We've encountered an endless line of dowsers eager to show their "abilities" to dowse for water, people, gold, explosives, graves.. and in one case, the ability to dowse for a circle drawn in chalk. There are number of different techniques, but so far, all of these claims have had one thing in common: they haven't stood up to the Million Dollar Challenge. That is to say, when exposed to the light of a controlled experiment, they fail.

Despite this, many people and the media continue to think of dowsing as a real phenomenon. A search of Google News shows dozens of hits in the news for dowsing. Most are the same old thing, but this Evansville (Indiana) Courier and Press report about Duane Walker caught my attention. Here are some quotes from the article, written by Garret Mathews:

The dowser poses the problem to himself and then uses his total powers of concentration. You must have a driving force inside you that wants to find the answer to the very specific question.

Isn't that how we solve all problems? If I've lost my keys, I concentrate on where I last saw them, where I'd be likely to put them, etc. And magically.. they're always in the last place I look! Sometimes, they're even in the first! I suppose I should try finding them in the 2nd to last place that I look some day..

At first I was skeptical," Phyllis Walter admits, smiling, "but when he went to two cemeteries, and I watched him find some long-forgotten graves, I became a believer.

He found graves in a cemetery. Ok, that makes sense, but these were "long-forgotten." I wasn't there... I don't know what he did, but if you've ever visited an old graveyard, it's often a simple task to find a grave without a stone. The ground often has a depression due to the collapse of the coffin and settling of the filled-in soil. Phyllis saw and she believed... but what she saw, wasn't a controlled experiment. It was an anecdote.

There was the project at Evansville's Mater Dei High School when he located some "old wooden-square coffins under a bunch of trees."

I just mention this because I have no idea what "wooden-square" coffins are. And yes, I Googled.

Just don't bring a camcorder to the site.

"Slows down my L-rods."

Umm... gee, how convenient.

For all I know this guy is the real deal, but articles like this should at least mention that the science community believes dowsing to be a simple matter of self-delusion mainly due to the id eomotor response. (Note the last paragraph in that linked Wikipedia article.)

Also on this article, are comments that support dowsing. Here's an interesting one:

Posted by **johnh** on December 27, 2008 at 8:16 a.m.

Dowsing for graves? I have never heard of that. Dowsing for underground streams is easy. Use a forked willow branch. When you pass over an underground stream, try to keep the top of the branch from pointing downward. You can't. It will peel the bark off in your hand.

When I decided to put in geothermal devices to heat and cool my house, I drove 4 miles to a family who had a willow tree, and asked for a forked branch. They gave me "my choice" and laughed.

I brought it home and doused the four sites I would drill. The first 3 showed no water, the 4th did. When I had a well driller drill the holes. That hole produced a spring. Now I have FREEE heating and cooling. I have FREE Water.

So dowsing failed 3 out of 4 times. That's some convincing evidence there. Given that there is water under most ground, at varying depths, I'm surprised it took him 4 times to find it.

Posted by maclee4427 on December 27, 2008 at 11:31 a.m.

I have never doused for graves, but I used to work as a Maintenance Supervisor at an apartment complex. I made two L shaped rods from coat hangers, then I used them to find a water line that was not in the area it was supposed to be acording to blue prints. I held the rods loosely in my hands pointing in the direction I was walking low and behold when I was over the water line the two rods crossed, when we dug in that spot there it was the water line directly under the spot where the two rods crossed. I have used this several times and it located the water line every single time. I was astonished that it worked. Ilearned this trick from someone who was younger than I am, and was skeptical until I tried it and got the results. I have never used a wilow branch but I have heard of others using it to find water and it works. Don't ask me to explain how it works but believe me it does work.

And here is the biggest problem with dowsing. Stories like this are common, and there's no way to refute them. Either the man is a liar, he's fooling himself, or he's telling the truth, and though we've only seen the first two possibilities here are the JREF, we have to hold out the possibility that the third is actually what's happening here. Our only response to these stories can be "Apply for the Million Dollar Challenge." Let's do a controlled test of the ability, and see what happens.

Alas, we know what happens. We get myriad excuses, and the believer keeps on believing.

And yes, dowsing is harmless... at least that's what I thought until a day two years ago when I saw a utility worker using two L-rods to locate and mark underground electrical lines.