

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 14, Number 4

May 2006

Gleanings by Clark Olson

Fib poems

Count the syllables on each line. (*New York Times* 4-14-06, p B 27)

*Blogs
spread
gossip
and rumor
But how about a
rare, geeky form of poetry?*

Evolution, creationism

The *State Journal-Register* carried several news items and 11 letters from March 28 through April 18 on evolution. Ten of these were: Milford Franks original challenge to creationists about dino finding in Gobi desert with 9 responses. Five were pro-evolution, some from unfamiliar names, and 3 were from familiar anti-evolutionists, with two from Eddie Bratton. Bratton's were about cave paintings of dinosaurs. The implication is that these findings would establish that dinos existed at the same time as humans. Google has a lot of entries under "dinosaur cave painting(s)" including one of the sources in Jack Cuzzo's book *Buried Alive, The Startling Truth About Neanderthal Man*. The painting is interpreted to be a brontosaurus, but looks like cloud watching to me. However, an angelfire site has some pretty dramatic pictures of South American Incan pottery with a pretty good triceratops on it! So what this is about is up in the air. Jack Cuzzo is an ortho-

dontist who has studied forensic anthropology and has actually studied human fossils and contributed to reconstruction of some. Unfortunately, he is also a confirmed creationist!

Very brief book note

Ray Kurzweil, 2005. *The Singularity is near. When Humans Transcend Biology*, Viking. This is a very big book which covers a lot of futuristic topics in the categories of genetics, nanotechnology and robotics. To quote the jacket blurb the "Singularity" "...will be an era in which the very nature of what it means to be human will be both enriched and challenged, as our species breaks the shackles of its genetic legacy and achieves inconceivable heights of intelligence, material progress and longevity." He looks forward to the 2020's and beyond. For instance, he says nanobot (nanotechnology robot) red blood cells are almost feasible now. These could be engineered to carry a lot more oxygen than our own cells, thereby increasing athletic capacity. Nanobots could also be engineered to survey the brain and help to design computers that would work more like the brain, only faster and with more capacity. Unfortunately, for a techno naive person like me a lot of this was not very well explained. Perhaps, he thought the reader already understood some the basic technology. As a biologist I especially didn't think the biology was very well explained. At any rate he seems to know the field very well and there isn't a technology he doesn't like. Also, he doesn't want to die — he takes 250 supplement pills a day besides some intravenous injections each week! For a very different viewpoint see Bill McKibben's book *Enough*. ☹

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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.

Annual Membership Rates: Regular, \$20; student, \$15; family, \$30; patron, \$50 or more; subscription only, \$12.

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From the Chairman

Wally Hartshorn

Did you make it to April's meeting? Unfortunately I had to miss it. Dawn and I took our 16-month-old son on a trip down to south Texas to visit his grandparents, and then to Austin to visit his aunt, uncle, and cousin. Around Christmas we made a trip to New Mexico that was of comparable distance. In that case we drove — 3 days to get there, 3 days to get back. This time we flew. I can say without qualification that flying was easier.

One quick tip: When traveling with a young child, they let you get on the plane first. Everyone knows that. What we didn't realize was that there is no time gap between when they let us on the plane and when they let everyone else on the plane. You basically just have first dibs on seats, but no opportunity to strap in the car seat before everyone else piles on the plane!

Mythbusters Mystery

A recent episode of *Mythbusters* was rather interesting. (Well, even more so than normal!) They were examining the claim that a bullet fired into the air (e.g. to celebrate Fourth of July or New Year's) can kill you when it comes back down.

My first thought was, "Well of course it can. We've heard news reports." They Mythbusters did some experiments to determine the terminal velocity of a falling bullet (the maximum speed at which it will fall before air resistance prevents it from falling

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faster), then rigged up a machine that would “fire” the bullet at that speed. They then fired a bullet at a pig carcass (to simulate a human) — and saw the bullet bounce off without even penetrating the skin!

They then consulted an expert who showed them X-rays of people who had been wounded or killed by bullets falling to earth after being shot in the air.

How could that be? Their tests were showing that the bullet would fall way too slow to be dangerous, but here was proof that people had been injured or killed by falling bullets!

A bit more investigation revealed the problem. If a bullet is fired straight up in the air, it will indeed fall back to earth at its terminal velocity, eventually landing on its side. However, if a bullet is fired at even a small angle, then rather than falling in an uncontrolled tumble, it will maintain its ballistic trajectory and its stabilizing spin, returning to earth at a much faster speed. The result can be deadly.

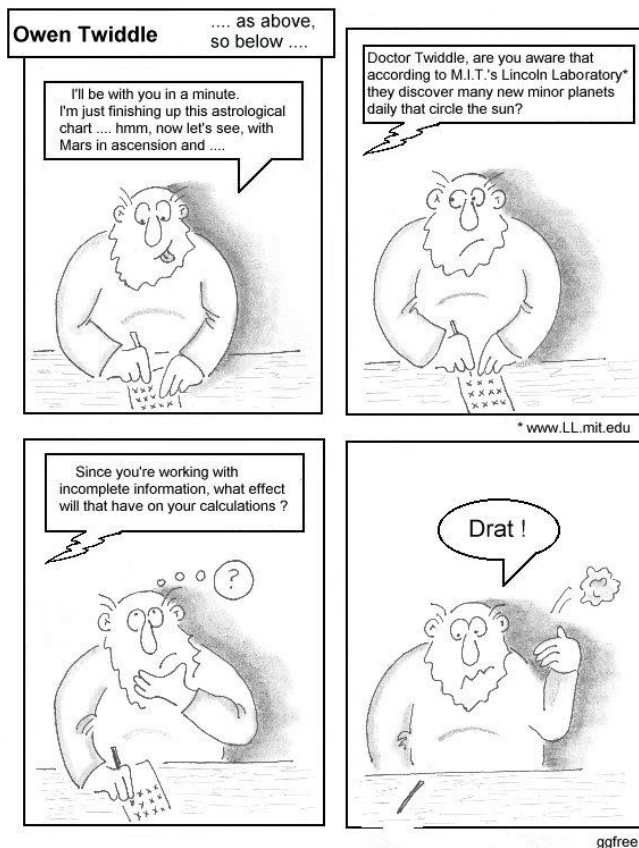
It was interesting to see a non-intuitive result come back from an experiment, along with the subsequent thinking and follow-up testing that needed to be done to solve the mystery!

May Meeting

May’s meeting will feature another video in the Skeptic Society’s Distinguished Lecture Series. This one is a July 2005 presentation by Jennifer Michael Hecht, author of *Doubt: A History*. She examines the idea that those who doubt tend to drive the creative forces that lead to innovations and discoveries. (My wife has been reading this book, incidentally. She reports to me that the main thing she has learned so



***Great doubt, great awakening;
little doubt, little awakening;
no doubt, no awakening.***



far is that she (my wife) knows very little about the ancient Greek philosophers!)

June Picnic

Our annual picnic will be coming up in June, in place of our normal June meeting. (The library has their book sale each June, which means our normal meeting location is unavailable. We use that as an excuse to have a picnic!)

We haven’t settled on the details yet, but I’m guessing it will be held on the second weekend of June (either Saturday, June 10, or Sunday, June 11) at one of Springfield’s parks. Be sure to check next month’s newsletter for details! ♡

— **Zen maxim**

Our Next Meeting

Doubt: A History
Dr. Jennifer Michael Hecht

This is a DVD of a presentation made in July 2005 as part of the Skeptics Society's Distinguished Lecture Series. Jennifer Michael Hecht is the author of *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*. "History usually focuses on belief systems, but those who doubt were often engines of creativity and social advances. Dr. Jennifer Michael Hecht shows that doubt has a vibrant story and tradition with its own saints, martyrs, and sages."



Springfield, Illinois
Lincoln Library (7th & Capitol)
Tuesday, May 2, 7:00 PM

Free and Open
to the Public

www.reall.org

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