

# The Phoenix Skeptics News

A Bimonthly Publication of the Phoenix Skeptics

Volume 1, Issue 1

July/August 1987

## Welcome!

This is the first issue of our newsletter. We hope you enjoy reading it and find it informative. Besides "feature" articles and tidbits every issue, we expect to have book reviews and announcements of upcoming meetings and conferences.

We are interested in suggestions for a name for our newsletter. Send suggestions (along with your credentials as a newsletter-namer) to "Newsletter Name" c/o Phoenix Skeptics.

If you would like to contribute a feature article, please contact Ron Harvey at 863-0284 or Jim Lippard at 437-3778 for more information.

If you have something smaller to contribute, please drop us a postcard or give us a call.

## July Meeting

We met at 12:30pm for lunch and an "organizational meeting" on Saturday, July 25. Ted Bluestein of the Tucson Skeptics was on hand to offer organizational advice and tell some tales of work they've done in Tucson.

People were asked to let us know whether they would be interested in working on the newsletter, media relations, or investigations. We received many responses in all areas and we hope soon to be tapping these new resources.

## Resource Library

Along with the usual computer databases that go along with an organization these days, we plan to set up one that contains information on where to find information in our members' libraries. If you have books or magazines you feel would be interesting to others of us, please list them and send us the list. Information should include title, author, publisher, and date of publication. For magazines, the name of the magazine, the publisher and the dates/issues. If you could

provide a *précis* (including whether a book or magazine is Pro or Con or Balanced as to some phenomena, whether it seems to be well-researched and documented, etc.) that would be helpful as well.

## Cold Reading

By Jim Lippard

On the evening of May 27, 1987, the Amazing David Newman was a guest on a KTAR talk show. Callers were given psychic readings: Newman told them what sort of people they were, what was troubling them, and what the future held for them in their work, romantic lives, finances, and travel. Judging from the responses of the callers, Newman was quite accurate.

But after about half an hour of readings, one caller asked how readings are done. Newman's response was this: "Learning to do readings is a skill. You study it, and you learn a skill--like burglary and bank robbery." He went on to say, "My name is Bob Steiner, I am a professional magician. I am a member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. I am chair of the national Occult Committee of the Society of American Magicians, and I study this nonsense."

What Bob Steiner was doing is known as "cold reading", a method for convincing people that you know all about them. This technique is commonly used by palmists, psychics, astrologers, channelers, and fortune tellers. By using stock phrases and fishing for information, cold readers can give the impression that they are obtaining information in a paranormal manner.

The cold reader begins with the assumptions that people are more alike than different and tend to have more or less the same sorts of problems and fears. This information is built upon by careful observation of the client's appearance (such as age; style, cost, and neatness of clothing), mannerisms (grammar, accent, gestures, eye contact), and so on.

Ray Hyman (1977) reports the following case of a cold reader in action:

A young lady in her late twenties or early thirties visited a character reader. She was wearing expensive jewelry, a wedding band, and a black dress of cheap material. The observant reader noted that she was wearing shoes which were currently being advertised for people with foot trouble. ...

[The reader] assumed that this client came to see him, as did most of his female customers, because of a love or financial problem. The black dress and wedding band led him to reason that her husband had died recently. The expensive jewelry suggested that she had been financially comfortable during marriage, but the cheap dress indicated that her husband's death had left her penniless. The therapeutic shoes signified that she was now standing on her feet more than she was used to, implying that she was working to support herself since her husband's death.

From this, the reader went further to correctly deduce that the woman had met a man who had proposed marriage, but felt guilty about marrying so soon after her husband's death. The reader told her what she wanted to hear: that it was OK to go ahead and marry.

Yet even without information of that detail it is possible to perform a successful cold read. The cold reader can cover all the bases by reinterpreting statements which fail to be on target. If a statement is not accepted, the reader can claim it is about something that will happen rather than something that has already happened. An example of this is a case in which a psychic told a friend that she saw her taking a vacation in the summer, that she saw her in the mountains. When the client responded negatively, the psychic claimed that the mountain scene was simply figurative, not a literal vacation in the mountains. She could equally well (probably better, in fact) have claimed that it was either

a vacation in the past or more distant in the future.

The technique of "fishing" also is quite successful. The reader phrases statements in the form of questions, to which the subject will often supply more information than is necessary to answer. The reader can then rephrase the question as a positive statement and use the additional information later.

By familiarizing oneself with the techniques of cold reading, one can learn to recognize them when used by alleged psychics. The following articles are recommended for more detailed descriptions of cold reading, with examples:

Feder, Kenneth 1987. "The Cold Reading of Writing", The Skeptical Inquirer, 11:4 (Summer 1987), pp. 346-348.

Hyman, Ray 1977. "Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers That You Know All About Them", The Zetetic (now The Skeptical Inquirer), 1:2 (Spring/Summer 1977), pp. 18-37. Reprinted in Paranormal Borderlands of Science (1981, Prometheus Books, edited by Kendrick Frazier).

Randi, James 1979. "Cold Reading Revisited", The Skeptical Inquirer, 3:4 (Summer 1979). Reprinted in Paranormal Borderlands of Science.

Schwartz, Ronald A. 1978. "Sleight of Tongue", The Skeptical Inquirer, 3:1 (Fall 1978). Reprinted in Paranormal Borderlands of Science.

## Local Radio Talk Show Features Psychics

Since cold readers seem to be able to duplicate the feats of self-proclaimed psychic mind readers, one can practice identifying some of the techniques described in the previous article by listening carefully to psychics. There is a local talk radio program hosted by Frank Baranowski that often has psychics as guests. The show may be heard on KFYI Radio 910 AM, Saturdays 7-10pm. To talk to the guest on the program, call 258-5394.

## Modem Users Take Note

Several Phoenix-area computer bulletin boards have paranormal discussions on subboards. The Other Side is actually devoted to the paranormal. They are all 300/1200bps. So far we know of:

The Other Side	837-0062
Mistywood II	220-9363
Black Castle	843-6782

If you have access to a cheap long-distance service, you might want to check out the Skepticism SIG on Cleveland Free-Net (216 368-3888). The main contact there is Page Stevens (aa325).

## Foes turn up heat

Fire walking is not so hot, skeptics of seminars say

By Simon Fisher, Tribune Writer

A self-help guru offering personal-success seminars in Phoenix this weekend says he teaches people to believe in themselves enough that they can walk barefoot across a bed of hot coals.

But firewalking is not such a mystical experience and the record should be set straight, says a group of skeptics.

Phoenix Skeptics chairman Jim Lippard said almost anyone can walk across hot coals barefooted, and it isn't necessary to pay Anthony Robbins \$125 for an evening or \$495 for a weekend to learn how to do it.

Lippard, an Arizona State University philosophy student and founder of the fledgling, 10-member group of skeptics, said his attendance at Robbins' seminar today will be the organization's first inquiry.

Skeptics' groups worldwide investigate and attempt to find scientific explanations for such things as paranormal events, UFO sightings, and the predictions of astrologers.

Lippard says he plans to hand out copies of articles explaining the firewalking phenomena

at the seminar Friday evening at YWCA Leadership Development Center, 9440 N. 25th Ave.

"We just want to let people know, to encourage people to think critically, and to make people aware of what the scientific explanation is," Lippard said.

The Skeptics are not out to discredit Robbins, but the "mistaken interpretation" of fire walking puts the program in a questionable light, he said.

Larry Prochazka, marketing executive for Robbins Research Institute in Phoenix, which promotes the seminars, said a firewalker needs the mental control Robbins teaches through "neurolingual programming" in order to walk on fire.

"If you were to show up and say 'I could do this, I just want to try it,' you could get seriously burned," Prochazka said.

Firewalking is not the sole purpose of the program, but a "metaphor" for exercising specific skills to overcome fears of success, rejection, public speaking or whatever, he said. The goal is to instill the drive and confidence necessary to excel personally and professionally.

The seminars in Phoenix are sponsored by the Greater Phoenix Business Journal. Prochazka said Robbins has also trained staff of the U.S. Army, Hughes and AT&T in recent years.

"The whole purpose is not to teach people about fire walking," he said. "It helps them overcome the fearfulness, the nervousness that shuts off part of the brain.

"You have to organize the brain in a certain way. Most people organize it in a limiting way," said Prochazka, who said he has done the fire walk several times. "Performance depends on communication with yourself."

According to information Lippard provides--an article written by physics professor Bernard Leikind, formerly of the University of California at Los Angeles, and UCLA

psychologist William McCarthy--fire walking is possible because of the conductive nature of the coals.

The coals are poor conductors of heat, McCarthy explained in a phone interview Thursday, and the feet are not in contact long enough during the 10-foot walk to burn.

Reprinted from the Tempe (Ariz.) Daily News Tribune, 1 May 1987.

### Postscript

By Jim Lippard

That evening, several members of the Phoenix Skeptics distributed flyers which explained the physics of firewalking to the seminar attendees, much to the dismay of the Robbins Research Institute. At one point, a woman asked me for a copy of our flyer only to have it taken from her hand by a Robbins staffer. We were asked to leave, so we stepped off the property and distributed flyers to people as they drove up. Larry Prochazka of the Institute then came out and spoke to us. He invited us to return later that evening to view the firewalking itself, but would not allow us to take part. This invitation was later withdrawn, apparently at the request of someone higher up in the organization.

### Book Reviews

Sorry, no book reviews this issue. If you have read a book (new or old) that you think would be interesting to our readership, please write a review and send it to us c/o "Book Reviews".

### Local Conference on Health Fraud

The Arizona Public Health Association will be holding a conference titled The Great

Pretenders: Health Fraud in the Market Place in Ahwatukee on September 16-18. The keynote address will be by Victor Herbert, M.D., J.D. titled "Separating Health Science from Health Scams". Other speakers include James Randi; James Lowell, Ph.D., President of the Arizona Council Against Health Fraud and Tucson Skeptics member; and William Jarvis, Ph.D., President of the National Council Against Health Fraud.

Cost of the conference is \$85 for non-AzPHA members. Cost for Thursday only is \$45. A mailing with more information will be made shortly.

### Upcoming Phoenix Skeptics Meetings

Meetings are held near the end of each month at Jerry's Restaurant, 1750 N. Scottsdale Rd., Tempe. The restaurant is just south of McKellips Rd. Meetings start at 12:30pm.

August 29: Guest speaker will be Professor Hans Sebald, ASU Sociology Department. "Which Witch is Which? Historical and Contemporary Observations of Witchcraft"

September 26: Guest speaker will be Charles Cazeau, Professor Emeritus of Geology, SUNY Buffalo. "Nostradamus: Prophet or Fraud?"

Suggestions for topics or speakers for future meetings are gladly accepted. Feel free to nominate yourself!

The Phoenix Skeptics News is published bimonthly by the Phoenix Skeptics, Jim Lippard, Chairman. Editor is Ron Harvey.

The Phoenix Skeptics News is the official publication of the Phoenix Skeptics. Phoenix Skeptics is a non-profit scientific and educational organization with the following goals: 1. to subject claims of the paranormal, occult, and fringe sciences to the test of science, logic, and common sense; 2. to act as a clearinghouse for factual and scientific information about the paranormal; and 3. to promote critical thinking and the scientific method. Subscription rate is \$10 per year. All manuscripts become the property of Phoenix Skeptics, which retains the right to edit them. Address all correspondence to PS, P.O. Box 62792, Phoenix, AZ 85082-2792. CSICOP-recognized skeptic groups may reprint articles in entirety by crediting the author, The Phoenix Skeptics News, and Phoenix Skeptics. All others must receive Phoenix Skeptics' permission. Copyright © 1987 by Phoenix Skeptics.

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