

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 3

March 2001

Is Human Evolution Special?

by David Bloomberg

In high school, most of us learned that human evolution was an orderly and linear process. Australopithecus evolved into *Homo erectus*, which in turn evolved into a form of *Homo sapiens* – us. Neanderthals were stuck in there as a “primitive” form of *Homo sapiens*, and it was all very simple.

When learning about the evolution of other animals, we saw that there was a kind of “bushiness” to their family trees. Branches split off into new species, which either split off again or ended in extinction. None of the other animals had straight-line evolutionary histories, but humans are different.

Or are we?

Ian Tattersall, Chairman and Curator for the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History and an adjunct professor at Columbia University, and Jeffrey H. Schwartz, a professor of physical anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh and research associate at the American Museum of Natural History, say the same rules that apply to other animals also apply to mankind’s history, and that it has been far from a straight-line progression along the pathway to human beings. Their new book, *Extinct Humans* (Westview Press, \$50), also presents the case for a better understanding of human evolution.

Tattersall and Schwartz have collaborated on various projects since 1972 and have been working on this particular one for over six years. Both started by studying the origins of other animals, and they brought an atypical approach to the table when they began to look at the human evolutionary line. Rather than simply looking at pre-human fossils as layers of time, they compared them anatomically, looking at the entire pre-human fossil record.

Schwartz said in an interview that the most important aspect of their work is showing that “humans are like other animals,” in that there have been multiple lines of pre-humans. Some species coexisted and interacted with each other. Many have gone extinct. Only one led to us.

“The human fossil record certainly demonstrates a remark-

able host of diversity as well as extinction. It’s just a very strange evolutionary fluke that we happen to be the only living species of this group,” Schwartz said. “That fluke is the exploitation of our brain.” Once humans began to make better use of our brains, the entire landscape changed.

This book is a preliminary version of their ongoing work, meant for the general public as an “introduction to the human fossil record that people probably don’t know exists,” according to Schwartz.

But why has it taken so long for work like this to be done? Schwartz says one reason is that there is only one species of “humans” on the planet now – us. It was therefore surmised that there had only been one on the planet throughout history. Many scientists thought that it must always have been this way.

Another reason is the huge difference in appearance between humans and apes. “Our closest relatives don’t look like us, but hominid fossils do,” Schwartz says. “This allows itself to be interpreted in this linear fashion.”

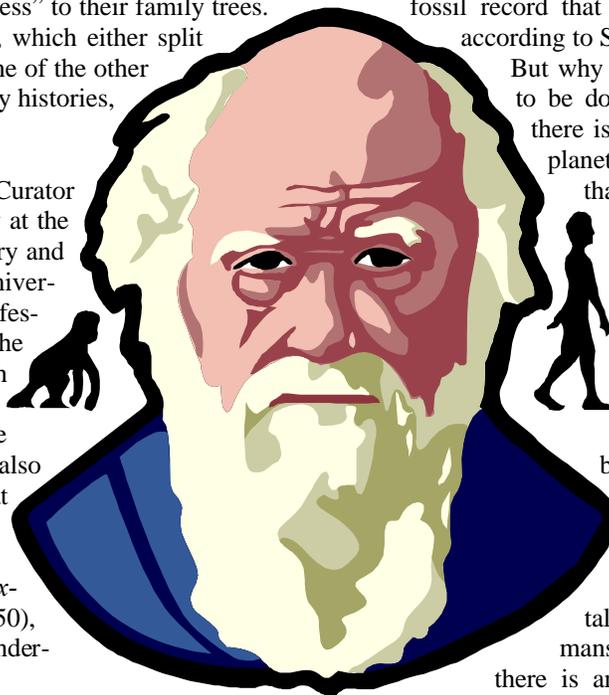
This was the old way we all learned about it in school. Tattersall and Schwartz say this is simply wrong.

Previous scientists have “applied totally different criteria to the study of humans,” Schwartz says. With other animals,

there is an obvious diversity of closely-related species. For example, there are many different types of squirrels or bears or horses. Tattersall and Schwartz make the case here that this has been true in the past for pre-humans, even though it is obviously not true today.

Using Neanderthals as an example, Schwartz says, “they were a good species – different from us, but varied amongst themselves.” However, they have previously been thrown in as

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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

I'd like to thank Malcolm Levin for giving his presentation to our February meeting – which also included the students in Alex Casella's UIS class on science and pseudoscience. Unfortunately, Malcolm was interrupted and thrown off track numerous times by both David Sack and John Henry, creationists who attended the meeting. They said that their intent was not to do this, but rather just to provide information to the students, but the effect was the same. In talking to the students the following week (I went to their class to discuss astrology, among other topics that came up), they all seemed to feel that Sack and Henry contributed little or nothing to their understanding, and only disrupted the presentation.

How did they disrupt? Well, in several cases Malcolm, realizing he had a class of mostly non-science majors in attendance, tried to use language they would understand. But as soon as he did this in one case, by substituting the word "gene" for a term the students probably had not heard, Sack said that the statement was untrue – ignoring the fact that Malcolm had been trying to use more common terms rather than precise scientific language. At another point, Sack asked a question that Malcolm had apparently addressed with him in their previous discussions. Malcolm asked if Sack had read the material he'd sent over to Sack before. Sack tried to ignore the question and press on with his own, but Malcolm wouldn't let him get away with it. It was obvious to all that Sack had not, in fact, read the material (to his credit, he could have easily lied and said he did, but he chose to just try to avoid the question instead).

I could go on with the details, but the fact of the matter remains that what could have been a good learning opportunity for the students (and other attendees) instead was disrupted to the point that none of them got much out of it. In this regard, the Board will be considering what we can do in the future to

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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prevent a recurrence of such a situation. Normally, we could ask that all questions wait until the end, but Malcolm had specifically said he wanted people (especially the students) to be able to ask questions during the presentation, and we definitely



Professor Malcolm Levin discussed how to prepare to give a lecture to a creationist organization at our February meeting.

want everybody to be able to voice their thoughts at our meetings. Unfortunately, we could not foresee what would happen in this particular case.

Perhaps the most bizarre moment of the night came after the presentation, when several of us were still talking to Sack and Henry. I was trying to explain to them that evolution is not just supported by one little thing that they can easily toss aside, but was supported by evidence from many branches of science, including astronomy, geology, biology, etc. It was this convergence of evidence, I said, that supported evolution so well. At this point one of them (I don't recall which) said something that turned science upside down. He claimed that because of this convergence of evidence, that makes evolution non-falsifiable and therefore something we take on faith, not science. I was stunned. Indeed, I was left almost speechless – and anybody who knows me knows I almost always have *something* to say! But these men were completely turning reality on its head. By what they said, anything that we have strong evidence for must be faith because it can't be falsified. What?! They seemed to be mistaking the *possibility* for falsification with the *ability* to actually do it. Evolutionary theory *can* be falsified, but it would mean finding evidence to overturn part or all of it. The fact of the matter is that we already have decades of evidence in support of the theory. This doesn't make it faith – quite to the contrary, it makes it some of the best science in the world. We go where the evidence points, and it all points to evolution. If they want to try to falsify it, fine, that is their prerogative. But they first need to come up with evidence that does so. That hasn't happened yet.

March Meeting

Our next meeting will take place on **Tuesday, March 6, at 7:00 in the Lincoln Library** (as usual). We will be featuring a videotape from the Skeptics Society lecture series on “**Combating Cult Mind Control,**” by Steven Hassan. Hassan is a former cult member and leading cult expert, and will explain cult techniques of persuasion and influence. He answers the question of whether there is such a thing as mind control and presents a revolutionary approach that could transform the way people think and act when dealing with cults and other mind-control relationships. I hope to see you there!



REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

There has been quite a bit of activity in areas of interest to REALL within the past month or so, and some of them have been quite high-profile. Surprisingly, most of them have even been good news!

Kansas Leaves the Dark Ages

After the November election for the Kansas Board of Education, we knew changes were coming, but it's nice to see them finally arrive. On February 14, the Board voted 7-3 to restore evolution and related matters to their proper place in the state science standards.

Of course, the three remaining creationists on the Board fought against the horrible idea of having science taught in science classes, but they were outvoted by the newly-elected replacements to some of their former cohorts. According to CNN.com (2/14), one of the creationist members, John Bacon, said, "These standards are too restrictive in allowing only one view of man's origin to be taught." Yeah. Damn those scientists for wanting to teach science instead of religion in science class. Bacon further suggested the standards might end up in court. But another creationist member said he thought the issue was settled until four years from now, when the standards come up for review again. Of course, he added, he'll accept the evolution promoters' apology then. Uh, yeah. We'll get back to you on that.

The *Chicago Tribune's* article (2/15) recapped some of the "uproar" that had come from the original Board decision to remove most of evolutionary theory and related items from the state science standards. They also noted that Kansas is not the only state in which creationists have tried to pull evolution from the standards. As I've discussed in the past, that list includes Illinois.

Unidentified Flying Planets

Discover magazine's "Sky Lights" column usually deals with interesting astronomical features you can see in the night sky. In the March issue, however, it focused on objects in the sky that can cause people to think they are seeing Unidentified Flying Objects.

In particular, the article points out that Venus is responsible for inspiring the most reports of UFOs because it has been so bright in the Western sky lately. Indeed, it's been so bright that my almost-five-year-old son noticed it and asked me what it was. I told him it was an alien spacecraft coming to kidnap us and perform strange experiments. Oh, wait – the April Fool's issue is next month. No, what I really told him was that it is the planet Venus. Try explaining what a planet is to a pre-schooler.

But one thing he said when he noticed Venus again a few days later is a key to why it is so often misidentified as a UFO – we were in the car and he commented that the light was "following us." While we might laugh at a young child making such a remark, the fact is that many adults believe the same thing when they see Venus or other far-away, yet bright, ob-

jects. They believe the object is following them, which of course gives rise to fears of spaceships and the like. Furthermore, the article points out that passing clouds can make a fixed point of light (such as a planet) *seem* to move.

Besides Venus, the article also discusses other objects that might be mistaken for UFOs and talks about how to avoid jumping to conclusions. For example, if you are seeing an object through glass, such as a window, it may very well be a reflection and not be in the sky at all. REALL's Secretary/Treasurer Bob has a great photo from when he was in New York a couple years ago – he took the picture from inside a building (the headquarters of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, ironically enough) and it clearly shows flying saucers in the sky. The problem is that they were actually reflections caused by the lights inside the room.

Another note in the article describes the slow and steady path of satellites, which can be mistaken for UFOs. Indeed, satellites can grow brighter or suddenly wink out as they follow their path around the Earth, depending on how their solar panels are oriented. Furthermore, "small muscle movements in the eyes can make them appear to zig and zag."

Other objects mentioned include airplanes, meteors, and even searchlights. The article ends by noting that you can identify a "UFO" 95% of the time by simply asking the basic questions addressed there. Unfortunately, many people who see UFOs are convinced that they could *never* be fooled by something like Venus or an airplane, so they will too often ignore such mundane suggestions. But it is just these types of mundane objects that make up the vast majority of UFO sightings.

First Humans, Now Animals

It wasn't enough that alternative medicine practitioners have been making money hand over fist by selling quack therapies to humans. No, they had to expand. After all, they were leaving a valuable portion of the population unserved – animals. Indeed, as we noted in an article a couple issues ago, alternative veterinary medicine is becoming more popular.

To try to stem this tide of nonsense, the American Veterinary Medicine Association formed a task force to write new guidelines on alternative practices, such as chiropractic, acupuncture, etc. The *Chicago Tribune* ran a front-page story about this brouhaha (2/12), and actually didn't do too bad a job of covering the issues.

The article discusses the opinions of both sides, quoting Dr. David Ramey, a member of the task force, several times. For example, he notes, "We're in a profession that is based on science, and science has rules that you play by." Of course, the pro-alternative folks have their say as well, including one who notes that alternative human medicine is making further inroads, and so the veterinary field would be "backtracking." Sounds like this guy needs to hear the old question every parent in the world has ever asked their kids: "If all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you?" The fact that quackery has invade the human medical field doesn't mean vets should do the

same thing. Furthermore, the article notes that the American Medical Association's policy on alternative medicine does say, "There is little evidence to confirm the safety or efficacy of most alternative therapies."

Ramey is further quoted as nothing, "No one on the committee wants to keep effective therapy from sick animals. But the flip side is that through history, all sorts of therapies have come and gone and been popular and then discarded. We don't want to play that game."

Shrouded in Nonsense

Well, we already have a candidate for the worst local article of 2001. I guess I should view it as *hoping* this is the worst, because we still have 10 months to go. The future award-winner in question is a State Journal-Register article about the Shroud of Turin (2/11). Freelancer **Steven Spearie** wrote the article – a feature in the Beliefs section about **Mark Antonacci**, a local guy who has written a pro-authenticity book about the Shroud.

The amount of pure baloney contained in this article was amazing to me. Spearie did not appear to have contacted anybody for a skeptical look at these claims (certainly nobody was quoted). Instead, he seems to have allowed Antonacci to frame the critics' statements himself, which he then, of course, rebutted. It must be nice to be allowed to take charge of *both* sides of

a debate.

In doing so, he simply makes statements like, "Critics who denounce the shroud as a fraud have not only been unable to agree on a method of forgery, they also have never agreed on a plausible, documentable place or 'artist' of a forged shroud." I'm sorry, but that is simply utter BS. As I pointed out in my letter to the editor (printed a week later), we have a letter from the Bishop in the area to the pope pointing out that this is a forgery! And the method was – get this – painting. Wow, that was a tough one.

He further criticizes the carbon dating (which, again, was written into the article without a hint of rebuttal) and claims that the Shroud of Turin Research Project "found that the features on the shroud literally defied the laws of chemistry and physics." Wow! That's big news. Too bad Spearie didn't actually write about any evidence for these claims.

So, how does Antonacci answer for the many flaws in Shroud claims? For one thing, he "theorizes" (in an inappropriate use of the term) that an instantaneous burst of particle radiation was given off from Christ's body when he was resurrected. Then he uses this made-up radiation burst to argue that the Shroud couldn't be a forgery! Yes, that's right – he makes up his own answer and then uses that answer to "prove" his question correct! And why did it take so long for the Shroud to show up in records? Well, because the radiation burst caused the Shroud to oxidize and the image formed over a long period of time. Yes, that's right – the Shroud was the world's first Polaroid-type picture.

Give me a break.

Writing the letter in response to this article was difficult. I'm guessing the article was about 2000 words or so. Letters are supposed to be limited to 200. So I had 1/10 of the space to correct statements that would take about three times as much room to accurately explain. So I talked to CSICOP's Joe Nickell, who has literally written the book on the Shroud, and he gave several suggestions. For one, he agreed that trying to write a tit-for-tat letter would not work.

So I chose to focus on several things that went virtually unmentioned in the article. Carbon dating put the timeframe of the Shroud in the 1300s. It was painted in the style of that same time period. And, as I mentioned, there was a letter from a bishop denouncing it as a fraud from that same time period. All the evidence points to the 1300s, and we have to follow that evidence, not start with a belief that it's true and go from there – which is what Antonacci has done.

But I guess we can't expect Antonacci to understand science – he is a lawyer, and seems to think this prepares him to work in science. Obviously, he is wrong.

Did You Hear the One About the Cop Who Spread False Stories?

On a better note, the *State Journal-Register* reported on yet another urban legend being spread by yet another local police department. Last year, a Sangamon County, Illinois, deputy spread the urban legend about people putting HIV-infected needles in gas pumps. Indeed, I gave it REALL's "Best Central Illinois Story" award.

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a subspecies of Homo sapiens. Tattersall and Schwartz write, “There is no evidence whatever that Neanderthals evolved directly into Homo sapiens.” Furthermore, recent DNA analysis “suggests that this lineage may have separated from that leading to ourselves as much as 650 kyr [thousand years] ago.”

Homo sapiens coexisted with Neanderthals for over 70,000 years, but something happened to change that situation, and the Neanderthals died out. At about the same time, there was an “explosion of expression” by Homo sapiens, in terms of art and cave drawings and other cultural changes that can be discerned from prehistoric artifacts. Schwartz says this signifies the point when Homo sapiens adapted or learned to better use their brains as resources, for language, art, and survival.

They write that there is a “high probability that some hominid species were at least indirectly responsible for the disappearance of others.” When Homo sapiens and Neanderthals coexisted, most of the competition was a contest for resources. But they also note, “History abundantly shows the horrendous ways in which invading humans have tended to treat resident peoples, let alone members of other species, as they have moved around the world. And we only have to know one side of the equation to realize that encounters between Neanderthals and modern humans cannot always have been happy ones.”

Numerous scientists have applauded their work, while others remain unconvinced. The larger project they are still working on will make studying the overall set of hominid fossils much easier. Schwartz says they “want to provide enough information so people can make up their own minds.” Certainly, they hope people will see the evidence in this work and be convinced that the old, linear way of thinking has not been the right way; human ancestors and their relatives have been subject to the same rules as the rest of the animal kingdom throughout history.

The two scientists write, “although the end result may be extraordinary, the process by which it came about was routine.”

This article originally appeared in the State Journal-Register and is reprinted by permission of the author. ♡



**Look for the evidence.
Look for the proof.
Or else you're acting
like an awful goof.**

— Steve Allen, “How to Think”

Letter to the Editor

To the editor:

Just got the newsletter 9(2) wherein you awarded Bloomington-Normal’s *Pantagraph* for having the worst local stories. “Let’s hope they get better – soon.” Wow! For a skeptic that’s pretty optimistic, but unfortunately the *Pantagraph* is off to a horrible start to 2001 and the new millennium. The January 15 issue had a page and a half article on energy healing as the lead article for a health and fitness supplement. The article is whole-hearted advocacy. The only hint of skepticism involved words or phrases like “alleged,” “according to,” “as reported,” and “healers believe.” As before, I am sending congratulations to the editor for winning your award. In sending my e-mail to Bill Wills, Editor of the *Pantagraph*, I am suggesting that he mark “news” articles so we’d know when they were doing good objective reporting and when they were being just plain gullible or “entertaining.”

Both a physics professor (retired) and I wrote letters debunking this type of alternative medicine. At least one supporter wrote to say I sounded like a fundamentalist supporter of conservative science. If she meant the process of science, then I was complimented, but it was basically an attempt to make science sound like dogmatic old fogies. I’m contemplating writing a guest column about science and why its standards are so high. The most interesting result was the editor published a small disclaimer along with both critical letters saying that the article was not prepared by the news division. I guess this means we must know what unit of the *Pantagraph* prepared the article before we can have any confidence in its veracity.

It appears that our culture is moving towards an acceptance of placebo purveyors in the guise of many different alternative therapies. Apparently psychologists are already talking about “immuno-psychology.” I told my colleague that it made all the difference to me that the health provider knew they were producing a placebo effect, rather than believing in special powers, non-existent energies, and other hocus-pocus.

Ah well. These are tough times for skepticism. I keep a diary of things that annoy my intellectual sensibilities with the idea that I may write a book someday (a retirement project) which I have tentatively titled “Swimming Upstream in America.”

Best regards,
J. E. (Joe) Armstrong ♡

(“REALLity Check” continued from page 5)

Now, the Springfield police are spreading a different urban legend about con men calling, pretending to work for the phone company, and asking people to dial 9-0-# and hang up. The police, ever alert, said they got their information from “an e-mail that had been forwarded several times,” according to the *SJR* (2/2).

Sean Dailey, an *SJR* staff writer, did “a little research of urban-legend Web pages” and quickly found that “this rumor has been making the rounds for at least three years.” Too bad the police didn’t think of doing that before spreading this urban legend as fact.

Not So Healthy, the Continuing Saga

U.S. News & World Reports had a cover story on something that you’ve seen me report time and time again in these pages – the side effects of “dietary supplements,” herbs, and the like (2/12). They addressed many of the problems I’ve talked about here and also included a number of anecdotal reports of what has happened to people who had these side effects. While anecdotes are not science, we know that they are often used by alternative medicine proponents to try to attract business; maybe this use will show that there are real human side effects, too.

According to the article, “The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has over 2,900 adverse-event reports about ephedra, ginkgo, St.-John’s-wort, ginseng, and thousands of other supplements; these include 104 deaths. For every adverse event in its files, the FDA estimates 100 more go unreported.”

But, of course, the FDA can’t require scientific safety studies for these products because of laws preventing them from doing so. One herbal marketer claims they don’t need testing because they’ve been used for hundreds of years. Gee, that’s great, but if we have no way of knowing if they were safe before, how do we know now? Indeed, the article notes that chaparral, a tea used for therapeutic reasons by American Indians, seemed safe in that regard – until supplement makers put it in capsules for direct consumption, whereupon it was found to be a nasty liver toxin. There’s that safety we were talking about.

But if you are looking to Congress and the Bush administration for changes, don’t count on it. Right now Congress gives so little money to the FDA for enforcement of supplement safety standards that the article says meaningful oversight is “unmanageable.” Why would Congress do such a thing? As a sidebar to the article says, “Despite their image as a cottage industry serving a handful of health nuts, nutritional product companies have become significant players in campaign finance.” To be more specific, “nutritional companies and their executives have donated more than \$10.9 million to candidates, parties, and political action committees over the past five years.” Indeed, “Several of **George W. Bush**’s ‘Pioneers,’ who raised \$100,000 or more for his campaign, own supplement companies or lobby for them.” Among the other big receivers of supplement company money are Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Representative Robert Wexler (D-Florida), Representative Dan Burton (R-Indiana), and Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa). As you can see, both parties are getting the dough from these guys. Who is left out in the cold? The consumer.

Skeptic News in the News

Incidentally, I would also like to take this opportunity to mention that *U.S. News*, the magazine discussed above, also had another article in a different issue in which they listed the Skeptic News website as a link for information about conspiracies. For those of you who don’t recall, Skeptic News (www.skepticnews.com) is run by Editor Wally and I also help out. Congrats, Wally!

Fox = Supermarket Tabloid TV

Just another quick note – Fox ran a “special” in February claiming the moon landing was a hoax. I didn’t watch it – I just could not bring myself to do it. From what I’ve heard, it was horrible. I mean, even worse than usual. They basically gave a soapbox to every paranoid nutball and said, “Goferit!”

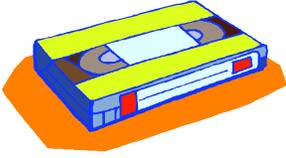
It really makes you wonder who the heck at Fox thought a show like this would be a good idea. Maybe their next special will be on how we all actually live on a flat Earth....

Pardon Me?

While there has been quite a lot of news coverage over President **Bill Clinton**’s last-minute pardons, one piece of the scandal has been the pardon of **Glenn Braswell**, a 57-year-old Floridian who had been convicted of “mail fraud, perjury, and tax evasion in connection with selling herbal supplements purporting to promote hair growth, remove cellulite, and increase bust size,” according to *U.S. News & World Reports* (2/12). They note that in this case, as with several other controversial ones, “the U.S. Justice Department was not consulted.”

Okay, so you’re figuring I’m upset because this guy was selling herbals and the like. Yes. But that’s not the half of it. It turns out this guy was again under investigation by the FDA, the Federal Trade Commission, the IRS, and the attorney generals of several states. He has been selling anti-arthritis supplements and has been sued several times over for falsely implying that well-known people supported his claims.

What’s particularly strange in this case is that Braswell is not particularly well-connected with Clinton – but rather has ties to George W. Bush and his brother, Florida Governor **Jeb Bush**. However, Hugh Rodham (as in Senator Hillary Rodham-Clinton’s brother) was the one who handled this request for a pardon. ♡



Our Next Meeting

A Video Presentation

Releasing the Bonds: Combating Cult Mind Control and Empowering People to Think for Themselves By Steven Hassan

Steven Hassan, a former cult member himself, has been involved in educating the public about mind control and destructive cults for 23 years. A licensed Mental Health Counselor, he holds a Master's Degree in counseling psychology from Cambridge College.



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Lincoln Library (7th & Capitol)
Tuesday, March 6, 7:00 PM

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