



The Arizona Skeptic

A Journal Promoting Critical Thinking

July 1990 Edition

Self-Deception and the Paranormal

By

Michael A. Stackpole

Man's ability to deceive himself, or in this case, my ability to deceive myself, was brought home again to me this week. From the GENIE computer network's Macintosh Round Table I downloaded a Biorythm program. I unpacked it and started it up. I input my birthday, as the program requested, and ran my chart. I got a neat little diagram, as depicted below, and found it amusing. No harm done.

Biorythms, for those who missed one of the pseudo-science booms of the late 70s, are the supposed emotional, mental and physical cycles we all go through. They are calculated from the day of our birth (so someone born at one minute after midnight and one minute before midnight would not be on the same schedule) and progress at a regular intervals. The cycles, according to the program manual, are 23 days for Physical, 28 days for Emotional and 33 days for Mental. Our position on the scale for any one of the ratings can be positive or negative, with "critical days" being those that surround the crossover of the zero point. On double or triple lows, we're supposed to be very down, and vice versa for double or triple up days. Critical days are those in which we are supposed to be very careful because we are more accident prone. (Approximately 1 in 5 days is a critical day.)

Then I noticed the program allowed me to input the birthday of a friend and get a "compatibility" rating. For example, I was born on the exact same day as Caroline Kennedy. That would make me 100% compatible with her (which I've always secretly suspected anyway, mind you). When I ran folks of my actual acquaintance, I discovered I found the correlations percentages the program offered intriguingly

accurate. Despite being a dyed-in-the-wool skeptic, this discovery took me back a bit.

Biorythms were my first area of skeptical inquiry. I recall, back in the late 70s, Reader's Digest ran an article on Biorythms that provided little templates for figuring out your cycles. I faithfully cut them out and mounted them on cardboard. After doing the calculations necessary, I created a chart that covered the 1st semester of my junior year in college. I posted it on my bulletin board and, after the first two weeks in September, I forgot about it.

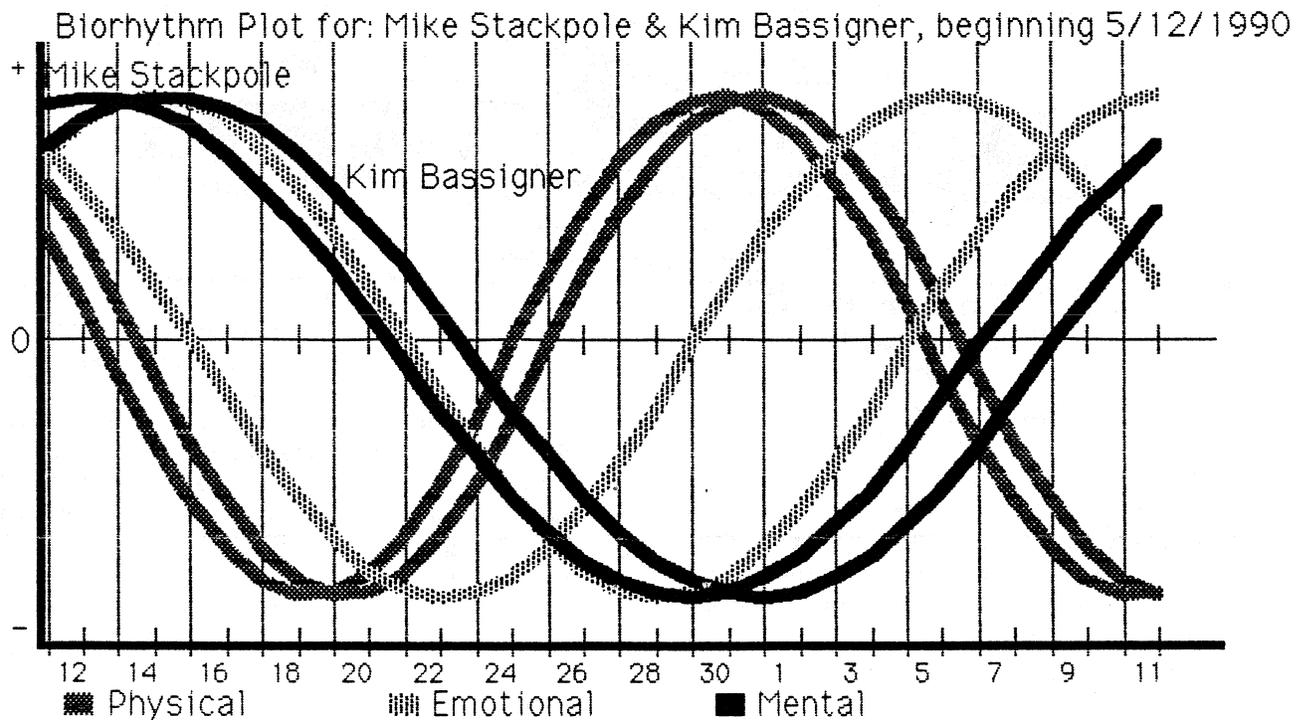
During that semester I became good friends with a guy in the University of Vermont ROTC program. They had an intramural hockey team and were looking for anyone who had equipment and was willing to play. In Vermont, when offered free ice-time with a goalie in the net, you take it, so I agreed to join the team. Of course, on a scale of one to pro, I'm a hopeful amateur - I failed to make my high school team - but on this team I was one of the better players.

In Biorythm terms, this team was triple critical all the time.

The memory of one game is etched in my mind with the clarity reserved for remembering great disasters, like the shooting of Martin Luther King or the explosion of the Challenger. In this case, however, the cause is reversed because I had the best game of hockey I will undoubtedly ever have in my whole entire life. It was incredible.

In the first half, while skating rather lazily around the blue line, I tipped a pass from one defenseman to another. The puck hopped up on its edge and started rolling toward their goal. I am not a fast skater, especially when trying to control the puck, but I took off after it as fast as I could. I finally managed to make the damned puck lie down and wound up for a blistering slap-shot as I sailed over the far blue line. I could see the terror in the goalie's eyes.

Of course, I blew the shot. The puck headed



Mike Stackpole...

You were born on November 27 1957.
 The day was a Wednesday.
 You have lived for 11,854 days.
 You are 32.45 years old.
 Phys.= (+) Emot.= (+) Mental= (+)

Kim Bassigner...

You were born on December 08 1953.
 The day was a Tuesday.
 You have lived for 13,304 days.
 You are 36.42 years old.
 Phys.= (+) Emot.= (+) Mental= (+)

in toward the net with the speed and power of a winter visitor driving through downtown Phoenix. The goalie, however, had reacted to the flash of my stick, so the lethargic puck meandered into the goal between his legs. He nearly died of embarrassment and my heart started pounding because that was my first goal in this league.

It also gave us a 1-0 lead.

Late in the game the score remained 1-0. One of my wings - a guy who actually knew

Compatibility....

Physical= **91.3%
 Mental= **87.9%
 Emotional= **57.1%

what he was doing - got a breakaway. I skated after him as fast as possible, which meant he was still pulling away. Like a jet on a strafing run, he swooped down on their goalie and snapped off a shot. The goalie got his stick on it and the rebound popped out to the top of the left face-off circle.

That happened to be right where I'd drifted at this point.

I stopped and cranked my stick up for another slapshot. I could see the confidence in the goalie's eyes because he wasn't going to be fooled by me this time. My stick came down and finally I got off a good shot. The puck shot straight like a bullet and clipped off his knee into the corner of the net.

I was ecstatic. Two goals in one night, in one game! And we won 2-0, which made it all that much more wonderful. I was in heaven.

Walking home from the ice rink I remembered the biorhythm chart I'd created.

The second I hit my room I went to check it because this night clearly had to be a triple high. I was in my glory and, if biorythms were all Reader's Digest had made them out to be, my cycles had to be converging.

They *were* converging.

That day was a double low for physical and emotional, with mental on the fast slide into critical. With a laugh, I tore the chart down and tossed it away. The experiment wasn't very scientific, but it sent my "Common Sense-o-meter" into the hokum register, so it was enough for me. Biorythms were nonsense, as far as I was concerned.

But if that was true, why the interest and amazement when biorythms started showing me things I felt were somewhat accurate concerning friends? Very simply, given a chance, most folks will read their hopes and fears into almost anything even the least bit predictive in nature. In many ways it is no different as trying to puzzle out the tip sheets at a race track: anything than can give you a handle on stuff you don't understand is welcome. Other people can be very complex, and trying to understand them is a task in which most folks can use all the help they can get.

This liberal "reading into" things is what creates a sense of right or *deja vu* when looking at things like biorythms or horoscopes or generalized remarks from a psychic. How many of you recognize yourself in the following description: "You are a thoughtful individual who has a good sense of humor and the ability to analyze problems well. There are some things about yourself you would like to change, and you have resolved to work on those things, but you feel relatively secure at this point in time about who you are."

Obviously the text here has more than enough hooks to tie into almost anyone's life. How close would you say that hits you? Perhaps it's 100% dead on, or only 50% on. And how much more likely would you be to believe it if it was being said to you by someone you liked and respected, or was being said by someone you hated? What if a psychiatrist told you that, versus reading it in a horoscope column? A whole host of variable can affect how we interpret what we hear.

The second more telling problem is this: often, as in the example above, things are

stated so generally as to be useless. When the Biorythm program tells me I'm 92.3% physically compatible with Kim Bassinger, what the hell does that mean? Presumably the measurement is determined through a formula comparing the different cycle rates on our physical cycles, but how do we give that number value? What does it mean to be physically compatible with someone else? Where do the effects of genetics and nutrition and physical conditioning leave off and those of physical rhythm pick up?

Is it possible to have the same Mental and Emotional compatibility with someone who was born on the same day as I was, yet has had an utterly alien upbringing? Could a schizophrenic street-person and a Nobel-laureate physicist who were born 33 days apart have that much in common with each other? Is it likely that someone born 58.22 years after another person, so all three rhythms coincide, will really be just like the other?

Of course not, and we know that. We can run the numbers and can see that every 23 days a person is born that will be 100% physically compatible with us. The same goes for mental and emotional cycles such that in a room of 30 people we're likely to have all sorts of rhythmic clones. We'll also take it as dead on significant if we match with someone we like, and don't with someone we dislike. When the converse is true, we all dismiss this stuff as nonsense.

Nonsense it is, but it's fun and people enjoy toying with it. As Skeptics we have to be careful to avoid landing on people like a hammer because playing with horoscopes and biorythms isn't the problem. Accepting them as true without any scientific verification is the problem. Believing them accurate and predictive is our bane, and most of us would assume that anyone but card-carrying skeptics, in fact, do buy these pseudosciences wholeheartedly.

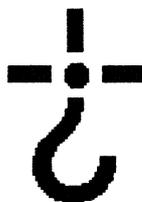
This, I believe, is an error in perception on our parts. Being curious or amused by paranormal phenomena is not the same as believing it. Is there harm done in reading a horoscope if the person reading it admits it's nonsense? I do not believe there is, but I think it is important for folks to state to themselves that they don't believe, just to keep it in mind.

So, perhaps instead of looking at someone

consulting a biorhythm and asking "How can you believe that nonsense?" we need to ask (in a kinder, gentler tone of voice) "Do you believe that stuff?" And if the reply is "Yes," we can follow it up with, "Why?" Getting them to examine their belief and explain it to you is one of the easier ways to get critical thinking stopped, and that tosses a monkey-wrench into the cycle of self deception.

Self-deception is not a good thing, but we should meet it by encouraging realistic critical thinking, not condemnation. No one likes to think of themselves as a fool, and they hate like hell to have it pointed out to them.

Now, where did I put Kim Bassinger's phone number?



The Curious Case of the Cross of Chaos

By

Michael A. Stackpole

In Satanhunting, one of the more interesting aspects comes in the form of the symbol guides published by experts. These guides and symbols are reprinted over and over again by different experts. The symbol above, created in 3 minutes of playing around with this Macintosh, first came to my attention on the cover of a Blue Oyster Cult album I bought back in the early 1970s. I'd not seen it before, but I've seen it on other albums by that group, including the recent release **Imaginos**.

More often than on albums, however, I've seen that symbol pop up in these occult symbol guides. It is called the Cross of Confusion or Cross of Chaos. In the Baldwin Park Police Department Training Bulletin (Vol. 86, No. 2, April 1986) on Occult Criminal Investigation, the symbol is defined with the following: "The 'cross of confusion' is an ancient Roman symbol questioning the existence or validity of christianity." Pat Pulling, in her 1989 book **The Devil's Web** says, "**Cross of Confusion:** This symbol was first used by Romans who questioned the truth of Christianity."

Looking at the symbol, the definition makes a certain amount of logical sense. It is obviously the mating and inversion of a question mark and a cross. Brilliant of those Romans to have come up with this symbol to question the validity of Christianity. Yet more brilliant for modern Satanists to pick up on this ancient symbolism and use it to bedevil (no pun intended) their enemies.

This logic, however, has a couple of flaws. The first thing involves the nature of the cross symbolism in Christianity. The early Christian church did **not** use the cross as a symbol because a cross was a tool used to kill criminals. Using the cross to symbolize their movement would have been akin to using an electric chair to promote a cult devoted to Ted Bundy. It's not the sort of thing that promotes membership.

By the way, the early church used the fish symbol you see on plenty of cars these days as their symbol. It is based on a Greek anagram and its relation to the word Ichthys.

Still, the cross did arise as a symbol for Christianity before the end of the Roman period, so there might be some overlap there. We'll grant the Satanhunters the possibility they might have something. This leads us to look at the other half of the symbol: the question mark.

The Romans, it turns out, did not use that symbol. According to an article in the July 1990 issue of Discover magazine (Comma Before the Storm/Light Elements by Judith Stone), the question mark did not show up until the 8th Century. In fact, when it was first used, it looked like this:



Not really the precursor to our symbol, is it? The Oxford English Dictionary points to the first use of the term "question mark" as being in the 1400s. In fact, until printing helped standardize the language, spelling and punctuation were used in very original and different ways.

So, if the Romans did not really associate the cross with Christianity, and if they did not have the question mark, how did this symbol get its sinister pedigree? As I mentioned above, I'd not seen it before its use on the cover of a Blue Oyster Cult album. In High School I can well remember seeing it

drawn on notebooks carried by kids, which means it undoubtedly became carved on desks and spray-painted on schools. I have no doubt whatsoever that the symbol ended up decorating one or more of the places police have later, questionably, identified as ritual sacrifice sites.

Clearly the symbol's meaning was divined by reverse engineering. This likewise has happened with the peace symbol. It was taken from the semaphore symbols for N and D (for Nuclear Disarmament) surrounded by a circle to signify the world. It was invented in 1947, just after we entered the nuclear age. Occult experts, however, have identified it as a broken, inverted cross surrounded by a magic circle.

Similar reverse engineering points out that the Seal of the United States (the eye and pyramid on the dollar) is an occult symbol. Ditto the sinister meaning for the Proctor and Gamble logo.

A little research could point up this sort of nonsense. Satanhunters never do that research because they know they are right. It's up to us to bring out the truth and separate fact from fiction. Luckily, when the **truth** and their truth come into conflict, reason always carries the day.

But Is It Science? edited by Michael Ruse

1988. Prometheus Books. 406 pp.

Reviewed by Jim Lippard

University of Guelph philosopher of science Michael Ruse has put together a collection of essays which focus on "the philosophical question in the creation/evolution controversy": that is, do creationism (or evolution) satisfy any reasonable criteria of what it is to be a science.

The book is divided into four parts: the nineteenth-century background of creationism, evolution today, the creationist challenge, and the philosophical aftermath. The first section is a collection of writings including the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, an excerpt from William Paley's "Natural Theology" giving an argument for the existence of God from design, a short selection from Darwin's "On the Origin of Species." Also included is Ruse's "The Relationship between Science and Religion in Britain, 1830-1870."

The second section describes the state of evolution in the 1980s. Chapters by Stephen Jay Gould, John Maynard Smith, and Richard Dawkins debate the Eldredge/Gould theory of "punctuated equilibria." Karl Popper's attack on Darwinism is printed here, along with a reply by Ruse. Ruse writes on "Is There a Limit to Our Knowledge of Evolution?" and geneticist Francisco Ayala describes "The Mechanisms of Evolution."

In the third section some of the arguments of creationists are presented. First, Ronald Numbers gives an excellent description of the twentieth century development of "creation science" and its current institutions. Michael Ruse presents a summary of Henry Morris' book *Scientific Creationism*. Duane Gish's "Creation, Evolution, and the Historical Evidence" is reprinted, as are the texts of Arkansas' "Act 590 of 1981," Ruse's testimony before the court, and Judge Overton's decision. The choice of Gish's article is rather unfortunate, as it was written in 1973 and contains statements which Gish now disclaims (such as his claim that there are no fossils in Precambrian rocks).

Finally, in the fourth section, the "philosophical question" arises. In actuality there is more than one question here. Besides the question of whether or not creationism is a science, philosophers of science Larry Laudan and Philip Quinn raise the question of whether or not even a set of criteria for finding the "demarcation between science and non-science" is possible. They argue that it is not, and that all criteria which have thus far been proposed either admit things we do not wish to consider science or shut out things we do wish to consider science. They specifically argue that Judge Overton's decision overturning the Arkansas creationism act was based on faulty reasoning and an erroneous set of criteria for deciding

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what is and is not science. (Yet neither Quinn nor Laudan are creationists. Laudan states that "if any doctrine in the history of science has ever been falsified, it is the set of claims associated with 'creation-science.'" Quinn writes that "'creation-science' is, at best, not just bad science; it is dreadful science.")

While some exchanges of articles between Ruse and Laudan are printed, Ruse unfortunately decided not to respond to the final salvos of Laudan and Quinn. This leaves the reader with the impression that they are correct and that Ruse has surrendered. Yet while I think both Quinn and Laudan make excellent points against Overton's line of argument, I think their case against a "criteria for demarcation" is overstated. If, as both Quinn and Laudan admit, one can make a distinction between "good science" and "bad science," why cannot one also make a distinction between "science" and "non-science"? It seems that once "bad science" gets bad enough, there is no point in even calling it science. But perhaps, on the other hand, they simply believe that the boundaries of science and non-science are fuzzy (perhaps overlapping) ones in which every claimant to the title of "science" does not necessarily have any single characteristic in common with all other such claimants.

This seems plausible, but even such a position does not necessitate abandoning use of the term "scientific," as Laudan would have us do. Such fuzzy boundaries seem to be present in many "natural kind" terms, yet that does not make these terms any less useful. And, getting back to the question at hand, it appears to me that creationism does not satisfy any reasonable definition of "science," even allowing for fuzzy boundaries. In effect, Laudan is arguing that because not all birds fly and have wishbones, and because other creatures fly, it makes no sense to say that a dog is not a bird. I beg to differ.

July Meeting

by Ron Harvey

Around a dozen people gathered on July 7 to hear James McGaha of TuSKS (the Tucson Skeptics) speak on the topic of "Astronomy: A Skeptic's Tool", which he gave at the most recent CSICOP conference in Washington, D.C.

Mr. McGaha described his efforts over the past couple of years of using an individual's

curiosity of the sky to introduce them to the idea of science and scientific thinking. He suggested that perhaps skeptics are winning battles against nonsense, but perhaps are losing the war, a result of what could be deemed overkill or bashing. Science hasn't been doing a good job of explaining the world because, as it gets more complex, the depth of understanding needed by the average person is well beyond what they learn in schools.

Through astronomy, which can be taught on an introductory level with just a telescope and night sky, individuals can be introduced to the scientific method and critical thinking. Not only is amateur astronomy an intriguing and rewarding hobby, but it leads to understanding data that directly opposes the tenets of astrology - one the most widely accepted of pseudosciences. It also provides a grounding in information that can help in investigating UFO phenomena.

Mr. McGaha correctly noted that through teaching critical thinking we put the tools necessary for skepticism in the hands of the people. Once that is accomplished, practitioners of the pseudo-sciences will have a much harder time spreading their nonsense, and our jobs will be much easier. Astronomy is an entertaining and enlightening subject to help teach those lessons.

Editorial Prattle

It's almost August and our re-enlistment rate is something akin to only 50% of the members on our mailing list. If you have an X in the box below and do NOT send in your dues check, this will be the last issue of the Arizona Skeptic you will get. We'd love to be able to carry everyone for free, but our dues are figured to support the newsletter on a 1:1 ratio, so free issues are not really something we can do at this time.

I also want to note, if you do not send in your dues, I will be purging your address from our mailing list. As it is I have a whole bunch of addresses for preachers and New Age establishments that I might send a list of names to. (Actually getting mail from these places, when not totally chilling, is kind of fun.) Consider yourselves warned...

Once again we need articles for this fine journal. Had June not involved a lot of trips for me, and if I had actually had articles, we

might have had a June newsletter. Articles should be fairly short: 1,000 - 2,000 words. (For you non-writers, that means a text file with 5,000 - 10,000 characters or 4-8 double-spaced, typed pages with a 1 inch margin all the way around.) Anything longer than that becomes difficult to publish on our shoestring budget.

Oh, at our July meeting, three people forgot to pay their tab for lunch. One person has called me and promised to pay the Skeptics back. It's about \$5 per forgotten tab, so if you can't remember if you paid or not, talk to me in August.

The Return of Scapegoats

by
Michael A. Stackpole

Scapegoats are making a comeback. Way back when, before reason reared its ugly little head, scapegoats were a popular way of ridding yourself of curses. Assume you'd angered one or more of the gods. You find a sacrifice, conduct a ritual that strips your name from you and attaches it to the animal, and kill the animal. *Poof* Any guilt or wrong doing attached to your name or your soul would be gone with your sacrifice.

Now, in this day and age of technology and reason, scapegoats are coming back, and coming back with a vengeance. Whereas they originally could expunge guilt and sins, now they can do much more: they can also make you very rich. A law suit being resolved in Reno, Nevada points this out very clearly.

Back on December 23, 1985, two young men, James Vance (19 at the time) and his best buddy Raymond Belknap (17 years old) were

Yes, I want to renew my membership to the Phoenix Skeptics. I have checked off my class of membership below, and I have enclosed a check made out to The Phoenix Skeptics for the appropriate amount. I realize that if I don't renew my membership by June 1 I will be dropped from the mailing lists and the Phoenix Skeptics will do nothing to help me if I get kidnapped by aliens.

- Single Membership: \$12.50 a year.
- Couple Membership: \$20.00 a year.
- Philanthropist Membership: \$100.00 a year. (Well, we can hope!)

kicking back at Belknap's home. They listened to the Judas Priest album "Stained Class," trashed Belknap's room, then went to a school yard and attempted to kill themselves. Belknap managed to tuck a shotgun beneath his chin and end his life. Vance just managed to blow off the bottom of his face. He survived for three more years.

Their parents have filed suit against Judas Priest and CBS Records alleging that "subliminal messages" on "Stained Class" prompted the boys to commit such a horrible act. They and their attorney have lined up experts who claim to have located subliminals, some of which are "satanic," on one cut from the album. As far as they - and many folks who've not had an independent thought since Eisenhower left office - are concerned, heavy metal rock and roll has yet claimed two more innocent victims.

The judge in the case allowed prosecution to go forward because, in his opinion, subliminals are not protected by the First Amendment. This judgement is quite possibly correct, but the case itself will hinge upon whether or not subliminals are present on the album and, if so, what effect they could possibly have on these two boys. Said subliminal expert Wilson Bryan Key, "As far as I'm concerned, [subliminals in the songs are] just another example of corporate willingness to do anything they can to make a buck."

Before everyone starts bashing big, bad corporations, there are some other factors that need to be looked into in this case. And it should be noted here that I've never listened to, or felt inclined to listen to any Judas

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State: _____

Zip Code: _____

Phone number (optional): _____

Areas of Interest/Expertise:

Priest, so what follows should not be seen in any way as a fan defending his musical messiahs.

Both Vance and Belknap had a history of physical parental abuse. They were considered disciplinary problems at school and, in fact, dropped out after 10th grade. They drifted from job to job and were known to have used LSD, speed, cocaine, marijuana and alcohol. On the day they chose to kill themselves, though neither of them was of legal age, they consumed beer at Belknap's house and smoked pot.

It should also be pointed out that the weapon they used to kill themselves was a "sawed off shotgun." That is a weapon that is decidedly illegal to possess or manufacture. What must have been their home environment that they could find such a thing in a place handy enough to blow their brains out with it?

Without a doubt, both of these young men fit the pattern of being drug abusing loners - the sort of individuals who slide into the Center for Disease Control's teen suicide template as if it were tailored exclusively for them. The wonder is not that they committed suicide, but that no one noticed the sort of tailspin they were in before hand.

Moreover, had they been female, the chances are very good they would not have succeeded in their attempt. Teen male suicides are very good at selecting very lethal means for suicide and are 10 times more successful at it than their female counterparts.

Should someone sue God because of the victim's gender?

The question of subliminals and their effects is really a moot point. That album

undoubtedly sold hundreds of thousands of copies, yet these are the only two suicides linked to it? Trying to shift responsibility for these deaths to Judas Priest is akin to blaming the actress Jodie Foster for a lunatic's attempt to kill President Reagan. Of course the difference here is that with Judas Priest there is money to be won, money that will go to the abusive parents of these dead youths.

Scapegoats have always been popular, and probably always will be with us because they relieve us of our responsibility. If Judas Priest is found guilty, the parents are absolved of their negligent and abusive treatment of their sons. It would be a pity for that to happen, and not because it might put a damper on some other artist somewhere, sometime expressing himself artistically.

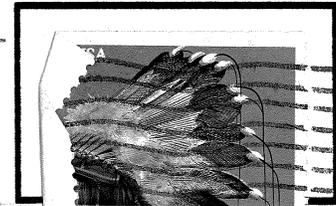
No, it would be a pity because parents everywhere who need to accept responsibility for their children can look at this decision and surrender. And then, after some tragedy that could have been prevented occurs, they will reap a reward for their irresponsibility.

Meeting Announcement

Our August Meeting will be held on Saturday, September 8 at 12:30 in the afternoon at the Jerry's Restaurant on Scottsdale/Rural Road between McKellips and the River bottom. The September program is a video presentation called "Psychic Confession." The program was put together by a journalist and psychic debunker named Dan Korem. Though the case is from the early 1980s, the presentation is valuable in pointing out both research techniques and the reasons for actually debunking New Age nonsense.

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If an X appears in this box, it's time for you to pay dues.