come up with any substantial communication and only says, 'I'm getting an M.' You keep your Mom with you in pictures and memories that are so special. I'm telling you that because you seem like a great man. You're fun-loving and good-spirited, and I know this just from our talks before and during the reading. That's what your Mom left behind for everyone to see and enjoy. You are part of her, and your relationship is a wonderful legacy. I don't have to be psychic to know all that stuff. I'm just a human being who is being honest with you about what I see." We said more, but

basically that covers what I talked about. We cried some and hugged. I thanked him for being a part of this and for helping me in my fight.

Now here's the amazing part. All of my "talks" were difficult. Some not so much, but others were like the ones above. I didn't know, when I started today, how people were going to react. The man from the conversation above told me this was the best thing that happened to him all day. He hugged me and told me what a special person I was to tell the truth. He introduced his lover to me and walked away telling everybody what a great lady I was, and how happy I'd made him. A grandmother brought her family over to meet me, and laughed when I explained how I'd guessed her husband's name. Almost everyone was incredibly happy and the rest were just fine and a bit bemused.

### **Taking Away The Voodoo**

I think I have finally found my answer to those people who tell me that skepticism takes the joy out of life, that you need God to experience morality, and that without him it's just a heartless existence. People were happy to talk. They really just wanted someone to listen to their problems, or share their hopes and dreams. They wanted to go over funny stories about a loved one they'd lost or just sit and remember them out loud with someone. When I took away the voodoo, the fact that we had "shared" didn't go away. There is all the joy you need in human interaction. I really made sure that after we were done I gave each

person, for lack of a better way of saying this, a part of me. I felt I had taken away something fake and I needed to replace it with something real. Human contact, human caring, human interaction.

I think it worked. Like I said before, I don't know. I'm not thinking correctly right now. Maybe someone went home and felt cheated and used, but maybe not. I don't know if I changed what people believe, but I think that I made them stop for at least a moment and open their eyes. Hopefully, if I only succeeded in getting them to like me, then they will remember that they liked me and that I felt it was important enough to spread the word about what is real. Maybe that will make them think, and then they will change their minds or just be more skeptical the next time. Who knows?

So that is that. I'm going to go downstairs now, watch a movie with my good friends, and hug my guy. You gotta love livin', baby. ■



*Kari Coleman is an actress living in L.A. Her film credits include Multiplicity, Sour Grapes and T-Rex, an Imax 3-D movie. Television appearances include Seinfeld, Mad About You, Home Improvement and a bunch of other sitcoms. She has been known to eat fire with Penn & Teller in Las Vegas.*

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## E IS FOR EDUCATION

As part of JREF's mission, *Swift* will be giving more attention to education. Beginning with this issue, we will be publishing articles for and by educators, including lesson plans, course syllabi, reading lists and ideas for class projects.

If you teach at any level — from grade school to college to continuing education — please send us material that you have used to teach critical/skeptical thinking and scientific inquiry. Teaching ideas that relate to paranormal and just plain weird claims are especially welcome, but any and all effective approaches to enhancing science education are appropriate.

*Swift* will consider manuscripts. We will also compile and edit shorter communications into a column. Our emphasis is on practical, tested ideas that can be of real help to parents and educators.

*Swift* also hopes to provide a venue for recognizing outstanding student projects. In addition to the student awards announced by JREF (see *Swift* vol. 2, no. 1), we will from time to time publish papers by students. We invite student readers to contribute papers. And we encourage teachers to bring student work to our attention.

Please send all contributions for consideration to:

*Swift*

Dept. of Education

201 S.E. 12th Street (E. Davie Blvd.)

Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33316-1815

or e-mail to: [cdenman@ibm.net](mailto:cdenman@ibm.net)

*Chip Denman*

editor, *Swift*

*Craig Odar is an undergraduate at the University of Maryland. This paper was originally prepared for a "Science & Pseudoscience" class taught by Chip Denman for the University Honors Program in College Park. We are pleased to present it here as an example of fine scholarship. — J.R.*

## IS SANTA CLAUS COMING TO TOWN?

by *Craig Odar*

Imagine, if you will, a child, eyes glowing with joy, bounding down the stairs at five-thirty in the morning. He nearly falls down the last few stairs in a frantic rush and turns the corner to find boxes of all sizes stacked under a tree, wrapped in shiny paper, filled with toys. His eyes can barely believe the whole scene he sees before him. He can't imagine a day better than this day. Christmas Day. A day reserved especially for children, rewarding them for their good behavior over the past year.

This is an ideal picture of the American Christmas holiday as seen through the eyes of a child. As these children get older, they adopt the mainstream American ideals of peace, love and joy for all. Presents are still received, but something is missing... something big... something red... Santa Claus.

We all know Santa Claus as the merry fat man with a "belly that

shakes like a bowl full of jelly" (Moore). He has reindeer that fly. One of his reindeer has a glowing red nose, "like a light bulb." He crawls down chimneys and lives in the North Pole with all of his little elf helpers. It's quite an interesting myth and certainly deserving of a brief historical explanation.

### The Birth of Christ

The birth of Christ is the primary ideology behind the Christmas holiday. Three kings from the East came to the house of Mary and presented her with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But Mary didn't give birth to Santa Claus. And none of the three kings had flying reindeer. So where did the Santa myth come from?

It turns out that St. Nicholas is the real Santa Claus. While that fact is not surprising, it is surprising to note that St. Nicholas is the patron saint of fertility and children. In remote parts of Switzerland, Sant Klos (as St. Nick is known there) replaces the stork in baby origin stories. In fact, Santa's big belly allegorically represents the belly of a pregnant woman, though it should be noted that allegory in myth is sometimes outlandish (*Bettelheim, A Good Enough Parent*).

The closest descendant of the modern Christmas is St. Nicholas' Day, still celebrated in some parts of Europe. Not as commercialized as Christmas in America, St. Nick's Day is celebrated with candies and fruits. Two local men traditionally dress up as St. Nicholas and the Devil. The two visit each child's house where the Devil tries to punish the children for their bad deeds,

while St. Nicholas stops the Devil and gives some sweets to the children.

### **The Myth of Santa**

Saint Nicholas' Day evolved into the Christmas celebration that we are more commonly familiar with. The myth of Santa and his reindeer pervade every aspect of the winter season. He is used in TV commercials, and he sits for pictures with children in every mall across America.

The Santa myth is told to most Christian (and some non-Christian) children. The story of his toy workshop at the North Pole, his reindeer, his elves and his undying generosity to children differs from most other children's stories in one respect: Santa is real. Or so say most children.

Did the Three Little Pigs really live in houses of straw, twigs and brick? Did Little Red Riding Hood seriously think the wolf was her dear grandmother? Most children wouldn't debate the veracity of such stories, but when confronted with the myth of Santa most any young child will firmly tell you that Santa does exist.

The Santa story unfortunately has an unhappy ending for most. According to a study of children's reactions to the Santa myth the most common reaction to the truth about Santa was "sorrow" (Benjamin). After reading such results, it becomes important to evaluate the reasons for perpetuating this myth. I would like to explore the pros and cons of this myth and find a reasonable middle ground between the two views.

As I mentioned earlier, the stories of Santa Claus are similar to any other children's story. As a magical figure, Santa can accomplish feats

beyond the scope of any person the child is likely to know. He is super-generous and rewards children everywhere for no reason beyond good behavior. Santa Claus is a hero, and like any other hero, children want to emulate and mimic the qualities that they admire most about that hero (Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*). Santa's most admirable trait is his generosity, so it is rational to encourage children to be generous by providing them a hero with that trait.

Generosity, in the eyes of a child, is an abstract concept. By abstract, I mean that it cannot be easily associated with anything that they commonly know. The socializing process in this case becomes a bit more difficult. Providing a "real" image for a person to grasp an abstract concept is by no means limited to children (Bettelheim, *A Good Enough Parent*). For instance, Newtonian mechanics is much easier to learn than relativistic mechanics; we are much more familiar with the images that Newtonian mechanics are based on. Similarly, the image of Santa Claus is a helpful tool in grasping the concept of generosity. With a familiar icon such as Santa, a child will have an better grasp of the idea of generosity.

An aspect of Santa's generosity that is usually not addressed is the lack of reciprocation required for gifts received from him. It is common for many people to feel an obligation to reciprocate generosity when it is given to them. For instance, imagine the guilt you feel when someone gives you a gift

over the holidays while you hadn't planned on giving them anything. The usual reaction is to find a gift to give them in return. The child has no means to reciprocate to parents who get their children gifts. The magical Santa Claus provides a third party that expects no reciprocation in return. The child is then allowed to enjoy his gifts, guilt free.

### **Anniversary Reaction**

Happy childhood memories, especially those associated with a yearly event like Christmas, provide emotional support and strength throughout a person's lifetime. A person can look back on such memories during emotionally stressed periods of their life to give them hope and joy (Bettelheim, *A Good Enough Parent*). This effect is called an anniversary reaction by most psychologists. The concept is not one-sided, though. Unhappy childhood memories can depress a person at various times throughout their adult life, especially during the holiday associated with such an unhappy memory.

The reciprocation principle and the possibility of guilt associated with it becomes that much more important to avoid when looked at in the context of an anniversary reaction. A person may continue to feel guilt around Christmas time well into adulthood if the memories of Christmas as a child are riddled with feelings of guilt. The image of Santa Claus as a gift giver without obligatory reciprocation consequently becomes even more important now.

In his book *A Good Enough Parent*, Bruno Bettelheim brings to light

a very interesting point about a child's belief in Santa Claus. He says "what is the sense of celebrating a children's holiday if children have to experience it from our adult frame of reference?" Let the children have their own reality, if it makes them happy. A child's life is not the same as that of an adult. Our minds work differently. We perceive the world through different eyes. I know that I enjoy the logical conception of reality that I have now, but I also enjoyed the magic in childhood.

### Perpetuating the Myth

The advantages of perpetuating the Santa Claus myth certainly give us something to think about. The emotional security and socialization process of a growing child can be aided immensely by the image of Santa Claus. The argument against Santa Claus is a more difficult one. For one, Santa is a traditional part of American culture. To remove such an idol would be akin to removing cigarettes from American life. It's not easy. Secondly, no child psychologist that I read about supported a view against Santa Claus. Nevertheless, I will try to present the best arguments possible against treating Santa Claus as a real person.

In the Benjamin study, a response to a question that asked about the feelings of a child that learned the truth of Santa Claus went as such: "It made me think for a while that everything that my parents told me was to fool me." Parents hold the highest respect of any person in a child's life. Parents provide sustenance and love that children depend upon. When a child

learns the truth about Santa Claus, they will inevitably harbor some negative feeling, and with good reason too: their concept of reality has just been seriously shaken. Those negative feelings are most commonly directed towards the main perpetrators of the lie, the parents.

One response to a psychologist's question to mothers about children accepting nonlogical truths was:

"It probably ties over into the religious aspect, that there are things that you have to believe in that you can't always prove. And maybe [the Easter Bunny] is teaching them to accept things without asking questions sometimes (Clark)."

The Easter Bunny and Santa Claus are both things "that you can't always prove." If encouraging a healthy analytical view of reality is your purpose, then the Santa myth is working against that end.

### A Sound View

My final argument against continuing the myth of Santa is pulled from my own personal experience. My brothers and I were never told that Santa was real. I always knew who put the presents under the tree. And to this day I am proud that I never believed in Santa Claus. I have a very sound view of reality. My reasoning skills are above normal, as are those of both of my siblings. Therefore I would have to bring into question the validity of the arguments that most child psychologists offer on the subject. I could be the exception to the rule, but I doubt it. I had a very normal childhood.

The arguments against Santa Claus are few and far between com-

pared to those for Santa. The evidence suggests that Santa isn't detrimental, and most probably is helpful as a socializing agent in our society. I must reject this conclusion, though, on the ground that all people should have the ability to decide for themselves, including children, what they should believe. In my home, on Christmas Eve, my brother and I would lay out cookies and milk and put a sign saying "for Santa" next to them. We knew full well who might eat them, but like any other child we liked to pretend. And we did.

Lying to children about the existence of this being we know doesn't exist seems to conflict with our own ideals of honesty and truth. I do believe, however, that encouraging a rich fantasy life is important. Therefore, I suggest the best approach to the Santa myth is to tell it to children as any other story, as a fantasy, but at the same time, do not discourage playful imagination that might include this fantastic figure. Santa's a good man; we should give him a chance, even though he doesn't exist. ■

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# IS SKEPTICISM EFFECTIVE?

LET'S USE SCIENCE TO FIND OUT.

by Steve Strassmann

Whatever it is that skeptics are trying to achieve, there is currently no metric in place for success. I don't know about you, but I'd like to see skeptics accomplish a lot more than they have in the past.

To advocate skeptical thinking, you might look at skepticism as if it were a treatment for an ailment. How do you evaluate its effectiveness?

As far as I can tell, skeptics appear in homeopathic dilution among the general population. Water molecules may not have any memory of exposure to homeopathic chemicals, and the same can be said of people exposed to skeptics. Where is the credible evidence of a lasting "memory effect" of skeptics on other people?

Successful skeptic activity is only described anecdotally. We owe ourselves something stronger. A nice fraud exposure, or a snappy remark, all make for self-congratulatory entertainment. How will anyone, especially fellow skeptics, know it has any lasting value to the community?

The answer is simple. Let's scrutinize skepticism itself with the same kind of rigor that any alleged therapy deserves.

I propose a few action items:

**Describe the problem.** Devise a taxonomy of popular delusions and publish them. Delusions will appear in multiple categories, and that's OK. A web browser would make this a fun index to explore online. Suggested categorizations:

- by topic (therapies, astrology, mind powers)
- by danger (harmless, annoying, wallet-threatening, life-threatening)
- by criminality (innocent, self-deluded, cynical, predatory)
- by cash value (nonprofit, highly profitable)
- by proof level (unknown, testable, known false)

**Measure the problem.** Come up with a body of quantitative descriptions of popular delusions and publish them. Suggestions:

- tabulate % of newspapers printing horoscopes
- polls on belief in God, dowsing, ghosts, etc.
- tabulate crime statistics from bunko squads
- tabulate # of advertisements for psychics in print, TV, radio
- tabulate sales volume of homeopathic remedies, NIH funding.

**Use these metrics to categorize audiences before all public activities.** Are you speaking to students or adults? Creationists who don't believe in astrology, or astrologers who don't believe in creationism? This should be a required preparation for all skeptics active in public forums.

**Describe the solution.** Come up with a taxonomy of skeptical activities, such as public speaking, skeptic magazines, skeptical articles in popular media, police investigations, hoaxes performed by skeptics, letters to the editor, pressure on funding and government groups, etc.

**Measure the solution.** Create a body of quantitative descriptions of the efficacy for each activity. Include the cost and effort as part of the metric. Good skeptics are a precious resource; they should be used where they can do the most good. And you won't know where they do good unless you collect data on the results! Suggestions:

- How many people does this activity reach?
- What percent of those people are – skeptics – undecided – believers – major influencers (press, government, preachers)?
- For each subgroup, what net effect did the activity have?

**Set aside a chunk of time to create a review process.** Assess the resource allocation of JREF and other skeptic groups. How many people, hours per week, dollars, etc. are spent on: + reacting to press queries + publishing + criminal investigations + lobbying + issuing press releases + public speaking, etc. Document and review this allocation periodically. Is this the best allocation of resources? Could you be more effective if less time was spent on A and more on B? Is one of these activities grossly inefficient? Are you getting results? Do you need to automate? Are you doing something ineffective just because "it feels

good” or because you have good anecdotes? Adjust and reallocate as needed.

Lastly, I think the skeptic movement could benefit greatly from an image or metaphor to symbolize the agenda. This would be something journalists can use when trying to describe what skeptics do and what they stand for. By comparison, the atomic scientists have a symbolic Doomsday Clock which successfully conveys their position on nuclear weapons proliferation.

I’m not sure what might be best for skeptics, but it would be good to start thinking about it. To get you started, here’s a half-baked suggestion.

Create a cartoon of imaginary monsters labeled as “delusions” These hide under the bed or in the closet, and don’t exist when you shine the light on them. Each one is individually labeled with a particular delusion, and belongs to a family tree. Get a good artist to draw this cartoon in many forms, and you’ll have a powerful metaphor that any journalist can use for years.

Can skeptics be more effective? Applying a little of our old friend, the scientific method, might help make a small influence into a big one. ■

*Steve Strassmann has a Ph.D. in Entertainment Engineering from the MIT Media Lab and has hardly ever successfully fooled anyone with a magic trick.*  
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# I AM NOT A GIRAFFE, AND I CAN PROVE IT

by Bob Steiner

**I**t keeps coming back like a bad penny. I have seen it over and over in skeptical writing, and have heard it from skeptical speakers. A skeptic will present a persuasive, logical case why one should not believe in the paranormal: lack of credible evidence, the appearance can be duplicated by normal means, and the like.

Then a parapsychologist will say – correctly, “The fact that a magician can duplicate the appearance of this claimed paranormal event does not prove that the psychic did not do it psychically.”

The skeptic will step into the trap by replying, “That is true,” then hasten to add, “but you cannot prove a negative.”

I have not seen it yet, but the day will come when some astute parapsychologist will *prove* to the audience that one can indeed prove a negative. Thence, having captured the *merited* respect of the audience on that one point, the parapsychologist will extrapolate and will successfully convince

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

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## THE FOUNDATION SEEKS AN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) seeks a full-time Executive Director to begin immediately. Founded in 1996, JREF promotes critical thinking and combats pseudoscience and quackery around the world. See our Web page, <http://www.randi.org>

Eligible candidates will have at least three years of nonprofit management experience in membership organizations and demonstrated success in organizational development and fund-raising. They will be self-starters, with good writing and speaking abilities and a strong science background.

Send application letters with resumé and at least three references to Sidney Brien, James Randi Educational Foundation, 201 S.E. 12th Street, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33316-1815. Please do not call the Foundation.

the audience that the skeptic has no credibility and should not be believed on anything else said. All of this because the skeptic made a strong, all-inclusive, universal assertion – and it was wrong!

I have on my desk *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal*, edited by Gordon Stein (published by Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 1986).

In one otherwise well-written essay, the author concludes with:

“It would seem that with all the evidence of trickery we should come to the conclusion that PK-MB [psychokinetic metal-bending] is nothing more than a myth, skilled magicians using their five normal senses to create the illusion of reality. The problem is that it is impossible to prove a negative.”

In a letter to the editor in the July/August 1995 *Mensa Bulletin*, a writer attempts to nail down his point by invoking this all-inclusive, erroneous generalization. The particular topic at issue in the letter is less important than the flaw in philosophical reasoning by an otherwise logical writer:

“Not only is the [person who does not believe] under no obligation to do anything, it’s impossible for him to prove that [the topic at issue] has no existence. This is due to that ironclad logical rule that says ‘One cannot prove a negative.’”

In writing and discussion, it is sometimes appropriate to explain the difficulty (or even the impossibility) of proving some negatives. It

is an unjustifiable stretch to jump to the universal declaration that “it is impossible to prove a negative.”

We must consider the precision of the definitions, the size of the item for which we seek proof, the size of the universe in which this item is supposed to exist, as well as other considerations.

For example, suppose someone says: “I believe that unicorns exist. Although I cannot prove it, you cannot prove that they do not exist. So we must keep an open mind about the subject.”

The problems: We would have to agree on a precise definition of *unicorn*. Next we would have to determine how to test and validate it. Even after we do that, it would still be impossible to prove that there is not even a single unicorn anywhere in the universe.

What I hold about unicorns is not a disbelief. Rather, it is the absence of belief. I am a skeptic – an unbeliever. Try *unbeliever*: it is a wonderful word.

When someone brings up the “open mind argument,” I have a ready answer: “I *do* have an open mind. I am willing to evaluate your evidence. I am further willing to revise my beliefs – even my world view – as soon as there is credible evidence presented. Until such credible evidence is presented, I shall live my life as if it does not exist. I have the absence of belief, not a disbelief. Surely you would not want me to believe that there is an invisible dinosaur standing between us, would you?”

“You have made the claim. The burden of proof is on you. It is not my obligation to prove that unicorns do not exist.”

The concept that the burden of proof is on the one making the claim is one of the most powerful arguments in the skeptic’s arsenal. If you make a counterclaim – for example, it is impossible to prove a negative – the burden of proof shifts back onto you. *Don’t get caught in that trap.*

I mentioned the size of the object and size of the universe in which we seek the object. It would be far easier for me to prove that there is *not* a hippopotamus in my living room than to prove that there is a specifically designated virus germ in the room. Thus, in this case, it is easier to prove a negative than a positive. It is easier to prove *some* negatives than it is to prove *some* positives.

And now to summarize that one can indeed prove a negative: I can prove that the world is not flat, that there cannot be an undiscovered continent on Earth larger than North America, that there is not an elephant in my living room, that I am not a woman, that I am not a giraffe, and that two parts of hydrogen plus one part of oxygen do not produce sulfuric acid. ■

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*A shorter version of this article was published in BASIS, Newsletter of Bay Area Skeptics, April 1996. This expanded version is printed with permission.*

# THE GREAT AGE OF SNAKE OIL

by James R. Rosenfield

Combine the natural aches and pains of the aging body with the self-centered consumerism of the baby boomers, and what do you have? A near infinity of commercial opportunities. You can bet that the next 20 years will be the great age of snake oil, as boomers grasp at whatever straws promise to keep them young.

A magalog from Canada masterfully combines the key elements of the snake oil genre:

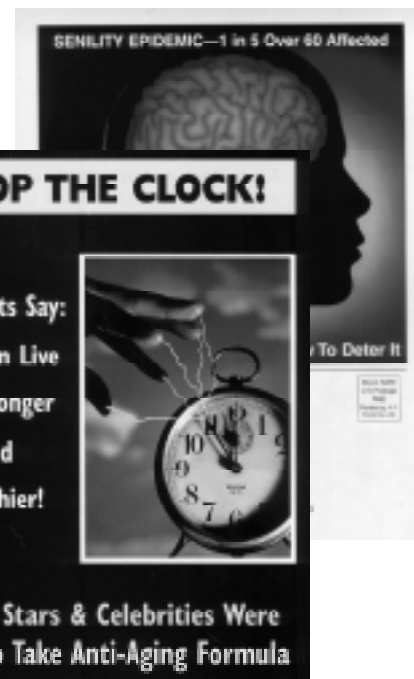
- 1 Scientism: pseudoscientific blather that at first glance seems credible.
- 2 Symptom mongering, with the symptom invariably something almost everyone has at some time.
- 3 Specificity, designed to build belief and deflect skepticism.
- 4 Hysteria, which usually takes the form of “You will die an unspeakable death unless you take our pills!”

It begins unfolding on the covers: “SENILITY EPIDEMIC – 1 in 5 Over 60 Affected” warns the back cover headline, above a big red brain whose stem is on the verge of total blockage. “Scientists Say: You Can

Live 29% Longer And Healthier!” proclaims the front cover, as it implores you to “STOP THE CLOCK!” Note the “29%,” one of those ragged, jagged numbers that look authentic, much more real than a pat “30%.”

Inside front cover: “Age spots on your skin signal that a brown slime is forming on the neurons of your brain!” A big, ugly, reddish-brown picture illustrates the brown slime phenomenon. Caption copy gives us a jolting dose of hysterical scientism: “Age spots are known technically as lipofuscin. In the brain, lipofuscin forms a brown slime on the delicate neurons. That slime decreases the ability of the brain to send vital electrochemical messages to other parts of the brain. As the slime thickens, senility and dementia increase. Shown above is a section of neurons in the brain of a man who died from a stroke. He was extremely senile. As you can see, the brown slime covered every neuron.”

“IF YOU HAVE AGE SPOTS...Don’t Wait Until Your



STOP THE MADNESS!  
THE FRONT AND BACK COVERS OF A MAILER FOR AN ANTI-AGING PRODUCT FROM GERO VITA LABORATORIES.

Memory Gets Worse! Clinical Tests Show The Condition Can Be Reversed!” is the headline intro to the text, “By Marcus Welbourne, Senior Science Editor.” Senior Science Editor of what, one might wonder. And I guess if I were cynical I might suspect the “Gero Vita Laboratories” people of manipulatively inventing a name that invokes Marcus Welby, M.D., the iconic television healer. A handsome middle-aged woman illustrates age spots with some hulking nasty blotches, most of which appear to be photographically superimposed.

“Probably the scariest aspect of getting older,” Marcus Welbourne tells us, “is the possibility that we will become senile with its attendant forgetfulness, mental confusion, inability to manage our money and vulnerability to being taken advantage of.

“Worse yet, senility is the first step towards various age-related dementia, including the awful Alzheimer’s disease.

“Age spots or lipofuscin are well-accepted in medical science as the first warning that we are progressing in the direction of senility or dementia.”

Transcendent snake oil selling – which this is – must threaten you with a truly dire fate, and then make sure that you’re likely to possess possible symptoms of that fate. Since anyone over 50 can easily find an age spot or two, and since everyone everywhere suffers from occasional memory lapses, this means the “Gero Vita Laboratories” people are casting their net very wide indeed.

### Scientism Rampant

The snake oil genre has always reached its zenith of wooly grandeur when it combines authority figures with technobabble. The language used in this mailing piece is a postmodern update of the rantings you’d hear at medicine shows a hundred years ago:

“A WELL-KNOWN NEUROPSYCHIATRIST, DR. AKIRI MONJI, CONDUCTED A DOUBLE-BLIND, PLACEBO-CONTROLLED TEST WHERE HE FOUND THAT ANIMALS FED DIETS DEFICIENT IN RRR-A-TOCOPHERYL HAD 31% TO 55% MORE LIPOFUSCIN...DR. ALBERT BURNS REPORTED IN THE BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL, *LANCET*, THAT NEARLY 60% OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE PATIENTS HAVE A DEFICIENCY OF RRR-A-TOCOPHERYL... GLUTATHIONE REQUIRES SELENO-METHIONINE TO BE METABOLIZED (USED BY THE BODY). SELENOMETHIONINE REQUIRES ANOTHER NUTRIENT, COBALAMIN, IN ORDER TO BE METABOLIZED. RRR-A-TOCOPHERYL WORKS BEST WHEN COMBINED WITH SELENOMETHIONINE. (IT APPEARS THAT COBALAMIN IS IMPORTANT

FOR PROPER MENTAL FUNCTIONING. DR. B. REGLAND FOUND THAT ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE PATIENTS HAD A DEFICIENCY OF COBALAMIN.)

“Dr. J.B. Deijen reported in the medical journal, *Psychopharmacology*, that he conducted a double-blind, placebo-controlled study of patients over 60 years old. Half of the patients were given pyridoxine while the other half received a placebo (fake pill). Those taking pyridoxine showed a significant improvement in memory, and those taking the placebo didn’t.

“Dr. S. Kleijnen directed a similar study and found that those taking a placebo suffered more from reduced cognitive functions – muddled thinking.

Note the disarming impact of the vocabulary glosses – “metabolized (used by the body) ...placebo (fake pill)...reduced cognitive functions – muddled thinking.” It’s like a phrase of Mozart in a cacophony of car alarms, and is used as manipulatively as the impossible-to-pronounce chemical terms.

### Act Now and Save Your Life!

You get the idea. A witch’s brew of bad chemicals is hurting you, and an angel’s elixir of good chemicals will save and prolong your life. Add celebrity endorsements and Eastern European medicine:

“Up until several years ago, many movie stars, celebrities and other wealthy people made annual trips to an anti-aging clinic in Bucharest, Romania, which was run by Dr. Ana Aslan.” (Comment: Until just a few years ago, it was kind of hard to get into Romania, even if

you were a wealthy celebrity, let alone make annual trips.)

“The cost was about \$10,000 for the treatment and a year’s supply of Gerovital H3 ampules. The reason they went there was that Dr. Aslan had proved that her Gerovital H3 actually reduced MAO by 87%.” (MAO is not the Chinese icon, but “an errant enzyme called monoamine oxidase,” one of the many evil things that is “implicated in the onset...of arthritis, arteriosclerosis...neuritis...senility, depression and impotence.”)

“According to columnists and rumors, the aging jetsetters swore that Gerovital was the reason they looked so well. Some of the reported regulars were Elizabeth Taylor, Bob Hope, Cary Grant, Jack Benny, Marlene Dietrich, Imelda Marcos, Zsa Zsa Gabor and Prince Rainier. Could that be the case with George Burns, who died recently at the age of 100, but looked like he was 70?”

A close reading reveals the weasel language – “According to columnists and rumors...(s)ome of the reported regulars were Elizabeth Taylor, Bob Hope...Could that be the case with George Burns?” But who’s going to read this stuff carefully?

“Dr. Aslan treated literally tens of thousands of people with Gerovital during her career...she set up a test group of 111 patients suffering from a variety of age-related afflictions. She treated them regularly with Gerovital and kept careful records of their responses. At the end of 15 years, Dr. Aslan disclosed that the test group lived an average of

29% longer than the normal life expectancy.”

So let's see: Here's this Romanian doctor who's getting \$10,000 a pop from folks like Imelda Marcos for some tabs of her Gerovital, and she sets up the test group herself? Hmmmm...

### Testimonials and the Myth of the Natural

Anyway, forget the celebs and the Eastern European cachet (i.e., liberated from the limiting and inhibiting effects of official Western medicine.) There are three whole pages of testimonials from GH3 users, complete with names and pictures.

I'm not being very nice, but I must comment that most of the photos have the slack-jawed, missing chromosome look of American Family Publishers sweepstakes winners. If this is how they look after being restored to health, I hate to imagine what they looked like before dosing themselves with GH3.

Can “Mr. R. Lee, Mississippi” or “Mr. B. Fletcher, California” be inventions of this fertile snake oil company? One would think not – after all, the world is filled with fools, illness can make a believer out of anyone, and one must never underestimate the placebo effect or the possibility that GH3 is harmless, and that some of these folks substituted it for some awful thing a lousy doctor had them taking. But – this company is from Canada, which has become a hotbed of sleaze-artists. In a long article about sweepstakes fraud in the July 29, 1998 *New York Times*, it's pointed out that it's quite

difficult for American victims to fight trans-border fraud: “Formal approval for investigations commonly takes six months.”

Interestingly for a Canadian-based outfit, none of the testimonials are from Canadians. Is it possible they might not be selling product in their own country? I called their 800-number in order to get answers to some of my questions, and was referred to their “research facility” in Orange County, California, another epicenter of sharp practices. Several efforts to speak to someone who could enlighten me further proved futile. Life being short and having noticed several age spots on my forehead, I gave up.

“Gero Vita Laboratories” seems to share a mailing address with “Life Force Laboratories,” who sent me a “Prostate Health Without Drugs or Surgery” mailer the same day I got the piece under discussion. Both entities define themselves as “Specialists in Ailment-Targeted Natural Formulas.” Therein lies the rub.

Just because something's natural doesn't mean that it's good. Lots of natural substances can poison you just as virulently as unnatural substances. But there's one huge advantage in concocting snake oil from only natural ingredients: You escape



INVASION OF THE BROWN SLIME: INSIDE FRONT COVER OF THE MAILER WARNS OF THE PERILS OF AGE SPOTS.

scrutiny from the Food and Drug Administration.

Remember “Mother’s Little Helper,” baby boomers, the Rolling Stones’ song that talks about “little yellow pills”? A six month supply of these snake oil capsules puts you back \$109.95, less than half the regular \$239.70. Don’t even think about insurance reimbursements. And start practicing “*caveat emptor*” right now! ■

*James R. Rosenfield is a lecturer and writer on marketing and direct marketing.*

# STILL AMAZING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

by Sheila Gibson

Randi was his “Amazing” self during the JREF’s “Media, Myth, and Magic” conference August 6-9 at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Fort Lauderdale. And he would mark his 70th birthday that weekend.

Can you imagine? Randi? Seventy years old? Why, he doesn’t look a day over . . . well, okay, he does look 70. But he wears it very well and he knows how to use it. He could give Merlin a run for his money.

He held court at the conference in classic Randi style as he took the floor to rant passionately about some New Age flummery, explain how to test a paranormal claim, or relate some hilarious story. He mingled among the crowd of attendees, his charming smile always ready and his blue eyes alight with laughter. Yup, he may be 70, but he’s still Randi.

Randi celebrated his milestone birthday on the night of August 7, surrounded by friends and admirers. Among them were Jerry Andrus, Jack Horkheimer, Michael Shermer, Marvin Minsky, Bob Park, Bob Steiner, and the whole staff of the JREF. The one-time child prodigy was showered with a haul of presents any self-respecting child would envy,

and he tore through them with childlike glee. Many had a distinctly wizardly theme, especially the electronic Merlin prognosticator. A host of friends saluted him with kind and heartfelt words. Letters from Martin Gardner, a prominent skeptical author, and other well-wishers were read. Randi grinned and joked and blew his candles out and gamely basked in the attention.

The party’s main attraction was the showing of a tape of highlights from his career as a magician, escape artist, and skeptic. Straightjacketed and hanging upside down over Niagara Falls, he struggled and succeeded in freeing himself from his bonds. Shari Lewis narrated as he locked himself into a milk can and escaped unharmed, just like Houdini.

A campy ’70s-era commercial for Bounce fabric softener sheets featured the “Amazing One” in traditional magic costume complete with female assistant. The crowd laughed as he shilled the “magical” powers of the dryer sheets. “How do they do it?” asked the on-screen Randi, as the real Randi feigned em-



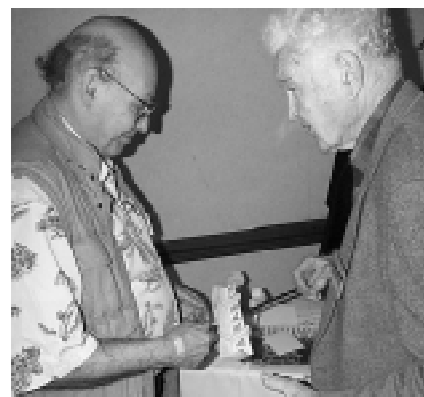
barrassment and hid his face in his hands.

“I hope you were paid well,” joshed a voice in the crowd.

The highlights reel ended, and a film starring a teenage Randi filled the screen. It was no epic work, just a flickery black and white film of a bespectacled young man, dark-haired but already balding, mugging for the camera and clowning around on the streets of some unnamed city. The crowd, who had been laughing throughout the showing, fell silent as it played.

Randi, even at 17, was unmistakably Randi. ■

ABOVE: RANDI EXAMINES HIS BIRTHDAY CAKE FOR SIGNS OF SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION. BELOW: JERRY ANDRUS (R) DEMONSTRATES AN OPTICAL ILLUSION FOR MARVIN MINSKY.



photos by Chip Denman

# AVAILABLE FROM JREF



## PIGASUS PIN

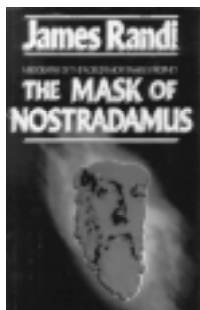
"Pigasus" is the symbol of JREF's efforts to uncover the unlikely. Now you can show the world how probable you think genuine psychic powers are by wearing this pewter pin/tie tack. Shown actual size. \$8.00 + .50 S/H.

## BOOKS BY JAMES RANDI



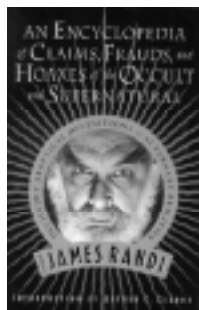
### THE FAITH HEALERS

A hard-hitting exposure of the methods used by evangelists who claim to heal by divine touch. Paperback edition, 1989, by Prometheus Books. \$20.00 + \$3.00 S/H



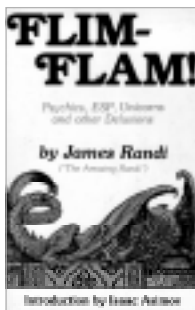
### THE MASK OF NOSTRADAMUS

Biographical study of the legendary 16th century seer who turns out to be a Renaissance con-man with secrets of his own that are revealed here. Hardcover edition, 1990, by Charles Scribner's. \$20.00 + \$3.00 S/H



### AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CLAIMS, FRAUDS, AND HOAXES OF THE OCCULT AND SUPERNATURAL

A comprehensive treatment of definitions, origins and terminology used by the occultists, parapsychologists and psychics, with a decidedly skeptical point of view. Hardcover edition, 1995, by St. Martin's Press. \$25.00 + \$3.00 S/H



### FLIM-FLAM! PSYCHICS, ESP, UNICORNS, AND OTHER DELUSIONS

A general examination of everything in the "paranormal" spectrum from ESP to UFOs. Paperback edition, 1992, by Prometheus Books. \$19.00 + \$3.00 S/H  
Cassette tape edition, 1995, by Prometheus Books. Excerpts read by the author. \$17.00 + \$2.00 S/H



### THE TRUTH ABOUT URI GELLER

The first in-depth critical examination of the claims made by and for a conjuror who professed genuine psychic abilities and convinced a number of scientists that such powers existed. Paperback edition, 1982, by Prometheus Books. \$21.00 + \$3.00 S/H



### CONJURING

A comprehensive historical, biographical treatment of conjuring and conjurors (320 pages, full color). Hardcover edition, 1992, by St. Martin's Press. \$25.00 + \$4.00 S/H

## NOVA VIDEO FROM PBS



All over the world, psychics perform feats that defy the laws of science. Do they have a special link to the paranormal? Enter magician James Randi - who for decades has turned his trained eye on

phenomena from spoon bending to faith healing to astrology. Tune in as Randi uncovers the secrets about psychics - and takes a penetrating look at the uncanny workings of the human mind. 1 hour, VHS cassette (NTSC) \$19.95 + \$4.00 S/H (overseas: \$10 S/H)

## JREF LOGO MERCHANDISE

Mug, \$10.00 + \$3.00 S/H

T-shirt: \$15.00 + \$3.00 S/H (specify S/M/L/XL)

Pen: \$5.00 + \$.55 S/H

**Please Note:** When ordering by mail, send checks or money orders only, to JREF, 201 S.E. 12th St. (E. Davie Blvd.), Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316-1815. For books, mugs and T-shirts sent outside the US and Canada, add \$9 for air mail (one week) rather than the S/H costs listed above; otherwise they will be sent by surface mail (up to 8 weeks). Pens and Pigasus pins go air mail, worldwide, for the regular S/H fees listed. If you'd like a book autographed by the author, just ask!



## NO TIPPING

by Massimo Polidoro

*Massimo Polidoro is the European representative for the JREF; he is also a researcher for CICAP (the Italian Committee for the Investigations of Claims of the Paranormal), author of various books dealing with the critical examination of paranormal claims and a graduate student in psychology at Padua University. He is currently working on a book dealing with Houdini's investigations in spiritualism.*

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*CICAP's Web page can be reached at:*

*<http://www.valnet.it/cicap>*

Recently, an Italian spirit medium approached us at CICAP and said he wanted his “powers” tested. His name was Teodosio Lavinia, a.k.a. “Mago Matheus Faust,” from Potenza, and he claimed he could move any three-legged table without touching it using only his psychic powers. “Table tipping” has been a standard of seance mediums since the mid-1800s, but the hands-off claim was a new twist.

The Italian National television, RAI-TV, considered the occasion sufficiently spectacular to film the test live. The site for the test was going to be the laboratories of the Department of Chemistry at the University of Pavia, where we often conduct tests on psychics.

The medium arrived that morning to examine the conditions of the test. We provided five different three-legged tables at his request, and he would choose one of the five that he felt was best suited for his demonstration. He examined them all, touching and looking, and finally he chose one for the test.

But something was wrong: the problem, he told us, was not in the tables, but in the floor. It was not

sufficiently smooth: the small cracks between the tiles might prevent the table from sliding. We suggested placing the table on top of a large, wooden platform. After we did so, he waved his hands on the table a few times, examined the platform and then shook his head. The wood, he explained, stopped the “spiritic fluid,” which apparently came from the ground, and the table could not move.

When examining people that claim to possess psychic powers, it is essential that the test conditions be as favorable as possible to the claimant; in this way, any possible failure cannot be attributed to unfavorable conditions or the skepticism of the experimenters.

We thus looked for another room in which to perform the test, but the only apparently suitable room we could find, the only one without cracks between tiles, was a space under a staircase. Psychic, table and crew moved to the new location but alas ... nothing could be done there either.

The space was “too gloomy,” the psychic explained.

Back again in the original room, the psychic agreed to try the test. He claimed he felt pretty con-

fidest of his success. Psychic powers work in mysterious ways...

Before starting the official test and the filming, we asked the psychic, as we usually do, to give us a demonstration without constraint of control conditions: this was needed to be sure that his powers could work well in that particular room, and that the lights, the cameras or the people present could not affect his sensibility. In case of a failure under test conditions, such elements could not then be blamed as the possible source of the fiasco.

We then sat around the table and the psychic asked us to place our fingers on the surface of the table after he did the same. Suddenly, without even attempting to hide it, he started to press on the table, making it slide. When we informed him that we could see the "move" quite clearly, he replied

saying that it was not him pushing the table, but the "fluid" exuding from his fingers. However, he still hadn't shown us his ability to move the table while staying apart from it, which was the most interesting part of the demonstration. He said that since it required intense concentration, he would only attempt that during the official test.

All was ready for the live experiment. Lights, cameras rolling... Action! We took our place around the table and placed our fingers in the usual way. After a few seconds, the psychic started to push and we observed an interesting twist on the trick: after he had tilted the table on two legs, the psychic removed his hands from it and left it in a precarious state, with only our hands supporting it. It was quite clear now how he usually succeeded: he was going to claim that any movement caused

by us in the attempt to keep the table from falling was, actually, produced by the fluid emanating from his hands, which he kept waving in the air. We did not give him a chance to try that on us, so we put the table back on the floor and asked him to move it from that position, even only a few millimeters.

Evidently surprised, the psychic appeared to concentrate for awhile, but then stopped and said that was enough. Before the end of the program, we explained to the TV viewers how the psychic had been able to incline the table by pressing on it.

When asked about his failure during the test the psychic answered: "It's their fault! They lack enough psychic energy." That makes sense: he was the psychic, but if we wanted to see real psychic powers at work we'd better provide it ourselves! ■

**SPIRITUALISTIC TABLE ANTICS** have attracted the attention of skeptical investigators for 150 years. Spiritualist believers would conduct seances with hands upon the top of a table. After a while, the table would rotate, sometime so much that the sitters would have to leave their chairs to stay with the table. For many, this was exciting proof that the spirits could interact with the material world. In 1853, physicist Michael Faraday devised an ingenious test of so-called "table turning." Faraday reasoned that if spirits really were moving the table, then the table must lead and the sitters follow its action. On the other hand, if the sitters themselves were pushing the table around, then their hands should move ahead of the table.

Faraday placed a stack of slippery cardboard on a table top. The sitters' hands rested on the top sheet of the stack, which was large enough to obscure the table top. There was just enough friction to transmit force between the hands and the table. After the table moved, the positions of the cards were compared. In every case, the cards at the top — by the hands — had moved further than the cards at the bottom. The table's motion had lagged behind the motion of the hands.

As a clincher, Faraday added visual feedback for the sitters. Rollers and a pointer indicated the direction of the forces, whether from the hands or from the table. Once the sitters were aware that they were subconsciously exerting a sideways force on the table, the spooky phenomenon ceased.

— *Chip Denman*



## IRRITABLE SCIENTIST SYNDROME

by Bob Park

*Robert L. Park is Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland and director of public information of the American Physical Society. He writes "What's New," a weekly internet commentary ([www.aps.org](http://www.aps.org)) on science issues that is widely read by scientists, science journalists, and government officials. He is also a frequent contributor to the op-ed pages of major newspapers and on television and radio news programs. A former chairman of the Department of Physics at the University of Maryland, he is the author of more than a hundred scientific papers in experimental surface physics. He is currently working on a book with the tentative title Voodoo Science.*

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It was standing room only in the ballroom of the National Press Club. The press briefing by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* was scheduled to run all morning, so I took a position standing next to the danish in case I needed nourishment. This was the sort of turnout you normally associate with an announcement of a major medical breakthrough in the battle against cancer or AIDS. But on the agenda this day were therapies for less terminal conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome and tension headache, and far from being breakthroughs, some of the treatments had been passed down without modification for thousands of years. Had *JAMA* gone alternative?

There is good reason for a scientific look at alternative medicine. We are witnessing an alternative medicine epidemic with no end in sight. Four out of ten Americans used some alternative therapy last year, compared to one out of three in 1990. And they spent \$27 billion out-of-pocket for the privilege – more than double the 1990 figure. Visits to alternative medicine practitioners now exceed those to pri-

mary care physicians. Aside from the general descent of the population into New Age woolliness, what accounts for the growing popularity of alternative medicine? Congress played a big role with the creation in 1991 of an National Institutes of Health Office of Alternative Medicine (it became the Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine this past October) and the passage of the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act in 1994.

The mere existence of an office within NIH devoted to alternative medicine gives credibility to a vast spectrum of implausible therapies. The Center has yet to find even one therapy that does not show promise, which seems to please Congress. In seven years Congress has increased the budget from \$2 million to \$50 million. The Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994 allows *natural* remedies to be marketed over the counter without any proof of safety, efficacy, or purity. The Food and Drug Administration cannot get involved unless the bodies begin to pile up.

So it's clearly time to put these therapies to the test and inform physicians of their safety and effective-

ness. That's just what the *JAMA* editors said they had in mind when they devoted the November 11, 1998 issue to scientific studies of alternative therapies. Four of the articles were showcased at the press briefing, presumably to demonstrate the scientific rigor of the research. The *JAMA* editor introduced the four studies by explaining that the "gold-standard" of modern medical research is the randomized, controlled, double-blind study. The reporters present quite naturally assumed that all four studies fit that description, and they would not have learned otherwise from the press releases or from the briefing. Their stories were full of praise for the scientific approach taken by *JAMA*. But were the studies double-blind?

One of the papers selected for the briefing dealt with the use of "moxibustion" to persuade a fetus in the 33rd week of gestation to get in the proper head-first position. Moxibustion is an ancient Chinese treatment involving stimulation of an acupuncture point with heat rather than needles. Not just any old heat will do. The heat is produced by building a tiny bonfire at the acupoint using the dried leaves of *artemisia vulgaris*. The fire, mom will be happy to learn, is extinguished before actual blistering occurs. The acupoint for getting a fetus to do a somersault is BL 67 (Zhiyin), which is located beside the outer corner of the fifth toenail. Treatment is repeated each day for seven days. This is standard practice in China, where they've been relying on it for thousands of years. You will be shocked to learn, as I

was, that no clinical trials of this procedure had ever been performed. What are our medical researchers spending their time on?

The study randomly assigned women with breech position fetuses to either receive or not receive the treatment. The article states, however, that "subjects and investigators were aware of group assignment." Only the fetus, it seems, was in the dark. The article explains that it would have been impossible to use sham moxibustion as a placebo; the study was conducted in China where this is the standard treatment for breech presentation, and it's pretty easy to tell whether you're getting a Chinese hot foot. "It was difficult to persuade the subjects to accept randomization and the consequent risk of having to do without the therapy." So, in a culture in which those in the control group fully expected the worst, they did somewhat more poorly than those in the treated group. This is known as the "nocebo effect." The best solution might have been to conduct the study in a culture where women have never heard of moxibustion – if you could find enough women who would not laugh themselves to death that is.

I didn't stick around to hear about the use of Chinese herbal medication for irritable bowel syndrome. I was irritated enough already, and the danish were gone.



A colleague called my attention to a full page ad in *USA Today* for a supplement called "Vitamin O" from Rose Creek Health Products,

which the ad says is helping thousands to enjoy healthier lives. There is a wonderful photograph of vigorous, smiling people. Every word of the text that goes with it is literally true.

"It is so natural it contains the most abundant element on earth. So safe you can drop it in your eyes. So effective you could spend hours reading the unsolicited testimonials of those who've used it with dramatic results."

How does it work?

*"Vitamin O contains stabilized oxygen molecules in a liquid solution of sodium chloride and distilled water to be taken orally as a supplement, usually 15-20 drops two to three times a day. Your bloodstream absorbs the 'Vitamin O' and carries the pure oxygen directly to your cells and tissues.*

*"There it maximizes your nutrients, purifies your bloodstream, and eliminates toxins and poisons – in other words, all the processes necessary to prevent disease and promote health."*

You can get a two month supply for only \$40.

It also says "this technology was used for our space research program" – there is a picture of an astronaut floating in a space suit. I will check and see if NASA can confirm this, though it's difficult for me to see how the astronauts could have survived if they didn't drink water.

It is a measure of the contempt these people have for the public that they are confident that they can get away with selling ordinary salt water as a supplement – and tell people exactly what they are buying! ■

# SWIFT FORUM

*Opinion and commentary  
from Swift readers.*

## CHINESE TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN CHINA

I am a graduate student in biomedical engineering and a third year medical student who just returned from Beijing. While returning from a tour of the Great Wall and Ming Tombs, the tour made an unexpected stop at a center for Chinese Traditional Medicine.

The tour began in the lobby where we were told how Mao promoted CTM in his later years. We were then ushered into a small lecture room where a charming young Chinese woman in a white lab coat offered us tea and asked us where we were all from. There were 10 of us, and all were from the U.S. except one Chinese woman who was strangely absent through most of the session. Except for my 41-year-old uncle and myself, all looked to be at least 65 years old.

Our host proceeded to tell us about Qi, Yin/Yang, and how three fingers applied to each wrist pulse could detect the condition of various organs in the body – one finger for each organ. She then called in a “Qi master” who, after ostensibly focusing his Qi into his lower abdomen, grabbed two bare wires to complete a 120V circuit. A light bulb placed upon his head showed that he did indeed have a current rushing through his body.

We were all then told to hold hands so that we could, as a group, complete the 120V circuit. People were amazed at the tingling feeling the current produced in their fingers. I suppose they all missed this demonstration in high school physics. We were all told that this “improved the circulation.”

We all then received a sheet of paper with descriptions of various herbs on it. We were told that Chinese herbs were different from Western medicine because Western medicine is made up of “chemicals” and because Chinese herbs treat the root causes of disease (Yin and Yang out of balance) and have no side effects. Some of the listed herbs, we were told, could not be found in America. Among the claims made about some of the herbs is that they could treat arthritis and diabetes, and “cure” hypertension.

We were next asked if we would like a doctor to diagnose us. Several distinguished-looking Chinese gentlemen (in white coats of course) entered the room and spread out amongst the various tables. I watched as my uncle was “diagnosed.” The doctor worked through a translator:

*Translator:* “How old are you?”

*Patient:* “41.”

*Translator:* “He says you have unstable blood pressure.”

*Patient:* “That’s amazing! A doctor once told me my pressure was a little high.”

*Translator:* “He says that you sometimes have lower back pain.”

*Patient:* “Yes! That’s right!”

*Translator:* “He says the unstable blood pressure sometimes makes you dizzy.”

*Patient:* “No. No, I’ve never been...”

*Translator:* “That part is unclear – yes, that was unclear.”

The doctor then pointed out the herbs my uncle should use to treat his ailments. The translator asked how many he wanted to buy.

My take:

Aside from the broad abstractions about yin and yang, the unmeasurable Qi, the false dichotomy between chemicals and Chinese herbs, and the apparent inclusion of electricity in traditional Chinese medicine, these “doctors” were employing such a bad con in diagnosing nearly ubiquitous ailments that it was utterly insulting. Except that, as with the astrologers and psychics that you write about, it “appeared” to work. I think it worked, and I think Americans were targeted, because of the wide acceptance that these methods receive in the U.S. by respected people and institutions. I hate to see ailing people taken advantage of like that.

Aside from this con, I felt very safe and free in China, had a wonderful time, and I highly recommend it to everyone.

*Chris Bratteli*

*University of Minnesota*

## FAITH, PRAYER AND HEALING

In the October, 1998 issue of *Readers Digest*, the front cover proclaims: “Doctors Report: FAITH CAN

HEAL YOU.” I have never been a reader of the *Digest*, but I am familiar with the format and direction it takes in presenting its articles. Most invoke some feeling of optimism and hope thereby leaving the reader with some positive ideas or a warm and fuzzy feeling about their lives. This article is no exception to that rule and ventures farther in a presentation of a wholly Christian perspective, ignoring any opposing voice or offering any backup to the studies and research cited. The article, by Malcolm McConnell, who is listed as an contributing editor, proclaims “Faith can help you heal.” It is a deceptive and unscholarly attempt to use subjective surveys, anecdotal evidence and appeals to authorities to present a case that prayer, specifically Christian prayer and churchgoing has “healing potential.”

First let me say that I do believe that a healthy lifestyle (low fat diet, exercise, etc.) is important for good mental and physical health. And that relaxation techniques or types of meditation can relieve certain stresses. I also believe that naps are important and fishing is a great stress reliever. However, this article goes beyond the scope of what is reasonable when it ties good health and healing directly to the Christian god who has a personal interest in the health of his churchgoers.

Five medical doctors, three studies and one nurse are cited briefly to bolster this claim. The problem with this article is apparent from the start: no pertinent background information is provided to the reader about the doctors or the

studies. Take Dr. Harold Koenig, an associate professor of psychiatry at Duke University. The article says “his research team, studying thousands of Americans since 1984, has compiled powerful evidence that religious faith not only promotes overall good health, but also aids in recovery from serious illness.” Koenig states that in a study of 455 elderly hospital patients, that those who attended church more than once a week averaged four days in the hospital and people who never or seldom went to church spent 10 to 12 days in the hospital. This study has many accountability and verification problems.

But what about Koenig? How objective is he? In Catherine Clabby’s article from the *News and Observer* 5/10/98, Koenig describes himself as a “Conservative Christian” and “Born Again.” In addition, he encourages patients to pray with him. Clabby adds, “...it’s obvious that religion dwells at the center of his family life. A poster at the kitchen door announces that Jesus Heads This Household. The radio is tuned to a Christian station. A delicate cross bought years ago in Bethlehem holds a prominent spot in the professor’s small study.” One can conclude Koenig can hardly be considered an “objective observer.” The other doctors (all peddling books) include Dr. Herbert Benson, whose book “Timeless Healing” proclaims people are “wired for God,” Dr. Dale Matthews, author of *The Faith Factor* and Dr. Dean Ornish author of *Love and Survival*. Ornish may be the only objective and non-biased source cited. The

article also quotes Sue Moody, a parish nurse at Overbrook Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio, who “visits hospitalized church members daily and acts as their personal advocate within the health care system,” and Dr. Iris Keys, an ordained minister and an internist at Copping State Nursing Center. Keys says she “never imposes her religion, [but] always listens for ‘church talk.’” However, in the one case related in this article, Keys “sensed the woman was sicker in spirit than in body” and asked her patient “(S)hall we have a word of prayer?” Keys then led her patient in prayer and subsequent visits included prayer. Just how objective can this group be? McConnell never even suggests there may be opposing voices or non-Christian views.

Besides Koenig’s study, the article cites the following studies:

A Dartmouth Medical School study where “heart patients were 14 times more likely to die following surgery if they did not participate in group activities and did not find comfort in religion. Within six months of surgery, 21 patients had died – but there were no deaths among the 37 people who said they were “deeply religious.” In Israel, researchers “studied 3900 people living on kibbutzim over a 16 year period. Their findings: the religious had a 40 percent lower death rate from cardiovascular disease and cancer than their secular peers.” And finally, Yale University’s “study of 2812 elderly people found that those who never or rarely attended church had nearly twice the stroke rate of weekly churchgoers.”

The problem with this entire article is apparent: none of these “sources” provide any objective evidence quantifiable by scientific standards for the claims that intercessory prayer or faith had any effect or efficacy when dealing with patients. Anecdotal evidence aside, none of the cases cited had any confirming evidence. In the studies listed, the problems are more numerous: Who did the study? What were the controls and protocols? Was there independent confirmation of the results? Were the results peer reviewed? Were the results duplicated in different parts of the country? The world? How can a control group be truly established when you are dealing with the efficacy and ecumenical nature of prayer? Are the studies available for examination? I am sure that these studies are as prejudiced as their Christian authors. Another problem with this approach is also evident: The doctors and studies are ignoring the millions of people in different countries and environments that do not have belief in the Christian God and live better and healthier lives than those in Christian countries or that there are deeply religious people, including non-Christians, who do not regularly attend churches. Japan is a good example. Also ignored is the question that if Christian faith and church going are so good for the human physical condition, why are these deeply religious, consistent churchgoers having strokes and heart attacks in the first place?

This article belies its prejudicial insistence that there is a Judeo-Christian preference by God for

healing and good health by taking a very narrow spectrum of the population and applying a Christian standard to it and completely and conveniently ignoring the rest of us. McConnell and the *Digest* should recognize their literary responsibility in an ever diverse and changing world and not just take at face value controversial subject matter and invalidated studies catering to the Christians in society. The religious right’s propaganda machine is certainly working overtime here.

Yet there is another aspect of this subject that has been completely (and perhaps conveniently) ignored by the article’s author and esteemed doctors and researchers: in thousands of nursing homes and assisted care centers across the country are tens of thousands of people suffering from Alzheimer’s, senile dementia, Parkinson’s, cancer and a myriad of other disabling and tragic diseases and conditions that affect the human mind and body. Many of these centers (as well as home care organizations) are church-sponsored and some are reserved exclusively for church or denominational members. Thus, it cannot be said that these patients are not receiving massive faith and prayer support nor can it be maintained that they were not churchgoers or persons of little faith. Yet no amount of faith or prayer will change the outcome of these human lives once diagnosed with a chronic and crippling condition. Once healthy bodies and minds, some deeply devoted to God and their religion now totally dependent upon others for the most basic necessities of existence. The typi-

cal Christian (or religious) party-line usually inserted here is about God being mysterious and, ironically, praying to God to ease the pain and suffering! This hypocritical response is appalling and shocking as it represents the dichotomy and uselessness of religion. It suggests a minimizing of the human side of these tragedies. It is no wonder that Koenig and his cohorts go for the “soft” numbers: they cannot face the reality and cold hard facts of incapacitating diseases in which faith and prayer haven’t the slightest effect.

Seen in this light, this article should be an embarrassment to any thinking person, Christian or otherwise.

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## **DEBUNKING THE PARANORMAL: A NOBLE GOAL BUT ULTIMATELY IN VAIN?**

It has been my experience that non-skeptical thinkers absolutely don’t want to change their beliefs about the paranormal. Take a look at your local bookstore’s paranormal shelves. How many books by authors like James Randi, Martin Gardner, and Philip Klass do you see compared to books about astrology, UFOs, and psychic ability? Bookstores stock what the ma-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

jority of consumers are reading and buying.

My first experience with the difficulty in debating with non-skeptics came after reading some of Jan Harold Brunvand's books on urban legends. I was amazed at how many bizarre, macabre stories have spread around for years, often told as if they're current, that have no basis in fact. I was even more amazed to find no one telling one of these stories wants to be told that it isn't true. Attempts to explain that the story is old (Brunvand traced one story back as far as the turn of the century) is met with defiance and sometimes even anger. It is human nature, I think, to not want to be wrong. So when I try to contradict someone regarding paranormal phenomena, I meet up with even more defiance.

An example I can cite from my own personal experience relates to dowsing.

My aunt told me about a man who lived near her who dowsed for many residents of that area. Although I let her know I didn't believe in dowsing, she pointed out that he had only been wrong "once." I was surprised that he would admit to being wrong at all. Still, I had been reading *Flim-Flam!* and had my copy with me, and I tried to show her the section about Randi's dowsing test. She turned her back on me and refused to listen! Her mind was completely closed to the idea that dowsing isn't really possible.

This man had previously dowsed on property where she and my uncle had been building a house. When the well diggers came in with their equipment, they dug in several dif-

ferent areas designated by the dowser, and came up dry every time! They had to install a pump at the bottom of the hill because they couldn't find water for a well.

Once I remembered that, I realized that this was the "one" failure the dowser had. He could hardly hide it from her; I wonder how many other failures he had that she didn't know about. Yet in spite of his failure on her own property, she still believed in him.

After reading Randi's thoughts about Therapeutic Touch (TT) in a recent issue of *Swift*, and his challenge to anyone to claim his prize, I mentioned the subject to my sister, who is a nurse practitioner. She has a friend, also a nurse, who took a seminar in TT and tried to demonstrate it to my sister. My sister was unimpressed with the display, especially after I told her what I had heard about it. However, when I told her about the article in *Swift* about Emily Rosa's successful debunking of the phenomenon, she argued that TT probably has some value as a placebo. She also pointed out that "no one really knows how acupuncture works." Frankly, I don't know that acupuncture *does* work, so the argument went no further. But I was disappointed that she could defend a pseudoscientific claim that should be considered a major embarrassment to the nursing profession. I did ask her what she would think of a nurse seeing a patient and recommending channeling crystals, but she didn't respond.

After numerous futile attempts to convince people to think ratio-

nally about paranormal phenomena and pseudoscience, I started wondering why they are so determined not to think rationally. A revelation of sorts came after I told my family and some co-workers that I am an atheist. The response that I got was not what I expected. Every single person I have told refuses to believe it. They insist that I really believe in God, but that for some reason I am simply denying it. I said earlier that contradicting belief in an urban legend or a paranormal phenomenon garners anger and/or defiance. Try to contradict someone's religion or lack thereof, and see what defiance really is!

Which led me to this hypothesis: People who believe in paranormal-type phenomena don't want to think skeptically because they might start thinking skeptically about their own religion. I wonder if a study on paranormal/pseudoscience belief would provide the evidence that the most avid believers are also very firm in their religious beliefs? After all, religion is basically an emperor with no clothes on. I have read Paul Kurtz's *The Transcendental Temptation*, and I wonder how anyone could believe that what is preached by any religion is absolutely true when no concrete evidence is offered to support the religion's doctrine.

Rational thinking will always be the exception, not the rule. People have been believing paranormal nonsense for centuries; the exact *things* that they believe in change, but the willingness to believe is the same. Virtually no one believes in the Philosopher's Stone

anymore; today it is Therapeutic Touch and psychokinesis.

In *The Transcendental Temptation*, Paul Kurtz explores the reasons why people have a need to believe in religion, including the theory that religion is based in biogenetics, that is, a genetic predisposition that humans have developed over time. Until we can fully understand this, I fear that belief in the paranormal and in pseudoscience will continue virtually unabated.

*Margaret Ernsberger*

## SWIFT TAKES

GOOD & BAD VIBRATIONS FROM ALL OVER

*Mirabella's "Tech Report" section in the September/October 1998 issue lures its readers with the promise of "A sneak peek at the latest science..." It's an empty promise. In one item, "The latest free-radical fighter to surface in the battle against sags and lines is alpha-lipoic acid, an anti-oxidant found naturally in human cells and in potatoes." An MD from Yale is quoted as saying the product is "anti-aging" and*

*the product's results include smaller pores, smoother skin, and more even coloring. Right. Last time we checked, we still hadn't discovered a "fountain of youth" and no amount of skin potions have ever made a dent in the size of anyone's pores.*

.....

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30

### "AMERICA'S MOVING ADVENTURE"



photo by Chip Denman

We hope there's no mileage charge for this particular move.



poor job in providing an educational and informed story. Unwarranted assumptions are made and only minimal skepticism is applied to most assertions. In addition, there is no new ground covered in the newsweekly's treatment of the subject.

Perhaps most egregious of all are the accompanying illustrations. Six full pages are devoted to high-quality photos of single plants and herbs with captions listing information such as the herb's "common name;" "what it does;" and "precautions."

Under the herb echinacea, the accompanying photo of a vivid pink flower: "What it does - Stimulates the Immune System; helps fight colds and flus." That's nice. Prove it!



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The James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) feels that young people must be exposed to the elements of critical thinking, as well as to reliable information about paranormal claims. It offers scholarships to students who investigate such claims in a careful, scientific manner. Adults as well as young people can attend JREF educational classes and seminars. Its library of books, videos, news clippings, and other materials is open to the media, students, researchers, and the general public.

## RESEARCH

The JREF is committed to providing reliable information about paranormal claims, and it both supports and conducts original research into such claims. It publishes the research results in *Swift*, the official newsletter of the Foundation.

## THE PRIZE

Years ago, outspoken entertainer James Randi “put his money where his mouth is” and offered a \$10,000 prize of his own money to anyone who would demonstrate a paranormal feat under controlled observing conditions. Thanks to a number of pledgers, collectively known as the 2000 Club, the prize amount is now \$1,000,000.

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The James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) is a not-for-profit organization based on the ongoing work of its founder and leader, the world-renowned conjuror and investigator James Randi. Its primary goals are to:

CREATE A NEW GENERATION OF CRITICAL THINKERS.

INSTRUCT IN THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNCRITICALLY ACCEPTING PARANORMAL, PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC AND SUPERNATURAL CLAIMS.

SUPPORT AND CONDUCT RESEARCH INTO SUCH CLAIMS.

PROVIDE RELIABLE INFORMATION ON SUCH CLAIMS.

ASSIST THOSE WHO ARE BEING ATTACKED DUE TO THEIR INVESTIGATIONS AND CRITICISMS OF SUCH CLAIMS.

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