

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

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NBC Reveals Psychic Secrets

by David Bloomberg

As you may already know, I write about skeptical topics for this newsletter and elsewhere, and reality TV for other venues. In April, the two came together as a veteran reality TV producer put together a show on NBC that unmasked "psychic" tricks. *Secrets of the Psychics Revealed* reached over nine million viewers according to early returns, and was the second-place ratings finisher in the coveted young adult age group. In other words, it got the word out to a lot of people!

If you saw those Fox shows with the "Masked Magician" a little while back where he exposed magician's secrets, you kind of understand the concept here – except that this one was much, much better, and it exposed magic tricks that "psychics" claim are much more than that.

Several different "psychics" performed tricks – either in front of a live studio audience who thought they were at a "real" psychic show, or in one case in a location that mimicked a street-corner psychic "shop." The show jumped from one to the other, first showing the performance and then explaining how it was done.

The first trick could have appeared in either a typical magic or with somebody who claimed to be using "real" powers – it was a card trick where a volunteer picked a card, pulled it across a table, and held it close so nobody could see it. Then the "psychic" called another "psychic" who would tell the volunteer what the card was. Of course, he was right.

The secret was in a combination of marked cards – seen by the performer in the studio – and a code on the phone. When the studio performer called his cohort, the one on the other end started saying, "Ace, two, three, four..." When he got to the proper card, the studio performer said, "Hello!" Then he did the same thing for the suit, knowing which it was when the studio performer again interrupted him to hand the phone to the volunteer. It was just that simple, but done in a situation where somebody claimed to have special powers, it could be quite convincing.

The second psychic also performed a trick that could have easily appeared at a magic show. He had audience members pick numbers between 1 and 1000. Then he called three up to

write their numbers on a pad of paper. He had another volunteer add up the numbers and open previously-sealed envelope. Of course, the numbers matched!

How did he do it? Simple, really. A quick sleight of hand. After he had the three volunteers write down their numbers, he flipped over the notebook and handed the fourth volunteer the pad with three previously-determined numbers showing. So when she added them up, it came to the same total as the sealed envelope. Frankly, I have to admit that I found this to be a bit of a risky trick. The performer showed the three numbers to the first three volunteers to verify that they were indeed their numbers (before flipping the notebook). If any of them had paid attention, they might have realized that the addition didn't, well, add up.

Next up is a "psychic" who says he has the power of telekinesis, the ability to move objects with his mind. He wants to harness the mind power of the audience for something that he says he's never been able to do before. So after getting everybody to hold hands and focus on a wine glass sitting on a table, the glass shatters, apparently due solely to mind power.

How was it done? The trick is actually in the table. There is a thin metal rod with a pointed tip that is attached to a spring in a slot on the table. It triggers with such force and speed that it's barely visible even on the slow-motion camera. So it appears to the naked eye that the glass just shatters on its own.

Spoon bending is a classic example of mind over matter – or, more truthfully, of a magic trick pretending to be mind over matter. The performer selects a spoon, taps it on something to show that it's real, and then makes it bend and finally break into two with just the power of his mind.

Except, of course, it's not the power of his mind at all. The host wonders, "How did the phony psychic pull off this scam?" The spoon is actually pre-cut, though the audience can't see it. The performer uses the pressure of his thumb to finish the break and then merely pretends it is bending as he releases the pressure on the joint.

The problem I have with this particular segment is that there are *many* ways to do the spoon bending trick. I once saw well-known skeptic James "The Amazing" Randi give a lecture and do the trick. An audience member asked him to show how it was done. He refused, saying there are so many ways to do it, if he shows one or two and the next phony psychic uses a different way, you won't be looking for it and may be fooled all

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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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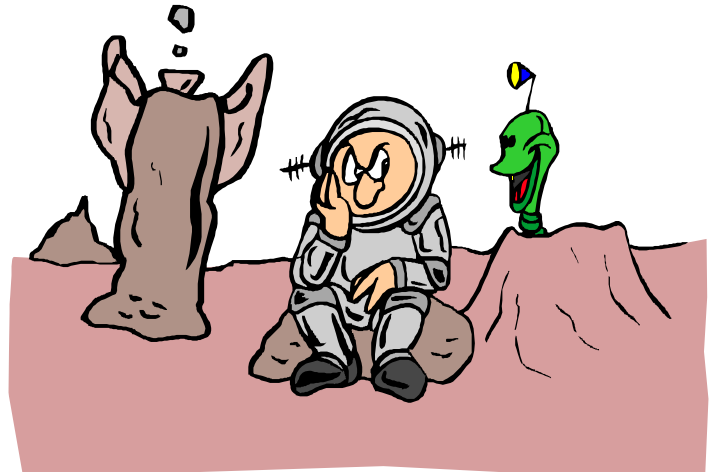
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From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

May Meeting

Our meeting this month will be **Tuesday, May 6**, at 7:00 in the Lincoln Library. Last month we featured the first two videotaped talks in a series on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). We had a good response from those who attended so we will continue with the series this month. The two talks this month are *The Prospects for Life in the Solar System — Mars, Europa, Titan and Other Worlds?* *The Search for Habitable Planets*. These two talks, as you can probably guess from the titles, take a closer look at the prospects for life on planets in our solar system and in other galaxies. Whether you believe that there is other life in the universe or are skeptical of those claims, you won't want to miss this meeting and others in this series. ♡



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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over again. Indeed, that is what this segment (and potentially others) set up. In this case, no volunteer was allowed to examine the spoon, or else they would have seen the cut in it. But in Randi’s, he *did* have a volunteer examine it and pronounce it untampered-with. So obviously he did something different. One famous “psychic” has taken objects, like keys, from volunteers and performed the same trick, so we know those haven’t been tampered with ahead of time. However, as Randi said at this lecture (and others), if a psychic really is using his mind power to bend the spoon, he’s doing it the hard way, because sleight of hand works just as well.

Next up is a demonstration of telepathy – mind reading. In particular, this one would be about the transfer of images from the mind of an audience member to the mind of the performer. He picked a volunteer to draw three pictures. Then he goes through each, saying he sees a circle in a circle that might be a tire or a donut, a solid heavy object with a pincer on one end – a wrench, and a star. So that’s it, star, donut, wrench. The volunteer says yes, though the donut was actually a tire (looking at the picture, there is absolutely no way to know that).

How was it done? Simple. Behind the volunteer, just over his shoulder, is an accomplice who has a hidden microphone. With everybody paying attention to either the performer or the volunteer, he can easily whisper into the mike, “star, donut, wrench.” The performer puts on the finishing touches and there you have it!

Now we move outside the studio to the one-on-one setting of a private psychic reading. The host notes that the most common forum for psychic deception takes place in street-corner shops, and we see a large neon “PSYCHIC READER” sign.

Clients are led to believe, the host continues, that psychic readings are based on insights into their personalities. But in this particular case, the reader is merely reciting a pre-memorized script that she uses for all of the clients here. It is cold reading, using universal themes that everybody can relate to. As the host notes, it makes “every innocent victim feel like the psychic is talking about them.

Throughout the reading, the “psychic” even tells each person that they have some innate psychic ability, and all agree to one level or another. (I have actually had people tell me that their psychic said they have psychic abilities too, and it seems a good way to rope them in with more belief.)

Everybody shown buys in to the reading. They all say it was right on, very specific, accurate, etc. But of course, we know it was all just a cold reading. They don’t know until they are told afterwards.

Back to the studio, for more mind reading. A volunteer is given a sharp dagger and told to put it face-up into one of three slots. Then he covers each with a large Styrofoam cup. The psychic smashes each of two cups in turn, in such a way that if the blade were in either one, it would have impaled his hand. Of course, that doesn’t happen. Why not? Because there is a small hidden peg on the side of the box that pops out to show which hole the dagger is in. It’s just that simple.

Following that is a demonstration of remote viewing, in which a psychic sees through the eyes of somebody else. An audience member is pulled up and told to concentrate on her home. The “psychic” then takes her through from pulling up in

the driveway. There is a porch, hedges with one bigger than the other, the car is blue, in the front door – which has a horse-shaped bell, inside with the living room to the left and bedrooms on the right, to the kitchen. There he sees the initials J.B. and a seven. Wait. A zero, a zero, and a seven. The woman says she has a James Bond shot glass in her kitchen! Then out the back door, a big tree to the right and something new – a trellis but no flowers yet.

Pretty impressive! How did he do it? Earlier in the week, he obtained the name and address of the woman from the ticket list. He sent an accomplice to the house. She scouted the outside and even managed to get in by saying she was lost and needed to use the phone. That’s how they got all the info, right down to the James Bond shot glass! The host notes, “As in most psychic scams, good information is the psychic’s best friend.”

The volunteer, interviewed after being told the truth, says she thought he was the real deal. Now when she watches psychics on TV, she’ll know that most of them are running a con game. Um. Only *most*?!

Next up is a rather painful-looking demonstration. A performer puts a large needle through his arm and then heals it through psychic power. I was cringing through the whole trick. But trick is what it was! It turns out to be a fairly easy one, as well. The performer pre-loads his arm with two strips of rubber cement. Then he brings out the needle and makes sure to face his arm away from the audience as he slides it in (probably with an excuse about it being too gruesome). After he gets the needle against his arm at the right place, he folds the two rubber cement strips over to temporarily glue the skin together and make it look like the needle is actually going *through* the skin. He can move it up and down and pretend to be in pain. Then he takes it out, wipes up the area – thus separating the skin again – and he’s healed!

Card tricks are back again for the next demonstration. The performer is blindfolded and has his hands tied behind his back. A card is picked, shown to the audience, and then put into his hands. Of course, he guesses what the card is.

So, how does he do it? Cards marked in Braille? No. The blindfold is rigged so he can see downwards. On his shoe, he has a mirror that he can pop out and thus look down to see the card he is holding behind his back. Of course, he has to stand the right way so the audience can’t see the trickery, but that’s no big deal. This was another one that you’d be more likely to see in a magic show than as a demonstration of psychic power, but it’s still pretty good.

Telekinesis makes another appearance with a moving wooden matchstick. The performer holds it in the palm of his hand as it turns around and then stands up on end. Two volunteers sit right at the table so he can’t do any trickery.

Or can he? Of course! There is a powerful magnet in the table and the matchstick has been pre-loaded with a small nail. The nail reacts to the magnet and we have the moving matchstick!

Back to the psychic shop again, we are told that the psychics there have a variety of scams to fool clients. A common one involves bringing in a treasured item, such as a ring, from a deceased family member. The psychic then does some sleight of hand tricks with the ring – for example, having it move up

(*“Psychic Secrets” continued on page 7*)

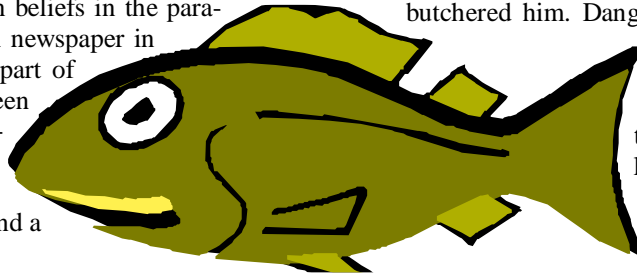
REALLity Check

by Bob Ladendorf

As the war in Iraq continued into April, the seriousness of this major current event overshadows all other news. Nevertheless, there always seems to be enough news about those topics that our readers are used to hearing about in this newsletter. This month is no exception.

Local newspaper cites poll about paranormal beliefs

An updated poll surveying American beliefs in the paranormal was cited by the *Pure News USA* newspaper in Springfield in its April issue. Although part of the Harris Poll of 2,201 adults between January 21 and 27 covered religious beliefs, it reiterated what most of our readers already know: most (84 percent) believe in miracles, half believe in ghosts, and a third believe in astrology.



New book promotes critical thinking to expose paranormal events

Prometheus Books has just published a new quality paperback book, *Hoaxes, Myths and Manias: Why We Need Critical Thinking*, by Robert E. Bartholomew and Benjamin Radford. I haven't had a chance to read the book yet, but it looks like a book that will particularly interest skeptics. Among the interesting — and sometimes amusing — topics covered in the book are: mass delusions, such as "The Mad Gasser of Mattoon," co-written by Bartholomew and me; alien crashes; Martian panics; dance manias; flying saucers, and shrinking genitals.

As the press release accompanying the book points out, the authors "first lay out the principles of critical thinking and then invite readers to put these principles to the test by examining a series of unusual and challenging case studies."

Bartholomew of Whitehall, New York, holds a doctorate and is an independent scholar, freelance writer, and co-author of *UFOs and Alien Contacts*, as well as many other books and articles. Radford is the managing editor of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine and the author of numerous articles on critical thinking, hysterias, and urban legends.

Bartholomew has written articles for our newsletter about the UFO panic in the late 1800s in the U.S. and an article on the mad gasser of Mattoon published prior to the article we co-wrote following new research and conclusions, which was published in *Skeptical Inquirer* last year.

A review of the book by David Bloomberg will hopefully follow in a subsequent issue.

The book sells for \$20. Prometheus Books' Web site is: www.prometheusbooks.com

A special fish that now sleeps with the fishes

At first, I thought it was April Fools' Day, or that I was

reading *The Onion* newspaper, or the story was an urban legend, or Tony Soprano's dream became real, but there was the story in the *London Observer*. A talking fish. But no simple talking fish. It was God! Maybe it was the Devil!

And not just any simple Devil. This carp channeled a community elder! An obscure Jewish sect — the Skver sect of Hasidim of New York — is apparently excited about this 20-pound carp that two fish-cutters at a market said began shouting apocalyptic warnings in Hebrew.

Alas, the carp met his match when one of the fish-cutters butchered him. Dang, I wouldn't have done that. I

would have taken the carp to bars, then maybe to a REALL meeting, then on a worldwide tour! But then I would have to learn to understand Hebrew.

A check of Snopes.com didn't show any references to this story as a hoax. Stay tuned.

As Yogi said, "It ain't over until it's over."

What's next? Take an Alien to Work Day?

New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment, the home of the tourist Mecca and capital Santa Fe, and the place for the first atomic bomb test explosion, may hold a state-sanctioned Extraterrestrial Culture Day on the second Thursday of February if a Republican from Roswell succeeds in passing his legislation, according to Reuters as reported by CNN.

The special day, Rep. Dan Foley proposed, will "enhance relationships among all citizens of the cosmos, known and unknown."

Sure, that's fine trying to be friendly with those creatures, but I bet he hasn't seen the movies *Mars Attacks!* or *Aliens!*

John Edward says, "Why didn't I think of that?!"

If you are bored watching "20 Questions" with John Edward or James Van Praagh, then why not contact your dear, departed loved one directly with a telegram!

Yes, Paul Kinsella of New Athens, which is near Belleville, Illinois, has a new service called Afterlife Telegrams and a Web site (AfterLifeTelegrams.com) to promote contact with the dead, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. So far he's sold one — to a family friend in Belleville.

Why so few customers? Kinsella, who's also a budding cartoonist, had to consult a psychic for that. "This one lady said from her experience," Kinsella said, "people are more interested in getting messages *from* the afterlife than *to* the afterlife."

Perhaps that's because the dead can't read without their glasses.

What's next? Afterlife Audiotapes! Vanishing-life Videos! DVDs for the Dead! CDs for the Deceased!

We can't wait.

For those with short-attention spans — Comic-book Darwin!

Charles Darwin as comic-book hero? Yup. For those who haven't heard, a combined edition of a series of comic books drawn and produced by Jay Hosler was published in March. Called "The Sidewalk Adventures," the \$20 special edition is available at <www.activesynapse.com>. Individual comic books in the series are available for \$2.95.

Give 'em hell, Charles!

More petitionary and intercessory prayer studies underway

One of the hottest topics in the U.S. these days is whether prayers affect one's health. In a recent article in *Parade* magazine, Dianne Hales looks at studies either completed or being conducted at prestigious universities, such as Duke, Dartmouth and Miami.

Hales' article is positive towards the healing power of prayer, at least for those who pray for improvement in their own health. Known as petitionary prayer, there appears to be scientific evidence that this aspect is true. "Some scientists speculate that prayer may foster a state of peace and calm that could lead to beneficial changes in the cardiovascular and immune systems," Hales writes.

A well-known effect also may explain those health improvements. As David Bloomberg summarized in his article, "The Nocebo Effect & Healing Prayer," in the December 2000 issue of *The REALL News*, "Those who believe prayer will help them and know they are being prayed for may indeed get better, thanks to the placebo effect. The same could be said of giving pets to the elderly who like animals (which research has shown is related to both physical and psychological improvement)."

As for intercessory prayer — in which prayers are said for others — even Hales admits that the findings "have been mixed." She cites the Mayo Clinic study that found no significant effects on health. "Still," she says, "a review of 23 studies of intercessory prayer involving 2774 patients, published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, found a positive effect in 57% and concluded that 'the evidence thus far merits further study.' "

Hales does go on to cite doubt about those studies. "Skeptics remain dubious. 'The premise behind distant healing isn't scientific,' says John Chibnall, a psychologist at St. Louis University. 'Studies cannot be designed in a scientific way.' "

Other scientific reviews of such studies have criticized their design, as Bloomberg pointed out, citing Tessman and Tessman, as well as others. Some studies weren't double-blinded and conclusions were often faulty.

On a personal note, while I'll concede that prayer may help an individual cope with stresses and illnesses, that certainly could be explained by the placebo effect. Or self-deception.

As for intercessory prayer, there are a number of problems with proving that aspect. How do you control for that? What if many people not in a control group are praying for a person and that is unknown to the researchers? What about the natural healing powers of the body, and time?

At the risk of upsetting many people, religious and otherwise, I must point out the fact that "hits" are remembered, but not "misses." That is a well-known phenomenon discussed by

skeptics. Take, for instance, the murder of nearly 3,000 innocent people in the World Trade Center tragedy of 9/11. For several days, there were expectations that people would be rescued alive from the rubble. As *Parade* pointed out, polls show that 90 percent pray and 80 percent believe prayers can heal. Assuming thus that 200 million Americans prayed for survivors and that another 800 million prayed worldwide, and assuming each person prayed for survivors five times a day for five days, then at least 25 billion prayers were said, hoping that survivors would be found. None were. Did we see one headline in a newspaper that said "25 Billion Prayers Unanswered"? I don't think so.

I am not mocking the dead or criticizing the living, including me, who honestly thought that there might be survivors, but I just want to show why scientists would be skeptical of selective intervention by a supernatural being.

Don't forget the misses.

Looking at alternative medicine — again

Another *Parade* magazine article in March advised readers to be wary of alternative medicine but not to reject it. Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld gives some guidelines for using and understanding alternative medicine products and urges readers to be skeptical of the use of the word "natural" for products.

He also warns, "Don't abandon conventional medications in favor of any alternative approach. It's one thing to supplement standard therapy in the hope of improving its effectiveness. It's quite another matter to replace what your doctor has prescribed with a 'natural' product. Before you do that, ask your doctor for a second opinion or consultation to see if there is any other approved therapy for what ails you."

Sounds like sound advice.

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A Skeptic in Washington

by Bob Ladendorf

While the April cherry blossoms were blooming cheerily in Washington, D.C., the White House was surrounded by scores of police in cars and horses in the middle of the street behind the President's home. Metal gates blocked off tourists from even entering the street at Lafayette Park, just a few blocks from the Capital Hilton where I attended a Council for Secular Humanism conference. It was sad to see that the White House, which I toured many years ago, had to be such a secure compound. But we're in the Age of Settling Scores and in the middle of a war, so that security is certainly a necessity.

During the three days I attended the *One Nation Under God? Secularism, Society and Justice* conference April 11-13, I also saw an antiwar, antiracism protest rally near the White House. On Saturday, I also caught a glimpse of the march that emerged from the rally as the protesters trekked around our hotel peacefully.

It was almost a surreal moment, and a triumph of free speech and freedom to assemble in America, as I watched the protests and then heard conference speakers and panelists, such as author/columnist Christopher Hitchens, critical of worldwide religious fundamentalism but supportive of the Iraq War just a few blocks from the home of the architect of the doctrine of preemptive strikes. Other speakers condemned Islam for its negative impact, among other things, on science. Next door to our discussions at the hotel, Iran held a conference that was attended by its foreign minister. Every so often, I could hear the sirens of police escorts as they carted dignitaries around Washington. I wasn't "in Kansas" anymore!

The conference was sponsored by the Council, which was started by Prof. Emeritus Paul Kurtz and is one arm of the Center for Inquiry group with CSICOP as the other distinct arm. There were elements of the conference of interest to skeptics, primarily regarding secular education and creationism. A panel discussion about the new threats to secular education included Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education (NCSE); Massimo Pigliucci, author and associate professor of ecology and evolution at the University of Tennessee; Taner Edis, assistant professor of physics at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri; and Rob Boston, assistant director of communications for the Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Of particular interest was Edis's presentation, "Intelligent Design: Bad Science, Bad Philosophy, or Both?" Prof. Edis's new book, *The Ghost in the Universe*, won the Council's award for best science book of 2002, and he received the award at the banquet Saturday night.

In conjunction with a Power Point presentation, Edis proceeded to criticize Intelligent Design (ID). "We say creationism is *not science* — not just creationists do not practice science, but that the very idea of supernatural design is out of bounds for science," Edis said. "We say creation is an essentially religious or at least metaphysical notion. Science is all about natural explanations for natural phenomena." Thus, ID should not be taught in science classes.

However, Edis went on to say that there is nothing wrong with ID in biology as a hypothesis. He said that philosophical ID supporters that attack methodological naturalists as wrongly excluding ID are correct. The better view, Edis continued, is that "naturalism is the most successful, best-supported broad description of the world" and that "we expect that to continue."

As Edis went on to say, "ID *could* be scientifically correct. It just happens to be wrong."

In dealing with complexity, Edis emphasized the "bottom-up naturalism," namely that physical science finds no "life force" or "molecular soul." Particles and forces in physics give rise to molecules in chemistry and then to life in biology. "Complexity is built up on the simple," Edis said.

Chance and necessity, and combinations thereof, are the components determining the course of life. Complexity is explained through self-organization, computation, evolution, and others, Edis said. "All are related, and all do their work through chance and necessity."

As for ID, it's a separate principle, and a "revolution." Promoted by leading theorist William Dembski, ID is an "irreducible form of explanation, distinct from chance & necessity."

According to Edis, Dembski claims that "both designed artifacts and organisms exhibit special order: *specified complexity* (SC)," and that "chance and necessity *cannot* generate SC, or *information*." Therefore, intelligence is a separate principle, blind mechanisms (like those of Darwinian evolution) cannot explain life, and Artificial Intelligence is impossible, Edis adds.

Edis goes on in more complicated detail to discuss chance and necessity, creativity, game theory, and testing for design. He concludes that ID cannot work. "We know what is beyond mechanisms. Not flexibility, not creativity, not specified complexity. Intelligence itself must be built out of chance and necessity. Not a separate principle!" He goes on to say that biologists have solved the problem of how randomness gives creativity. "The Darwinian mechanism does exactly this — creates information. Our own intelligent designs are enabled by Darwinian processes taking place within our brains!"

What then are Dembski's mistakes? He thinks, Edis said, that evolution is a solution to a preset problem. "Evolution is no such thing. What is 'fittest' continually changes, depending on the organisms themselves. There is no preset or final goal." In addition, he adds, "ID is completely out of touch with today's science concerning complexity."

In the end, Edis concludes, creationism is futile.

(For a more detailed explanation of his argument, visit Taner Edis's Web site at www2.truman.edu/~edis)

NCSE Executive Director Eugenie Scott's talk, entitled "Using and Misusing the Law to Promote Creationism," reviewed some of the efforts over the years that states tried to get creationism taught in public schools. She referred to the 1987 case that struck down the teaching of creationism.

For readers unfamiliar with the case, the NCSE Web site provided this key information:

"In 1987, in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the U.S. Supreme Court

held unconstitutional Louisiana's 'Creationism Act'. This statute prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools, except when it was accompanied by instruction in 'creation science'. The Court found that, by advancing the religious belief that a supernatural being created humankind, which is embraced by the term *creation science*, the act impermissibly endorses religion. In addition, the Court found that the provision of a comprehensive science education is undermined when it is forbidden to teach evolution except when creation science is also taught. (*Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987) 482 U.S. 578)."

Since that time, creationists have been creative in their descriptions of their hypothesis.

"Now we have 'abrupt appearance' theory, 'alternative theories,' and 'arguments against evolution,'" Scott said.

After reviewing some of the recent efforts by creationists, she added that there is viewpoint discrimination, but, after all, "the nature of science is discrimination" of ideas.

For more information about the NCSE, see its Web site at: www.ncseweb.org

The next morning, Michael Newdow, a medical doctor and attorney who is best known as the plaintiff in the suit that resulted in the 9th Circuit Court decision in California declaring the 1954 legislation about the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional, spoke to the group after playing a blues song he wrote about the Pledge. Strumming a guitar and using a harmonica, the multititled Newdow made the audience laugh with his inventive lyrics. He then proceeded to criticize televangelist Benny Hinn for his negative impact on people that is rarely shown. At one time, as an emergency room doctor, he saw a woman who had a heart attack and died on the stage. People

like this needed medical attention instead of a reputed faith healer.

Other notable speakers at the conference included Nat Henstoff, columnist, author, and free speech advocate; actress and comedian Julia Sweeney — best known as "Pat" on *Saturday Night Live* — who tried out a comedy routine as an ex-Catholic for an appreciate audience; Susan Jacoby, former *Washington Post* report and author of an upcoming book on the demonization of secularism; Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State; Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan; and Ibn Warraq, author of several books including *Why I Am Not a Muslim*.

Conferences like these are intellectually stimulating and, as Julia Sweeney commented, help "galvanize" you knowing that there are many other like-minded individuals out there supportive of critical thinking and fighting against the purveyors of the paranormal and pseudoscience.

The only problem with such a conference is the tendency to continue conversations with speakers and friends made at the conference until 2:30 a.m., which I did. When the next morning's session begins at 9 a.m., surely not to be missed, then you just resign yourself, of course, to being tired.

But that's a good tired feeling.

Bob Ladendorf, a free-lance writer living in Springfield, is a co-founder of REALL and its current secretary-treasurer. ♡

(*"Psychic Secrets"* continued from page 3)

and down on a pencil to show that she is in communication with the spirit world — and then moves to the psychic slates to get specific messages. She shows that the slates are blank and then asks for a message. She opens the slates again and there it is! A specific message, not just some general cold reading. The host notes that the victim is sure to come back again and again, and keep paying again and again.

So, how is it done? Well, the ring is pulled up and down by a thin hair attached to the pencil, which the ring is slipped over. The slates involve an accomplice hiding (in this case) under the table. The accomplice hears the story of the deceased relative and comes up with a personal question. Then he loads the slates so it will appear blank, but when turned over a cover will slip into the top to show the message.

Back to the studio, and here is a really easy one. The "psychic" claims to be able to generate heat with his mind. He takes out an ordinary metal spring and, by concentrating, it turns red-hot. Well, not really. It does turn and it is red. The secret is that the spring is painted black on one side and red on the other. So he turns it gently and it appears to turn red.

Another quicky is a dollar bill that folds up by itself. How? It's rigged with fish line in a zig-zag pattern so as the line is pulled, the dollar bill moves and folds up without any apparent outside aid.

Now we're on to talking with the dead. Frankly, I was afraid they would just go for tricks and not tackle this one, even though it is the most popular on TV right now. I was happy to

be proven wrong. The performer picks a volunteer. He says the person he wants to contact has been dead for some time, and it was quick — a car accident. Yes. There are the numbers seven and eight — they were on a team together, the volunteer was one and the deceased was the other. Yes. It was little league, he's asking you to remember and wants to know if you still have the baseball card he gave to you. Yes. He's happy.

Now, another. The volunteer has unfinished business. Someone is looking over your shoulder. A family member who passed. Grandfather. A strong person. Name begins with P — Phil? No, Paul. Close. You have to do things he wasn't able to do.

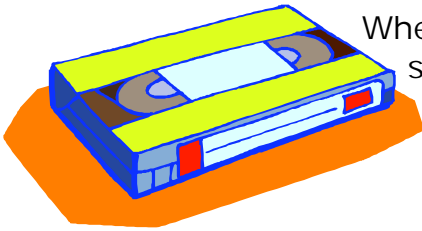
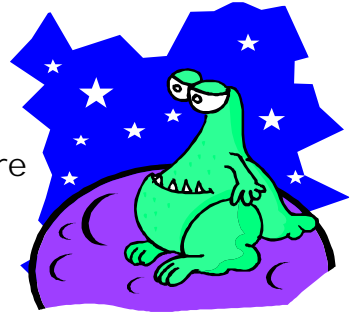
Both volunteers give stunning agreement. So how did they do it? Simple. An accomplice talked to one (in this case the same accomplice who radioed in the pictures earlier) before the show. He looked like an ordinary audience member just chatting about why they were there, but he was gently grilling the guy for info. The other was also the subject of an accomplice grilling, though a different accomplice this time. The stories are written down for various audience members and then the performer memorizes them. The audience members are labeled next to their seats with color-coded dots so the performer knows who is who.

That was the final trick exposed. The host says that tonight they exposed some classic tricks. So next time they watch a supposed psychic, remember that seeing is not believing once you know their secrets. ♡

Our Next Meeting

Life on Other Planets

In a continuation of a series of video lectures started in April, we are going to look closer at the prospects for life on planets in our solar system and in other galaxies. As taught by astronomer Seth Shostak of the SETI Institute, the lectures that we will watch this time are *The Prospects for Life in the Solar System—Mars, Europa, Titan and Other Worlds? The Search for Habitable Planets*.



Whether you believe that there is other life in the universe or are skeptical of those claims, you won't want to miss this meeting and others in this series.

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Tuesday, May 6, 7:00 PM

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