

# 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 9, Number 2

February 2001

◆ **Special Eighth Anniversary Edition!** ◆

## Jack Chick and Evolution

by John Blanton

If you don't know creationism, then you don't know Jack Chick.

For nearly forty years Jack Chick has been pushing that old time religion in a series of illustrated gospel tracts in nearly 100 languages. The number of published tracts is now in the hundreds, and some of them are displayed in the Smithsonian Institution.

Besides that old time religion, another of Jack's concerns is that old time evolution. He's agin' it. His Web site at [www.chick.com](http://www.chick.com) exhibits samples of his work.

A 1994 issue reviews Scott M. Huse's *The Collapse of Evolution*.

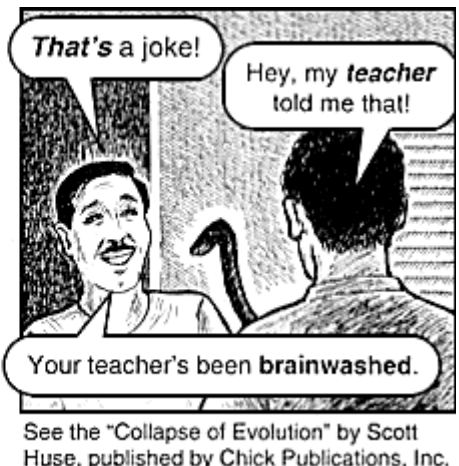
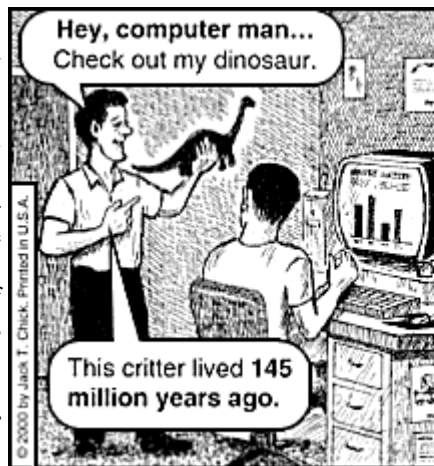
### **"Beetle Warfare Little Bugs That Evolutionists Would Like to Forget!"**

Did you ever notice how sometimes big surprises often come in little packages? Well, consider the little bombardier beetle. The bombardier beetle is a small insect that is armed with a shockingly impressive defense system.

Chick, like other creationists of the first kind, finds a favorite in this famous beetle. It's one of those critters that creationists say could not have evolved in a series of small steps. They equate their inability to comprehend with impossibility to happen. If they can't figure it out, it just can't be.

A delightful cartoon booklet, *In the Beginning*, just blows away evolution by pointing out that the Bible tells how we really got here. In the story, Computer Man's friend shows off his new dinosaur toy, and Computer Man reminds him that the dinosaur did not really live 145 million years ago, despite what the friend's teacher said. "Your teacher's been brainwashed," Computer Man reminds him.

"Evolution is the religion of scientists who *laugh* at God," Computer Man points out. "145 million years?... Those guys are only guessing," he says, and Jack Chick provides the scholarly reference: "The fool has said in his heart. There is no God. Psalms 14:1."



*Computer Man shows his friend the error of his ways. (from Jack chick's Web site at [www.chick.com](http://www.chick.com))*

Each of the friend's challenges from science are skillfully parried by CM, who recites the Biblical passages that explain what science cannot. The friend is left confused and distraught. All he had believed has been shattered by the unassailable logic of Genesis.

The story has a happy ending, though. CM goes on to explain how the rest of the Bible assures him that there is hope and salvation in his religion.

Although the main thrust of Chick's writings are just fundamentalist Protestant ideology ("we're right, and they're all wrong"), the anti-evolution theme comes up often.

*Primal Man?* (Crusaders Comic Volume 6) is one example: "This story proves evolution is impossible. Connelly says he's convinced, but keeps producing evolution films. You'll learn why."

*("Jack Chick and Evolution" continued on page 10)*

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## Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) 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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## From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

Here we are with our 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue. I had actually forgotten about it until Editor Wally pointed it out to me a few weeks ago. I believe his exact words were: "How are we going to fill 12 pages?" Luckily, I have plenty of Straight Dope articles in reserve for just such occasions. But it does bring up the reminder that we always are looking for newsletter articles! Not to make anybody feel guilty (unless, of course, it works), but if I have time to write newsletter articles, I bet a lot of other people do, too. I am willing to bet that almost every person who gets this newsletter knows something that most of the rest of us don't when it comes to the topics covered by REALL. So why not write it up, no matter how long or short, and send it in? Let's all share the wealth.

## 8<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting

For our special anniversary meeting, we will feature Professor Malcolm Levin talking about "How to Prepare to Give a Lecture to a Creationist Organization."

This is more than your run-of-the-mill debunking of creationists. Here, Malcolm will talk about how he gave a lecture about evolution to the Creation Club at Lincoln Land Community College a few months ago. Preparing a presentation for creationists means reviewing the creationist literature, examining the challenges to evolution that have been presented as reasons for the impossibility of evolution and preparing clear, simple explanations in a well-structured lecture. Murky definitions, a failure to recognize nuances in language, or a failure to give clear and precise examples may lead to the audience's rejection of your arguments or to an inability to understand them in a scientific context. Malcolm's presentation will address these issues in the context of seminars that he has presented, as well as lectures he has given in his University of Illinois at Springfield class on creation/evolution.

I hope to see you all there at 7:00 on Tuesday, February 6 in the Lincoln Library!

## Evolution Presentations in Rockford

For anybody who might be interested in taking a trip up to Rockford, Illinois, the Burpee Museum of Natural History is having its PaleoFest 2001 on February 23-25. Among the featured speakers is Niles Eldredge, who will present two talks on evolution on the 24th. At 11:00 a.m. he will speak on "punctuated equilibria," an idea inspired by the evolutionary path of the trilobite *Phacops rana*. At 5:00 p.m. he will speak on general evolution, with emphasis on important fossils like "Lucy," one of the earliest human ancestors to walk upright. He will also talk about some of the topics covered in his recent book, *The Triumph of Evolution and the Failure of Creationism*. Both talks are \$5 for adults and \$3 for teens. Other talks and workshops during the festival will be presented by Peter Larson, John Horner, Karen Chin, Don Lessem, Gabrielle Lyon, Dennis Kolata, Chris Ott and Lisa Buckley. For more information, check their website at [www.burpee.org](http://www.burpee.org). ☺

## REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

**I** predict that we'll have an all-psychic edition this month! Let's see if I'm right.

### I see... bars

The *Albuquerque Journal*, in an Associated Press article (1/11), reported that "psychic" **Tammy Williams** was sentenced to 19 years in prison for bilking area residents out of over \$100,000. She was also forbidden from any further fortune telling.

The scam looks like so many other fortune teller cons we've seen before, with the sleight-of-hand egg trick (exposed on *Dateline NBC* a few years ago) and pleas for more money to remove curses and the like. But like any classic con game, it keeps working.

Interestingly, the Gypsy Council of America approached the DA about providing full restitution if the charges would be dropped. To her credit, the DA refused. All too often, these con artists get away with their crimes by doing just this – giving back the money that they stole from *this particular* victim. They view it as a cost of doing business. But then they go about their con games and make it all back quickly. Ms. Williams won't be doing that for quite some time.

### I see... money

Unfortunately, not all psychic cons are treated equally. If you use tricks like Ms. Williams, above, you can be thrown in jail. If you just charge people a lot of money and use what appear to be standard cold reading techniques, you get your own television show.

**John Edward**, who has his own show, "Crossing Over," on the Sci-fi channel, will now get even more viewers as his

show has been sold into syndication. The three largest markets – New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago – have stations that have bought the show to air next season. More will probably follow.

Edward uses the same techniques that have been debunked many times over, most recently when they were used by James Van Praagh. In November, *Dateline NBC* took a look at him, but did a pretty poor job as compared to the way they have previously investigated claims of psychic powers. Although they presented some good information about his failures and techniques, they chose to use the "we won't tie it all together and we'll let you decide" method of non-news reporting.

### I see... that too few people will read this

*Brill's Content*, a media review magazine, took a look at "psychic" **Sylvia Browne** in an online article (11/27/00). Browne is frequently promoted on daytime TV talk shows like **Montel Williams**, and has had several best-selling books about her great powers. Brill's writer **Joseph Gomes** examined some of the claims she's made and compared them with available evidence.

He says, "For the most part, Browne delivers simple entertainment. But her claims that she has solved crimes, assisted enforcement, and directed victims to missing loved ones are something else entirely. They concern real people and real tragedies, and exploit misfortune for lively programming. What's more, talk-show hosts such as King and Williams fail their audiences by accepting Browne's claims without question or, in Williams's case, enthusiastically endorsing them.

Williams has been one of her biggest fans, which is sad because, if I recall correctly, he actually started out as a fairly skeptical guy on his show. But he apparently got suckered by Browne. On one show, Gomes quotes him as saying, "You looked exactly where [Browne] said and bingo-bango, he was found." Alas, as we so often see with these cases, this was not at all what happened. Gomes quotes the detective in charge of the case as saying, "[Browne] said it was buried in a hillside about 12 miles northwest of the new house, but we found him floating in the water....We didn't find any evidence to suggest [Browne] was accurate."

Despite Williams claiming that Browne has found three bodies on his show, Gomes says, "There's no evidence that Browne's 'clues' on Williams's show have ever led to the discovery of a body or missing person."

So Gomes took a look at ten recent Williams shows where Browne's testable predictions were featured. This encompassed 35 different cases. According to Gomes, "In 21, the details were too vague to be verified. Of the remaining 14, law-enforcement officials or family members involved in the investigations say that Browne had played no useful role."

Hmmm. Not quite the record she'd like us to believe she has. Even a producer from *Inside Edition* said, "These guys

("REALLity Check" continued on page 11)

## A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. To become a patron member of REALL, please use the membership form insert. Patron members are:

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# REALLity Checklist—2000 in Review

by David Bloomberg

"News is a consumer product, like sausage.

Be careful what you swallow."

— Author Unknown

Last year at this time, I said that instead of just having me pick these "awards," we should have all of REALL contribute. I thought it was a great idea, but it doesn't appear to have caught on. So, like past years, these are all my decisions on the best and the worst. But if you have any suggestions for next year, please start sending them in!

With that, let me mention that, like any other year, 2000 had its ups and downs. Sometimes the media did a great job, and sometimes they needed to go back to the basics. Here are some of the highlights and lowlights.

## ✓ Best Central Illinois Story

All too often, we see the media fall for urban legends and report them as fact. In 2000, we saw Ann Landers do this in one of her columns. In the past, Channel 20 has succumbed. But last year also saw another good example of a news organization exposing an urban legend as untrue. Unfortunately, a sheriff's deputy had already fallen for it by then.

In July, the *State Journal-Register* reported that Sangamon County Sheriff's Deputy **Tony Sacco** believed a hoax e-mail claiming that people were putting HIV-infected needles on gas pump handles so as to infect innocent people who were just filling up their tanks.

Before checking into it, Sacco sent an internal memo warning about this danger, which somehow got out and was posted by at least one gas station. Sacco did eventually find that the story was a hoax, and wrote another memo to explain this to the troops. But by that time, it was too late.

Adding to their story, the *State Journal-Register* even had an editorial the following day to discuss many of urban legends that have been recently circulating (if you recall, they had two articles on urban legends, plus one of my book reviews on the subject, in the past few years alone). They also pointed out that they have received numerous copies of this particular e-mail hoax and easily determined it to be false. Why couldn't Sacco do the same *before* sending out his warning memo? It took only one phone call to find out when he did get around to it.

On an amusing note, nobody mentioned that Sacco's boss, Sheriff **Neil Williamson**, was on of the people who had fallen prey to an urban legend a number of years ago and had appeared on the Channel 20 segment mentioned above in order to warn people about supposed LSD-impregnated lick-and-stick tattoos. But I'm sure he'd be thrilled to know that I still remember.

## ✓ Best Rest of Illinois Story

It may seem that you can buy your way into these pages if you mention REALL or one of our members or officers. Hey, we are the skeptical voice in Illinois, after all, so it only makes sense. The winner of this story won't change any minds about that, as they both interviewed REALL's longtime friend, Investigator **Bruce Walstad**, and they linked to REALL's website on the page containing the web version of this article.

Surprisingly, the article in question was in the *Chicago Tribune*, known to usually grace these pages so I can complain about them rather than sing their praises. In this case, the front page of this January 15 article showed **Dorothy Bimbo**, a self-proclaimed psychic fortune teller, being led to a police station in handcuffs. Now that's the way we should see more psychics!

As we've heard so 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. Walstad pointed 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.

Yes, the Tribune also had several articles singing the praises of psychics over the year, and at least one columnist condemning them, but this front-page story was still the best overall.

## ✓ Worst Local Stories

Sometimes it's hard to determine which single story should deserve this particular (dis)honor. For 2000, though, we had a repeat offender in the Bloomington *Pantagraph*. Rather than try to single one of these horrible articles out, I'll just lump them all together.

In January, there was a feature article on a local psychic fair with absolutely no skeptical content. This echoed their September 1999 article on **Greta Alexander** and their October 1999 article on a UFO abduction specialist (neither of these should technically be a part of this 2000 award, but it shows quite a pattern).

Then, in September, the health editor discussed an "energy healer" who would be speaking at a church in Normal. Somewhere in there (I've lost track) was at least one article supporting creationism (though they "balanced" it with one about evolution as well).

Overall, it's been a bad year-and-a-half for the *Pantagraph*. Let's hope they get better – soon.

## ✓ Worst National Political Move

How could anybody fault the New York City welfare-to-work program? After all, they were just trying to do their part to



reduce the welfare rolls and get people into good jobs.

Well, mostly good jobs – and a few destined to scam trusting souls by pretending to have special powers on a psychic hotline (in case there was any doubt, the AP reported that the necessary skills were being able to read, write, and speak English).

As soon as it was reported in January by the *New York Times*, the city suddenly saw the error of their ways and stopped dealing with that company.

According to a follow-up *New York Times* article, “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. I thought this was particularly ironic since psychic hotlines often have welfare recipients as clients/victims!

### ✓Worst International Political Move

Without a doubt, this award has to go to South African President **Thabo Mbeki** for his decision to bring AIDS denier **Peter Duesberg** into what should have been a scientific discussion about the disease that is cutting a swath through his country. To make matters worse, the South African Health Minister, **Manto Tshabalala-Msimang**, had refused to state categorically whether or not she accepts that HIV is the cause of AIDS. Oh, and she said she didn’t want to “plunge into” the use of antiretroviral drugs because she doesn’t understand them.

Numerous articles appeared in the scientific and general media to criticize Mbeki for his ridiculous stance. In July, AIDS researchers from all over the world gathered in Durban, South Africa, for the 13<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference. Before the meeting began, over 5,000 scientists and doctors signed a declaration affirming that HIV causes AIDS. The AIDS dissidents frequently assert that scientists are beholden to drug companies who profit from the myth that HIV causes AIDS, so to avoid any appearance of impropriety, only those who were not employees of drug companies signed. Not that this had any noticeable effect on Duesberg or his cronies.

The Declaration briefly explained the evidence and background. It stated, “The evidence that AIDS is caused by HIV-1 or HIV-2 is clear-cut, exhaustive and unambiguous, meeting the highest standards of science. The data fulfill exactly the same criteria as for other viral diseases, such as polio, measles and smallpox.” A laundry list of some of this evidence is then given, followed by the statement, “It is unfortunate that a few vocal people continue to deny the evidence. This position will cost countless lives.”

While Duesberg had continued to complain rather than back up his claims, Mbeki finally made a small movement towards science when he gave a speech to the Durban gathering saying he would support research on an AIDS vaccine and anti-HIV medications. Other members of his party have also come out to criticize his stance.

Needless to say, this has not been his finest hour.

### ✓Best Political Move

The voters of Kansas receive this award for removing several of the anti-evolution state school board members from office, including the board’s chair. A *Chicago Tribune* editorial



noted, “Creationism supporters complained that academics and journalists embarrassed the state and had Kansans believing ‘people are just laughing at us, people think we’re rubes.’” They continued, “Well, just as long as they got the message.”

Hopefully, other states – including Illinois – will get the message as well.

### ✓Best Research

Speaking of Illinois and creationism, the Fordham Foundation receives this award for their study on the teaching of evolution in each state of the U.S. The study looked at the state science standards to see how evolution is treated; each state was then ranked with a letter grade. 10 states received an A, 14 a B, 7 a C, 6 a D, 12 an F, and 1 – Kansas – got an F- (this was done before the new elections).

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Illinois received a **D!** The article explains that how a conservative Christian group pressured the previous superintendent into avoiding the use of the word “evolution” in the standards back when they were written a few years ago. Word on the grapevine is that the state school board is planning to put the word in. We are continuing to follow this story closely and working to make it happen. ☹

## Psychic Claims and Evidence Don't Add Up

### Fighting Ignorance with *The Straight Dope*

by David Bloomberg

As I've mentioned before, I write for the Staff Reports portion of *The Straight Dope* by Cecil Adams. The column is of the question-and-answer variety and runs mostly in alternative independent newspapers across the country. It does not run here in Springfield, but you can still read it on the web at [www.straightdope.com](http://www.straightdope.com) and buy collections in book form at pretty much any book store.

A number of the Staff Reports I write are also related to REALL, so we reprint them here from time to time. This month, we have a special psychic installment featuring:

- What's up with the claims about Edgar Cayce, the "sleeping prophet"?
- Did Nostradamus predict the day on which his own tomb would be discovered?
- What's the scoop on ganzfeld experiments?
- Did Jeane Dixon predict the JFK assassination?

As before, Ed Zotti, Cecil's editor, did some editing on these answers. Also, the answer on Jeane Dixon was co-written by Ian Rey.

#### Dear Straight Dope:

**I would appreciate some insight into the case of Edgar Casey, the "Sleeping Prophet." Although Edgar did turn his trance sessions into a money-making venture, what I've read has many elements of a solid story, especially the presence of a disconnected stenographer, and several verifiable accounts of medical treatments. Does the story of Edgar Casey meet with your skeptical approval? — Thomas Walsh, Chicago**

OK, first things first. Although his name was indeed pronounced "Casey," it's spelled "Cayce." For those who aren't familiar with him, here's some background:

Edgar Cayce purportedly began his psychic career when he began losing his voice at age 21 and the doctors couldn't do anything about it. He supposedly went into some sort of hypnotic sleep, recommended a cure for himself while in this state, and got better. Since it allegedly worked for him, he began doing the same thing for other people—diagnosing and prescribing cures while in a supposedly altered sleep state. From there he went on to doing readings for people who sent him letters (rather than actually being there) and on general psychic topics including past lives, the nature of the universe, what happened to Atlantis, etc. He claimed that, upon awakening, he did not recall anything he had said. He also claimed another sleeping power: the ability to absorb information from a book placed under his head while asleep. Unsurprisingly, this was apparently never tested.

Now, on to the claims.

One problem here, as with most claims of psychic success, is the fairly vague nature of the "psychic" predictions. It's made worse by the fact that Cayce gave thousands upon thousands of

readings—he was bound to get a few right by accident. As with most "psychics," people remember the hits and forget the misses.

I'm not entirely sure what you meant about the stenographer, but, yes, according to The Skeptic's Dictionary website, a stenographer did take notes during the sessions. However, this has little to do with whether his readings were accurate. "But wait," you might say, "we can look at those reports and see if he was accurate!" Not really. The Skeptic's Dictionary notes: "Cayce usually worked with an assistant (hypnotist and mail-order osteopath Al Layne; John Blackburn, M.D.; homeopath Wesley Ketchum). According to Dale Beyerstein ("Edgar Cayce: The 'Prophet' Who 'Slept' His Way to the Top," *Skeptical Inquirer*, January/February 1996), "these documents are worthless by themselves" because they provide no way of distinguishing what Cayce discerned by psychic ability from information provided to him by his assistants, by letters from patients, or by simple observation. Also, Beyerstein explains, "the transcripts tell only what Cayce said, with no indication of what he said as being true." As the Skeptic's Dictionary notes, "In short, the only evidence for Cayce's psychic doctoring is useless for testing his psychic powers."

For example, Michael Shermer ("Deviations: A Skeptical Investigation of Edgar Cayce's Association for Research and Enlightenment," *Skeptic* magazine, Vol. 1, #3, Fall 1992) and Martin Gardner (*Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*) note that when Cayce was doing readings in the presence of an osteopath, the terminology he used pretty much made sense only from an osteopathic perspective. Coincidence? I think not.

Let's take a look at Cayce's alleged psychic diagnostic and healing ability.

Many have claimed that because Cayce had no formal medical background, he could not have diagnosed people and prescribed cures—it must have been special powers. But as already noted, he was often assisted by people with a medical background. In addition, "he was a voracious reader, worked in bookstores, and was especially fond of occult and osteopathic literature" (Skeptic's Dictionary again). He also knew homeopathy and naturopathy.

As James Randi notes in his classic book, *Flim Flam*, "It is no secret that his cures were quite similar to the 'home remedies' described in the handy medical encyclopedias that were bedside reading in many rural homes in the late 1800s." In other words, he didn't exactly need psychic powers to know about them. Randi continued, "Beef broth was one of Cayce's favorite remedies for such diverse diseases as gout and leukemia. Who can fault a nice man who prescribes a cup of hot soup?"

Some of his remedies weren't as harmless as a cup of soup. He was apparently among the first to recommend laetrile as a cure for cancer. Laetrile is ineffective, but still has a cult following among those who think poison is a miracle drug (it contains cyanide). Some of his other recommendations were "oil

of smoke' for a leg sore; 'peach-tree poultice' for convulsions; 'bedbug juice' for dropsy; and 'fumes of apple brandy from a charred keg' for tuberculosis" (Skeptic's Dictionary). In 1926 he prescribed "the raw side of a freshly skinned rabbit, still warm with blood, fur side out, placed on the breast for cancer of that area" (Beyerstein). Yuck.

His diagnoses were about as well-informed as his suggested cures. For example, we have his reading for psoriasis as, "The conditions that exist through the thinning of the walls of the intestines allow the poisons to find expressions in the lymph circulation; thus producing the irritation to and through the epidermis itself" (The Edgar Cayce Website, [ecayce.tripod.com](http://ecayce.tripod.com), from reading #2455-2, May 21, 1941). Funny, I have psoriasis and my doctor never mentioned thinning intestinal walls to me—nor do any of the medical websites I've consulted.

Cayce supporters probably don't like to talk about his failures in healing members of his own family. According to Beyerstein, Cayce's cousin, Ike, appealed to him for help but died. And one of Cayce's own sons died as a baby in 1911.

As if these weren't bad enough, we have several documented cases of Cayce advising how to cure dead people, in connection with readings using letters they sent to him. In these cases, the letters had been written while the person was still alive, but by the time he made his psychic "diagnosis," they were dead. Whoops! Of course, his followers have excuses for this type of thing, but it seems to me if he's getting his information through magical means, he should know this particular person is beyond help.

Those excuses apparently followed every obvious screw-up. Mind you, most of his failures weren't so obvious. As James Randi notes in *Flim Flam*: "The rationalizations that Cayce and his supporters used to explain his numerous and notable failures are prime examples of the art of evasion."

He later notes, "Cayce was fond of expressions like 'I feel that' and 'perhaps'—qualifying words used to avoid positive declarations. It is a common tool in the psychic trade. Many of the letters he received—in fact, most—contained specific details about the illnesses for which readings were required, and there was nothing to stop Cayce from knowing the contents of the letters and presenting that information as if it were a divine revelation. To one who has been through dozens of similar diagnoses, as I have, the methods are obvious. It is merely a specialized version of the 'generalization' technique of fortune-tellers."

Let's move on briefly to some other areas where Cayce tried to use his vast psychic powers. One example discussed in detail by Randi is Cayce's extraordinary failure in divining information about the Lindbergh kidnapping case. I bet you won't find too many Cayce supporters talking about that one.

Another failure was his attempt to find buried treasure. Af-

ter several weeks of trying, with the additional help of a well-known dowser, he found nothing. The only thing they had to show for their work was excuses. Some of these are hysterical, such as the one about ghosts of Native Americans and pirates playing tricks with the psychic energy, or the claim that the treasure had been there but was already dug up by somebody else, or maybe it would be buried there at some future date. It's amazing that his magical powers could supposedly diagnose somebody from across the country, but couldn't tell the difference between the past, present, and future.

Another amusing prediction was that the U.S. would discover an Atlantean death ray (as in, one from Atlantis) in 1958. I suppose his supporters might claim the government actually did find it, but it's hidden away with the aliens from Roswell due to its dangerous nature.

The point is that, as with every other well-known "psychic" I've seen/heard about/read about, the claims simply don't stand up to scrutiny.



**Dear Straight Dope:**

**Is the story about Nostradamus predicting the day his tomb would be discovered true? The**

**legend goes that had himself buried with a plaque engraved with a date and left a memento saying that whosoever held his skull would gain all the knowledge he had—then die. The legend goes on to say that during one of the wars his grave was discovered and dug up by three soldiers on the date written on the plaque. As one lifted up the skull, his companions said that his eyes opened wide, then he was shot through the head with a bullet. I don't remember the date on the plaque, I believe it was May sometime, though the year would probably be much more useful. —A. Frederic Harms**

Cecil already addressed Nostradamus in general in his column at [www.straightdope.com/classics/a1\\_051.html](http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a1_051.html). That column didn't directly address this particular "prediction," but it gave a good overview of Nostradamus and his supposed abilities.

That said, let's take a look at the myth you discuss. And I say "myth" purposely, as this has all the earmarks of an urban myth. Your question is only one version of it. Another common version is that you had to drink from Nostradamus's skull to gain his powers. Some soldiers during the French Revolution broke into his tomb and one had a drink. Then he was shot.

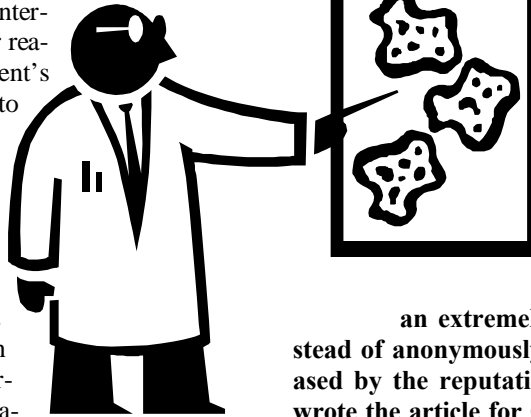
In one version I found (at [aries.phys.yorku.ca/~mmdr/1800/nostradamus.html](http://aries.phys.yorku.ca/~mmdr/1800/nostradamus.html)), the legend is close to what you said—the soldier was shot immediately. Also, it was 1793, and there was a plaque hanging around Nostradamus's neck with "1793" on it. Other variants say it was 1791. Or that the soldier was not shot immediately but was killed by a sniper in an ambush the next day.

Nostradamus's grave had apparently been opened at least once before then. Some believe he was originally buried

“upright in one of the walls of the Church of the Cordeliers at Salon” (Erika Cheetham, *The Prophecies of Nostradamus*). Supposedly this was so people would not walk on his grave. However, according to the Nostradamus Repository list of myths, “There is absolutely no evidence for this, nor is any provision to this effect contained in his will” ([www.nostradamus-repository.org/myths1.html](http://www.nostradamus-repository.org/myths1.html)). In any case, most histories say that in 1700 city officials moved his body to a sturdier or more prominent area. That, according to some versions of the legend, was when they looked inside the grave and saw a medallion saying “1700.”

The only thing these sources seem to agree upon is that some soldiers (or grave robbers) did open the tomb during the French Revolution, and, frankly, I can’t even verify that much because myth has become so intertwined with the history! But for whatever reason, his tomb was moved to St. Laurent’s Church of Salon-de-Provence (according to [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com), though I admit to being a bit suspicious of this source because they list his occupation as “scientist”).

As with most Nostradamus “predictions,” people were able to find a quatrain that supposedly showed he was right. In this case, it’s Century 9, Quatrain 7. As usual, there’s quite a bit of difference between what one or another translator says, owing to the archaic, convoluted French in which the prophecies were written. Here are a couple English translations:



*The man who opens the tomb when it is found  
And who does not close it immediately,  
Evil will come to him  
That no one will be able to prove.*  
([www.dreamscape.com/morgana/desecrat.htm](http://www.dreamscape.com/morgana/desecrat.htm))

Or:  
*He who will open the tomb found,  
And will come to close it promptly,  
Evil will come to him, and one will be unable to prove,  
If it would be better to be a Breton or Norman King.*  
([www.estara.freerve.co.uk](http://www.estara.freerve.co.uk))

As you can see, the two are substantially different—indeed, the first one leaves off the entire last line, acting as if the third line is both third and fourth and is the end of the sentence. This makes for a wonderfully ominous ending—evil will come to him that no one will be able to prove. Spooky. But apparently not what Nostradamus said. It’s only the first part of a strange sentence that seems to have little to do with anything.

The second lines of the translations seem to contradict one another. The first translation says, “And who does not close it immediately,” while the second says, “And will come to close it promptly.” It can’t be both. One suspects the first translator was twisting the words to achieve the desired result.

So what do we have in looking at all of this? Well, if you believe in Nostradamus’s “powers,” the quatrain above may be taken as predicting doom for those who disturb his grave. He

may have worn a medallion saying his grave would be opened in 1700. Or 1791. Or is it 1793? Some soldiers or grave robbers may have opened his grave in one of those years and held or drank from his skull. One may have been shot right away, or maybe the next day.

But frankly I think it’s a lot more likely that, as discussed at the “Myths of Nostradamus” page in the Nostradamus Repository (as mentioned above), “This is a pure urban myth with no evidence whatever to back it up.”

**Dear Straight Dope:**

**What’s the scoop on “ganzfeld” experiments? I have recently seen some programs on the Discovery Channel claiming that university researchers have had some amazing results in ESP trials. I was able to find mention of the research on the CSICOP website, but I am not sure if I correctly understood the article. It seemed to say that research conducted at the University of Edinburgh had not been reproduced elsewhere and that the peer-reviewed paper was submitted with the name of an extremely prominent researcher at the top instead of anonymously so that the reviewers wouldn’t be biased by the reputation of the researcher. The person who wrote the article for CSICOP seemed to write with a biased tone, something that a skeptic shouldn’t do, but maybe that is just my perception. —Rob**

The website for the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) has several articles on the topic, so I’m not sure which one you’re talking about (though your description makes me think it’s the one written by Matt Nisbet—see below). But let’s take a look at the ganzfeld phenomenon from the top.

Ganzfeld experiments (ganzfeld is German for “whole field”) have been around in some form since the 1930s. The studies that drew the most recent attention were done by Daryl Bem, a Cornell University psychologist, and Charles Honorton, a University of Edinburgh parapsychologist. Ganzfeld experiments involve covering a subject’s eyes (generally with halves of ping-pong balls), bathing them in a red floodlight, and feeding white noise through headphones into their ears. This supposedly makes the subjects unable to receive sensory information. Then another person in a room shielded from the first subject tries to mentally send a specific picture. The first subject reports whatever imagery comes to mind and then tries to identify which of a group of pictures the second person was trying to send via ESP.

The idea here is that ESP is such a weak force, it is normally drowned out by our other senses. So with all other sensory input suppressed, the subject should be able to better use ESP.

Bem and Honorton used meta-analysis to combine the results of several studies, and found a hit rate of about 35% — enough above the expected chance rate of 25% to be significant, if true.



“If true” is, of course, the key. Psychologist and skeptic Ray Hyman found statistical anomalies in the original ganzfeld experiments. His analysis of various experiments “showed that this database did not justify concluding that ESP was demonstrated” (*Skeptical Inquirer*, March 1996, [www.csicop.org/si/9603/claims.html](http://www.csicop.org/si/9603/claims.html)). He went on to note that “both Honorton and I agreed that there were sufficient problems with this original database that nothing could be concluded until further replications, conducted according to specified criteria, appeared.” In later experiments, he found that the experimenter interacted with the subject during the process of judging whether or not a hit was made. He notes: “This means the judgments from trial to trial were not strictly independent.” He discovered other flaws in the experimental procedure as well.

More recently, Julie Milton (University of Edinburgh) and Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire) did a follow-up meta-analysis on 30 new studies not included in the Bem and Honorton analysis. Scott Lilienfeld reports in one of those CSICOP articles (*Skeptical Inquirer*, November 1999, [www.csicop.org/si/9911/lilienfeld.html](http://www.csicop.org/si/9911/lilienfeld.html)) that those findings “stand in stark contrast to those of Bem and Honorton and raise serious questions concerning the replicability of the ganzfeld findings.” In science, replicability is essential. If other scientists can’t reproduce your results, chances are they may have been due to some flaw in the experiment rather than a real effect. Milton and Wiseman found a result “which corresponds to essentially chance performance and can most charitably be described as negligible.”

The Skeptic’s Dictionary entry on ganzfeld experiments ([skepdic.com/ganzfeld.html](http://skepdic.com/ganzfeld.html)) discusses claims made by one of Honorton’s co-authors, Rick E. Berger, Ph.D. Berger said the odds were “a million billion to one” that the hit rates they got weren’t due to chance. However, since the experiment involved an interpretation of the subject’s verbal description, it’s possible to get a hit without really picking an image specifically, just because it happens to be the one the experimenter thinks is closest. (This relates to Hyman’s comments about the experimenter interacting with the subjects.)

One example the Dictionary gives is a verbal description from Berger’s website:

*I see the Lincoln Memorial ... And Abraham Lincoln sitting there ... It’s the 4th of July ... All kinds of fireworks ... Now I’m at Valley Forge ... There are fireworks ... And I think of bombs bursting in the air ... And Francis Scott Key ... And Charleston ...*

The Dictionary notes: “There are quite a few images that would ‘match’ this description, since the description itself contains at least eight distinct images (the Lincoln memorial, Lincoln, 4th of July, fireworks, Valley Forge, bombs, Francis Scott Key, Charleston) to which one could easily add a couple more, such as the American flag, the star spangled banner, and, oh yes, George Washington, which was the image selected as most closely resembling the verbal description. We’re not told what the other three choices were.”

The Dictionary continues: “One wonders why, if this 8.2%, million billion to one difference is evidence of telepathy, the verbal descriptions are not more precise. For example, why did-

n’t the psychic ‘see’ George Washington, since that was what the image was? Why did he see the Lincoln memorial and a bunch of other things? How can they be sure of what they are measuring?”

Finally, the Dictionary brings up another important point—the experiments weren’t done with a “none of the above” option, nor were there control experiments in which the “sender” sent nothing. The article notes: “If Berger and Honorton would do a ganzfeld where the sender sends no messages at all throughout the entire experiment, my guess is that the receiver would still ‘receive’ and give a verbal description of his vision.” Indeed, it would be interesting to see the results of such an experiment.

With regard to your question about the paper submitted with a prominent author’s name on it, I’m guessing you’re referring to Matt Nisbet’s Generation sXeptic article, “The Best Case for ESP?” (7/28/2000, [www.csicop.org/genx/ganzfeld](http://www.csicop.org/genx/ganzfeld)), where Nisbet discusses his interviews with Bem and Hyman. He noted that Bem considered his own reputation in psychology as having contributed to a journal’s acceptance of the article. Nisbet’s point seems to be that in other scientific arenas, studies are reviewed blindly; but in psychology they’re not, which can lead to papers by well-known people being accepted when perhaps they shouldn’t have been. I don’t see that Nisbet is biased other than being biased towards good science—and I think he did a good job of letting each man speak for himself.

The point is, whatever you may have seen on TV, there is no “amazing” proof for ESP. At best there are some statistical suggestions that something may be afoot. Right now, however, the evidence points more at experimental error than at ESP.

This surely won’t be the final test of ganzfeld—parapsychologists undoubtedly will continue to use it in hopes of proving the existence of ESP. It’s good that they’re using scientific methodology, but they must be continuously aware of their own biases and make sure those don’t enter into the analysis. Unfortunately, history tells us that in the field of parapsychology that happens all too often.

#### Dear Straight Dope:

**Supporters of Jeanne Dixon and other psychics frequently point to Ms. Dixon’s prediction of the death of President Kennedy. They turn a deaf ear when asked what else she’s predicted, but then that is to be expected. In fact, this one prediction is so well known that even her detractors acknowledge it. But no one seems to want to let us in on the whole story. So I’m turning to you to do what you do best. What did Ms. Dixon predict, and when did she predict it? —Steve**

Amazing how these contemporary myth things work, isn’t it? In her life, Jeanne Dixon had a dozen or so “uncanny” predictions come true, mostly through vague statements like 1989’s “A shipping accident will make headlines in the spring,” said to be the Exxon Valdez, and 1978’s “a dreadful plague will strike down thousands of people in this country” supposedly predicting the coming of AIDS. Of course, these Nostradamus-like hits (they wrote without a trace of irony) came among literally hundreds that were wholly false, such as predicting the Soviet Un-

*(“Psychic Claims” continued on page 11)*

(“Jack Chick and Evolution” continued from page 1)

*The Ark* is another, of course: “While helping an expedition search for the ark on Ararat, the Crusaders learn about its history and of sightings this century.”

Besides his own anti-evolution works, Chick reviews and offers for sale on his site works by other notable creationists. Besides the Scott Huse book previously mentioned, he also offers Kent Hovind’s creation seminar video series. I haven’t seen any of the series, but from the titles they look like the real Hovind we have come to know and love:

#### #1 – *The Age of the Earth*

The Bible teaches that God created the universe in six literal days about 6000 years ago. Could this be true? Can it be scientifically proven that the earth is not billions of years old? This tape shows that evolution is actually a religion, not science. It also gives scientific evidence against the big bang, that the Bible is scientifically accurate, and that the earth is young.

#### #2 – *The Garden of Eden*

The Bible teaches that people before the Flood lived over 900 years. How is this possible? What was the Garden of Eden like? Were there ever cave men? Why do we find fossils that are huge compared to plants and animals today? Did dinosaurs live with Adam and Eve?

#### #3 – *Dinosaurs and the Bible*

Discover when dinosaurs lived, how Noah fit dinosaurs in the Ark, and how they died. See where dinosaurs are reported in the Bible, in history, and even learn about the few that are still alive today. Watch this tape and see eyewitness interviews with people who claim they’ve seen them.

#### #4 – *Evolution: Lies in the Textbooks*

See how evolutionists have permeated public school textbooks with false and fraudulent information simply to promote their religious world view. Learn what you can do to stop this mass indoctrination. Every public school student, teacher, and school board member needs to watch this tape.

#### #5 – *Evolution - The Foundation for Communism, Naziism, Socialism and the New World Order*

Dictators throughout history have used the evolution philosophy to rationalize their brutal actions. See how evolutionary propaganda is being used today to prepare people for the “New World Order.”

#### #6 – *The Hovind Theory*

Throughout the earth, geologists and paleontologists find physical anomalies that they cannot explain with evolutionary theory. The Hovind Theory is a fascinating explanation of the Ice Age, as well as the formation of the Grand Canyon, coal, and mountain ranges.

#### #7 – *Question and Answer Session*

How does carbon dating work? Are there contradictions in the Bible? Where did the races come from? What about starlight? Learn the answers to these and many other questions not covered in any of

the other Seminar tapes.

Hovind, it will be recalled, is a relentless opponent of evolution. According to the talk.origins Web site ([www.talkorigins.org](http://www.talkorigins.org)), he “claims to possess a masters degree and a doctorate in education from Patriot University in Colorado. According to Hovind, his 250-page dissertation was on the topic of the dangers of teaching evolution in the public schools.”<sup>1</sup> Past issues of the *North Texas Skeptic* newsletter have covered the Hovind phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> His book *Claws Jaws and Dinosaurs* (Living Dinosaurs) is featured in the cryptozoology book list on the NTS Web site.<sup>3</sup>

Wait there’s more.

The Jack Chick site also sells posters. The current feature is the “Evolution Poster.” As described on the Jack Chick site, “This 2½ foot long poster from the two middle pages in BIG DADDY? uses humor and facts to show the foolishness of evolution. Exposes the truth about Heidelberg man, Piltdown man and others. Teens love it!” Here are the high points of the poster from the Web page:

1. Heidelberg Man – Built from a jaw bone that was conceded by many to be quite human.
2. Nebraska Man – Scientifically built up from one tooth and later found to be the tooth of an extinct pig.
3. Piltdown Man – The jawbone turned out to belong to a modern ape.
4. Peking Man – 500,000 years old. All evidence has disappeared.
5. Neanderthal Man – At the Int’l Congress of Zoology (1958) Dr. A. J. E. Cave Said his examination showed that the famous Neanderthal skeleton found in France over 50 years ago is that of an old man who suffered from arthritis.
6. Cro-Magnon Man – One of the earliest and best established fossils is at least equal in physique and brain capacity to modern man...so what’s the difference?
7. Modern Man – This genius thinks we came from a monkey.
8. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools – Romans 1:22

Not only scientists, but honest people of faith will get considerable heartburn from Jack Chick’s publications. In addition to hacking at evolution, Chick has kind words for Catholicism, Masonry, Islam, and errant versions of the Bible, as well.

Sometimes I find myself worrying about otherwise serious scientists like Michael Behe, out there preaching the anti-evolution line. When real scientists knock evolution, it becomes necessary to point out in a rigorous manner where they are wrong. When extremists like Jack Chick wade in with their obvious nonsense, the defense of evolution becomes considerably easier. The quality of an idea can often be gauged by the character of its enemies.

Thanks, Jack. We needed that.

(“Jack Chick and Evolution” continued on page 11)

(“REALLity Check” continued from page 3)

don't solve cases, and the media consistently gets it wrong.”

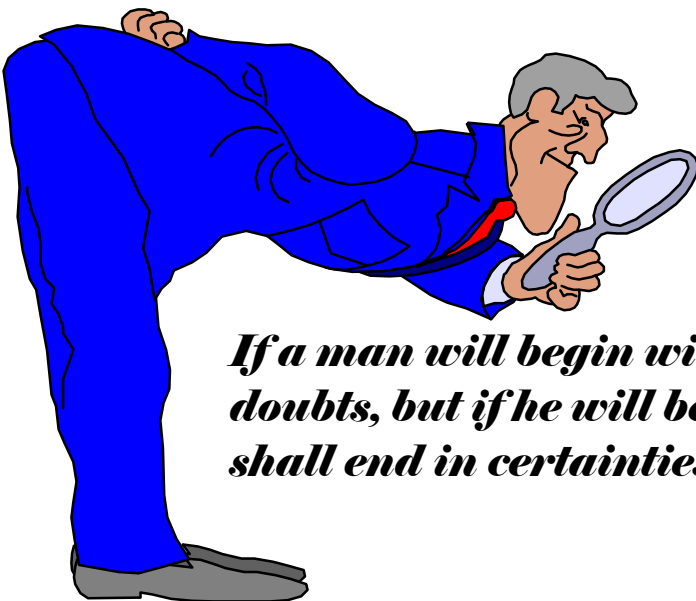
I just wish this article were at least in print, or in a place where more people would read it.

## I see... A Big Failure

While most media outlets have been a part of Survivormania in the past few weeks, the *Chicago Tribune* decided to take a different path to coverage of the new *Survivor* series: they had a psychic make predictions for them. As soon as I saw these “predictions,” I knew we were in for a treat. Why? Because, in one of the few specific predictions made, the psychic picked Debb Eaton as the winner.

Meanwhile, every *Survivor* website already had posted spoiler information indicating that Eaton was the first one to be voted off. Rather than relying on magical powers, they analyzed footage from promotional materials, photographs, and interviews, and realized that Eaton was the only member of her group missing from certain photos that had been taken later in the show. The conclusion was, of course, that she had been voted off.

The websites were right. The psychic couldn't have been more wrong. Am I happy? You bet! We don't often get to see such blatant examples of a psychic going down in flames. I will definitely be following each and every one of the other “psychic” predictions in the article – though most of them are much more vague than the one about Eaton. Unfortunately, most people will either have never taken this seriously to begin with, or will quickly forget about it, as they almost always do when a psychic misses. ☹



***If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.***

**— Francis Bacon**

(“Psychic Claims” continued from page 9)

ion would be first to land on the moon. In fact, the Skeptic's Dictionary notes that “Ms. Dixon was never correct in any prediction of any consequence” ([skeptdic.com/dixon.html](http://skeptdic.com/dixon.html)).

Her obituary in *USA Today* was representative of the way she was put forth in the evidently skepticism-free media: “her prediction that President John F. Kennedy would die in office came true.” The actual blurb which ran in the Sunday supplement *Parade* on May 13, 1956, was, shall we say, a bit less specific: “As for the 1960 election Mrs. Dixon thinks it will be dominated by labor and won by a Democrat. But he will be assassinated or die in office ‘though not necessarily in his first term.’” Less equivocal than most “psychic” predictions, but really just a lucky guess which grew in the retelling.

But here's the real problem—in 1960, she forecast that Kennedy would not win the coming election. Yes, that's right. Although she is credited with predicting his assassination because of her 1956 statement, her 1960 one is routinely ignored by those who perpetuate this myth. And unlike her previous one, it couldn't be more specific: She predicted clearly that “John F. Kennedy would fail to win the presidency.”

Well, if he wasn't going to win, how could she have predicted that he would be assassinated in office?

The answer: She didn't. Instead she made a lot of vague predictions, some of which contradicted each other, and then relied on people to only remember those which could somehow be worked into a claimed “hit” with 20/20 hindsight while forgetting the far-more-numerous misses. This same technique is used all over the globe today. And people still fall for it. P.T. Barnum would be proud. ☹

(“Jack Chick and Evolution” continued from page 10)

## References

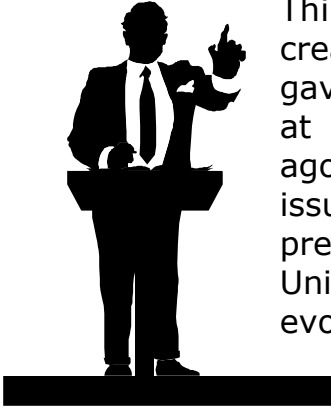
1. See this excellent Web site covering the full range of the evolution/creation controversy at [www.talkorigins.org](http://www.talkorigins.org).
2. See “Traveling creationism,” *The Skeptic*, December 1994; “Creation science education,” *The Skeptic*, July 1998, “Web news,” *The North Texas Skeptic*, March 2000.
3. [www.ntskeptics.org/books/cryptozoology.htm](http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/cryptozoology.htm)

*John Blanton is the Secretary of the North Texas Skeptics. This article originally appeared in The North Texas Skeptic and is reprinted by permission. ☹*

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