

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 8, Number 3

March 2000

Baptism of Hellfire

A Personal Account of a Creationist Speech

by Bob Ladendorf

As much as I thought I'd be prepared for any criticism of science, particularly evolution, from a believer in creationism, the blunt statement that "Evolution is a big lie and is being promoted in the educational system" at the outset was a stunner. The speaker added that he was "appalled with the false information" in the biology textbooks used in the schools.

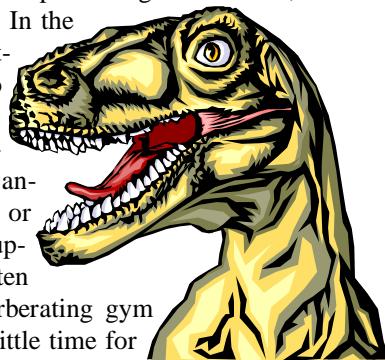
Eugene A. Sattler, founder and director of the Creation Education Association, Inc., of Pine River, Wisconsin, presented his arguments against evolution and for creationism at a public forum held January 23 at the Trinity Lutheran Church Gymnasium, 515 S. MacArthur, in Springfield. He described himself as a retired Lutheran educator.¹

His talk before 43 attendees included a short part describing the Bible's book of Genesis, a long, rambling part alternately criticizing evolution and promoting creationism, and a question-and-answer session. In the presentation, Sattler attempted to put evolution to death by a thousand cuts. That is, Sattler jumped constantly from one premise to another, making quick points or showing publications that supposedly proved a point — often difficult to hear in the reverberating gym atmosphere — that allowed little time for reflection.

In addition to his talk, which included slides and some alleged human footprints found alongside dinosaur tracks to prove co-existence, he had several tables of various creationist books, tapes and other materials for adults and children. Cookies and hot chocolate were also available as I mingled and chatted briefly with the church's two pastors.

What followed after Sattler's opening review of Genesis as the basis for the origin of the universe, earth, plants, animals and humans — in 6,000 years — was an unrelenting attack on evolution and science. Here are some "highlights" from his arguments. He:

- indicated that he was not criticizing those who believe evolution but was "hitting the doctrine"



- stated that evolution, like creationism, is a "model" not a theory
- called Stephen Jay Gould's statement about evolution "as well documented as anything" as a statement of "nonsense," saying that no one has documented "macroevolution"
- said that "scientific evidence" supports creationism
- ridiculed "Darwin's finches" as evidence of evolution
- called evolution a "myth" not a "science"
- made fun of evolution by calling it a "belief that hydrogen is a colorless, odorless gas which, given enough time, turns into people"
- demonstrated with slides that humans and dinosaurs existed at the same time because of reputed footprints
- discussed the use of carbon-14 dating showing dinosaurs living 9,000 years ago, give or take a few thousand years
- criticized evolution exhibits in Chicago's Field Museum and implied that some were taken out because of protests
- called humanism a "religion"
- showed a slide featuring a cartoon of characters in castle towers, one labeled evolution and the other as creationism, with the evolution side shooting at the foundation of creationism and the other shooting back.

These highlights, punctuated by creationist arguments about the Bible's tales of Adam and Eve, existence of Noah's ark and its being found on Mt. Ararat as well as details about its structure and contents, anti-science jabs, and gloating over Kansas's decision to allow school districts to stop teaching evolution, were too extensive for any kind of questioning and

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[Baptism by Hellfire]

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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Predictions

- More Weird Web Sites
- Book Reviews
- Skeptic Music



From the Chairman

Let me begin by thanking Rich Walker and Rense Lange for their presentation last month. I can't say I understood it all, mind you, but the parts I did grasp were interesting! I've been happy to see increasing turnout at our meetings lately, and I hope that trend will continue. Remember, if any of you are interested in giving a presentation to RE-ALL, just say the word!

Speaking of those who have given presentations, our November 1998 speaker was David Hunter, a father who'd lost his daughter to recovered memory therapy. Mr. Hunter has not been sitting still for this. He became the president of the Illinois False Memory Syndrome Foundation, and then resigned to form his own organization, Parents Against Cruel Therapy (PACT), which he formed under different guidelines than the Illinois FMSF, thus allowing more freedom to lobby and the like. In addition, he has been appointed as a member of the Illinois Marriage and Family Therapy Licensing and Disciplinary Board! These are the folks who keep an eye on licensed marriage and family therapists, much the way there was a board who disciplined Bennett Braun. He is one of two "public" members of the Board. I'm not quite sure how he managed to get appointed, but I applaud him for getting so involved!

March Meeting

And for our March meeting, we will feature a videotaped lecture from the 1999 Skeptics Society conference: Dr. Eugenie Scott, of the National Center for Science Education describes the battle for quality science education in America's schools. Her presentation is described as "funny, frightening, and clear." She warns about the rising crowd of "intelligent-design" creationists and explains why so many people are scared enough of evolution to try to keep it out of public schools. As usual, we'll be at the Lincoln Library's Carnegie Room South at 7:00, March 7. I hope to see you there!

Psychic Junk Mail Update

In an update to my August article on the "psychic" junk mail I'd received for "Leo Bloomberg" at the REALL post office box, we have now also gotten the very same mail for "Sherrie Blamington" and "Ethel Bloomberg" at the box as well. It appears that somebody is having fun by signing us up on these lists. Doesn't really bother me, I guess, since I just throw it all away while it's costing the "psychics" money to print and mail everything. Always try to look on the bright side.

From the Editor

March has arrived, but Spring seems to have beaten it here. Didn't the groundhog say six more weeks of winter? Unless we have something about to clobber us in the next few days, I'd say Phil got it wrong. I've got crocuses blooming by my garage door, for cryin' out loud!

This issue features an article by Bob Ladendorf, our esteemed secretary-treasurer and former newsletter editor. (I'm buttering him up in case I need to try to talk him into being the newsletter editor again at some point!) He ventured where few skeptics would dare to tread — a presentation by a creationist to an audience of creationists. All I can say is, better him than me. I doubt I would have been able to handle it.

In addition to Bob's article, David returns with another installment of "REALLity Check," this time featuring plenty of psychic-related news items.

Lastly, simply because I had some space to fill (the truth hurts!), I've included a brief list of some of the most notable web sites of interest to skeptics. After you've read this issue (remember, I said "after"), fire up your web browser and take a look at a few of these. Incidentally, if you haven't been to James Randi's site in a few months, be sure to do so, as it has been completely revamped.

That's all I have for this month. See you at the meeting! ☹

Obituary

Dr. Martin Orne died last month at the age of 72. You may not have heard of Dr. Orne, but his research into hypnosis, memory, and related topics preceded that of many of the more well-known folks like Richard Ofshe and Elizabeth Loftus. Among other accomplishments, Dr. Orne showed that people try to please their therapists by telling them what they think they are looking for. In addition, he showed that people under hypnosis do not relive the times from very early in their development. Also, he and his wife showed that people can have false memories implanted while under hypnosis. Outside of the false-memory field, he is perhaps best known as the man who established that Kenneth Bianchi, the suspected Hillside Strangler, was faking "multiple personalities" in order to escape prosecution. His intellect will be missed. ☹

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Holy cow! We're starting off 2000 with a flood of RE-ALL-related media items, both good and bad. For example, in just one issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, I found three articles of interest to this column! So get those eye muscles ready — this is a long one!

Skeptics 1, Psychics 0

The front page of the *Chicago Tribune* (1/15) showed **Dorothy Bimbo**, a self-proclaimed psychic fortune teller, being led to a police station in handcuffs. Like the stories we've heard too many times before, she was accused of bilking victims out of thousands or dollars using the old "you're cursed and I can remove it" scam.

The 22-year-old woman who fell prey to this particular scam lost nearly \$114,000!

Both Dorothy and her mother, **Cindy**, were charged. For those of you not up to speed on Gypsy clans, "Bimbo" is a well-known clan name (well-known to police, that is); these psychic cons keep it all in the family.

REALL's longtime friend **Bruce Walstad** was interviewed for the *Tribune* story, pointing out that "a good fortune-teller makes \$200,000 to \$400,000 a year telling people they're cursed." They use cheap readings to screen for potential con victims — those who will believe they are cursed and go to extreme, and expensive, lengths to have that curse removed.

A very good article overall. And to make it even better, the web version of the article had a link to REALL's web site! (At least until it was moved to the archive, when all links were removed.) So at least somebody at the *Tribune* knows we exist.

Skeptics 2, Psychics 0

In the second piece of psychic news, the AP reported (1/18) that the Supreme Court refused a case in which 16 former psychic hotline employees had claimed ABC illegally videotaped them at work.

Back in 1993, ABC's *Primetime Live* show sent an employee with a hidden camera to get a job with the hotline. The employees claimed it was a violation of a wiretapping law. The courts thankfully disagreed, noting that recording a conversation for news-gathering is not illegal.

ABC was trying to determine, in part, whether employees actually believed they had the powers advertised by the hotline. It seems to me that we already have an answer to that, in spades. Shouldn't they have known they were being videotaped and set up? Shouldn't they have saved their money and not bothered to file the suit? Hmmm...

Skeptics 2, Psychics 1

The psychics scored a point a few days later when the Bloomington *Pantagraph* had a feature article on a local psy-

chic fair (1/23). There was absolutely no skeptical content whatsoever, much like the *Pantagraph's* September article on **Greta Alexander** (see "REALLity Check," October 1999) and their October article on a UFO abduction specialist (see "REALLity Check," January 2000).

Reporter **Michael Freimann** talked to the organizer of some local psychic fairs, **Helen Hardwick**. Hardwick indicated that local psychics are much better than those phone psychics — she must have heard about those employees mentioned above. The funny part is that she said they were better because in person they can see their clients and get a feel for them. Well, duh! That's called cold reading!

To further exemplify (without apparently realizing it) the cold reading aspects, one "psychic" noted, "The questions most people have involve love and money, followed by health." Yup, that about covers the basics of cold reading alright.

I sent a letter to the *Pantagraph*, which was published a short while later. I just wish they'd learn to talk to a skeptic *before* deciding to publish such nonsense.

Skeptics 3, Psychics 1

A few days after that, psychics were again in the news when the *New York Times* (1/27) revealed that New York City's welfare-to-work program was recruiting welfare recipients to work from home on the Psychic Network. That very day, the city decided to stop dealing with that company. Maybe they realized that it wasn't too smart to be pushing psychic hotlines as employment when, just last June, they had a massive operation to stop psychic con games! (See "REALLity Check," September 1999)

According to a follow-up *New York Times* article the next day, "Since April, 15 welfare recipients had been trained to read tarot cards and hired by the Psychic Network." Taxpayer funds go to give wage subsidies and tax credits for companies that hire people off of welfare. This is particularly ironic since psychic hotlines often have welfare recipients as clients/victims!

So what were the qualifications for this hotline? According to an AP article (1/28), they had to have a high school diploma, and the ability to read, write, and speak English. Well, I guess that helps answer ABC's question from above about whether any special skills are needed.

Final Score: Skeptics 3, Psychics 2



In the final psychic article for this issue, we have an entry from the *Chicago Tribune's* Tempo section. If I hear you saying, "Uh oh," you're right.

Reporter **Lydia Martin** claims to be a skeptic, but you sure couldn't tell from the article she wrote about "intuitive" **Frances Fox** (2/16). She repeats whatever Fox told her, and apparently didn't bother to check any of it out.

For example, Fox claimed her father had put her in a "U.S. military mind expansion project that did research on that vast part of the brain that goes unused" when she was two. If Martin had done the most basic research, she'd have found that the whole "we only use 10% of our brain" thing is an urban legend. While this doesn't preclude the possibility that the military had some project, why not check it out? Oh, wait, Fox said it was all secret. Well, that's good enough for me.

Then she quotes Fox saying that the mind isn't in the brain, but is "in every inch of your body." She further claims that "They discovered years ago that cells have memory." Who discovered this? Why has it been so well hidden? Then Fox misuses the psychological term "dissociation" to further add to her abuse of scientific language — she says it means the "mind" leaves the body and floats nearby instead. And this is what causes cerebral palsy and autism, by the way. Good thing we have this wonderful psychic to take care of medical diagnoses for us.

Fox also makes fun of therapists who treat patients ethically and avoid planting seeds — she says she can just read a person's mind and figure out what the problem is, so why bother with years of therapy? That's how she makes her living — "treating" attention deficit disorder, autism, and cerebral palsy in children. Now if that isn't scary and didn't jolt Ms. Martin into doing a little research before writing this ridiculous puff piece, I don't know what would.

Wonder Twin Powers, Activate!

With echoes of previous magical claims by Africans and Native Americans (see: "The Shamans of Suburbia," May 1997; "Bullets Into Water: The Sorcerers of Africa," August 1998; "The Shaman Question: Revisited," November 1999), the news had stories of similar claims in Asia in the past month. What's perhaps even stranger than the belief that leaders of a guerilla army have magical powers that can make their followers invincible is that the leaders of that army are only 12 years old.

The children in question are twins, **Johnny** and **Luther Htoo**. They lead "God's Army," a group of about 100 guerrillas fighting Burma's military dictatorship. The group is supposedly made up of fundamentalist Christians who follow the Htoos because they believe them to have magical powers that protect them from bullets. Also, *U.S. News & World Report* says the twins have black tongues, "regarded as an important sign of divinity" (2/7). However, the *Chicago Tribune* says, "In fact, the twins' tongues are a normal shade of pink" (2/6). An accompanying color photograph of the boys sticking out their tongues confirms this, and the *U.S. News* reporter should probably have taken a couple seconds to verify the black

tongue claim before repeating the legend as fact.

While both articles note that mysticism keeps coming back in Burma during times of trouble, you'd think they would have learned by now. The U.S. News article notes that groups like this one have been fighting the governments for over 50 years. "In the 1930s, during a rebellion against the British, some... tattooed themselves as protection against bullets." I'm guessing it didn't work.

Similarly, the articles discuss a failed raid during which a number of God's Army members were killed. It seems the blessings by the Htoos have the same effect on bullets — none.

Hail to the Chief

The State Journal-Register ran an AP article that sounded like a new sitcom slated for next season (1/18). It discussed Henke Otto, an unemployed Dutch man who has been declared to be the reincarnation of a Ghananian king. It seems Mr. Otto, whose wife was the old king in question, is treated as royalty when he is there — his subjects believe he really is the king and they carry him around on a throne and have him make their major decisions.

Otte himself says he doesn't believe in reincarnation, but the article says he has "overcome his Western skepticism" and agrees that he should be the king. "Western skepticism"? I didn't realize rational thought was only applicable in the West. "Overcome"? I didn't know it was such a hindrance. Well, lucky for him he managed to get over that hurdle and can live like a king now.

All We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself

In 1998, a teacher in a Tennessee high school noticed a gasoline-like smell. Soon, students and faculty were evacuated after complaints of dizziness, headaches, nausea, etc. When it was reopened five days later, still more people were affected. Yet an extensive investigation found no cause, according to *Science News* (1/15), summarizing a *New England Journal of Medicine* report (1/15).

This was another episode of "mass psychogenic illness." The symptoms were real — people honestly did feel the pain, dizziness, pain, and suffering. But they were all caused by their fear that they were exposed to something, even though there was nothing physical involved.

The mind can do amazing things. If a person thinks they are getting a powerful medication, the mind may make them feel better (the placebo effect). Conversely, if a person thinks something bad is happening to them, the mind may make them feel worse (the nocebo effect). Unfortunately, *Science News* noted that doctors are often hesitant to note such psychogenic causes as those affected often take offense and feel they have been blamed or demeaned. If we are to ever properly study these types of effects, we need to remove the stigma felt by those victims. Too often, this is what skeptics face as well. Victims will insist that there really was something there and they wouldn't have suffered this pain if there was not. Skeptics

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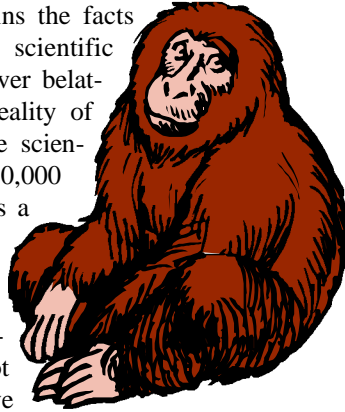
[REALLity Check]

[Baptism by Hellfire]

(Continued from page 1)

refutation except in reflection. He also drew an unrecognized distinction between “macroevolution” and “microevolution,” indicating that he was only talking about the former because this “myth” shows species evolving into other species.

Evolution of species is a fact and a scientific theory, a general statement that best explains the facts and reached through the scientific method. Even the Pope, however belatedly, has acknowledged the reality of evolution. Carbon-14 dates are scientifically reliable for at least 50,000 years, which in itself disproves a 6,000-year old earth. Humanism is not a religion but an ethical, scientific, and philosophical outlook that emphasizes the power of humans, not supernatural beings, to solve problems. Creationism is a metaphysical model, not a scientific theory.



What this kind of presentation does is preach to the converted. I grew up in a Lutheran Church but certainly do not recall the antipathy towards science and evolution that was prevalent in this talk. Sattler’s presentation was instructive because it showed that counterarguments need to be made by either a trained scientist or a group of skeptics who anticipate all the arguments and prepare refutations in advance. Allowing presentations like these to go unchallenged will only harden the attitudes of the faithful.

After listening to questions that mainly concerned how creationists respond to certain issues, such as ice ages (“there’s only one ice age,” Sattler said), I asked two questions, one about how Genesis’s two versions of creation appeared contradictory to me, and thus calling into question the alleged infallibility of the Bible,² and one about the contradiction of his acceptance of carbon-14 dating yet believing the earth is only 6,000 years old. Sattler did not expect those questions, passing off the second version of creation as merely a summary of the first one, and indicating that carbon-14 dating is not necessarily accurate in the length of time it measures. Then he took one more question from somebody else.

I did not raise a fuss at that point. I saw that his presentation is a demagogic appeal to apparent believers who accepted this reinforcement. Sattler basically tried proving his hypothesis on seemingly scientific grounds while shunning the nearly 100 percent of scientists who indicate that evolution is a valid scientific fact and a valid scientific theory. I could speculate on Sattler’s motivation, but the more important aspect of this anti-evolution — and therefore anti-science — stance is that the *metaphysical* hypothesis of creationism is being pushed to replace evolution in public schools.

With outrageous statements ridiculing evolution, even skeptics will continue to be drawn, however reluctantly, into battling the efforts of religious leaders to substitute a belief for the foremost biological principle.

Here are some additional anti-science and anti-evolution assertions from Sattler’s CEA “Update” newsletter (Autumn 1999):

- “... Christians know the Genesis record of creation is true and accurate.”
- “They [Christian school students] are directed to see and understand that all scientific evidence supports Biblical Creation.”
- “Evolutionary speculation is one of the most convenient and effective devices contrived by man (with the willing help of Satan) to accomplish just this [elimination of God].”
- “It is indeed unfortunate that so many educated people have been duped into thinking that evolution is a science.”
- “Evolution, though not established as scientific fact, gives rebellious men and women an imagined scientific pretext for ruling God out of their lives.”
- One article headline indicated “Pterodactyls Alive and Well in New Guinea,” based on a missionary’s report of “eyewitness” reports a large reptile was also spotted in a lagoon. “Perhaps our Creator has a plan in ‘displaying’ these creatures to frustrate evolutionary theory before His return.”

With the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution clearly supporting the separation between church and state, and court cases to back that up, both evolution and church/state separation advocates should be alarmed at efforts such as this one to promote pseudoscience in public schools as well as society at large. Creationism belongs in church schools — if even there; evolution belongs everywhere else.

Notes

¹ Little else was made available about the association, except for a newsletter edited by Sattler. A web search turned up little additional information, other than that the group is listed by several creationist pages as a Wisconsin organization.

² Creationists argue that God made the earth just 6,000 years ago and that a literal reading of the Bible proves that assertion. What I pointed out was a major contradiction as only one example of my skepticism: In Genesis [New King James Version], Chapter 1:11-13, God produced vegetation on the 3rd day of creation, while creating animals and then man (1:24-31) on the 6th day. In 1:29-30, it reads: “And God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is* life, *I have given* every green herb for food’”; and it was so.”

In Genesis 2: 4-20, a different historical sequence appears. “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground...” (1:7) precedes the Garden of Eden (1:8) and the appearance of animals (1:19)! In 1:18-19, God said it was not for man to be alone, that “‘I will make him a helper comparable to him.’ Out of the ground the Lord God formed every

beast of the field and every bird of the air....” [In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word “So” preceded “Out of the ground....”] Then in 1:20, it says, “But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.” God then made woman. Chapter 1 shows that God made the vegetation, then the animals, then man. Chapter 2 indicates that God made man, then the vegetation, then the animals! How can the Bible have it both ways and remain infallible? That alone should give creationists pause.

Bob Ladendorf is a founding member of REALL and is currently the Secretary/Treasurer. ♡

[REALLity Check]

(Continued from page 5)

come off as heartless even though they are just trying to find out the truth of the matter. This study adds one more building block to help get at that truth, and simultaneously acknowledges that the pain was real, but the cause was not.

Not So Healthy!

There have been several recent reports on dietary supplements that are supposed to help your health. It seems they might just not be so great after all.

Reuters reported (1/20) that high levels of PCBs were found in five different brands of shark liver oil capsules that are ironically sold as supplements to supposedly help fight cancer, among other things.

The *New York Times* Syndicate reported (1/11) that a lot of cancer patients use “herbal remedies” and don’t discuss them with their doctors because they don’t think of them as medicine (and who can blame them? After all, Congress won’t let the FDA regulate them as medicine, even though they make medical claims). Unfortunately, some of these can interfere with their cancer treatments. For example, ginseng may enhance estrogen levels and interfere with the anti-cancer drug tamoxifen. Echinacea may react with chemotherapy drugs. Etc. Furthermore, one doctor who heads an “integrative” care program noted that many herbal remedies on the market are contaminated, as the shark capsules above – sometimes with steroids, digitalis, or heavy metals.

Adding more fuel to the fire, the Associated Press reported (2/11) that St. John’s wort can interfere with drugs used by HIV-positive patients and those with heart transplants. This information comes from two different studies published in the medical journal, *The Lancet*. In the study on heart transplant patients, those who took St. John’s wort actually started to reject their new hearts! Both of these are important because St. John’s wort is taken to supposedly combat depression, and both of these groups are likely to suffer depression, thus making it more likely they could take the supplement in combination with their drugs.

But, hey, the great wisdom of Congress said that the FDA should not be able to really regulate these “supplements.” Who are we to argue with them?

But Congress made sure the alternative medicine side got its slice of the pie. According to an article in the *Chicago Tribune* (2/13), the National Institutes of Health’s Office of Alternative Medicine is getting \$68.7 million this fiscal year, and they are even being upgraded to the “National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine,” which means they can grant research money directly. According to the article, they have given grants for research into a variety of alternative areas — we can only hope they are giving the money to scientists who actually know what they’re doing, instead of those who oppose the entire scientific method, as they’ve done in the past (see “REALLity Check Special Report — Acupuncture,” November 1997). ♡

Web Sites for Skeptics

Looking for a new web site to explore? Here are a few that might be of interest.

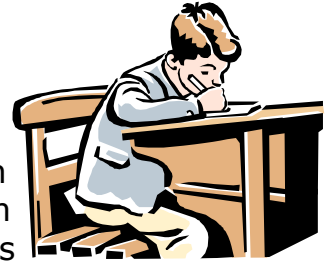
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Our Next Meeting

Fighting for Evolution in America's Schools
By Dr. Eugenie Scott, NCSE

In this videotaped lecture from the 1999 Skeptics Society conference: Dr. Eugenie Scott, of the National Center for Science Education describes the battle for quality science education in America's schools. Her presentation is described as "funny, frightening, and clear." She warns about the rising crowd of "intelligent-design" creationists and explains why so many people are scared enough of evolution to try to keep it out of public schools



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