

The Phoenix Skeptics News

A Bimonthly Publication of the Phoenix Skeptics

Volume 1, Issue 3

November/December 1987

October Meeting

The October meeting was a Halloween party hosted by Hans Sebald. Several people braved storm and ridicule to dress as they were (or who they'd liked to have been). The evening ended with a ceremonial debunking-of-the-feats-of-Houdini as they were performed on the tv show "The Search for Houdini".

November Meeting

The meeting started with a videotape of an address that James Randi gave at the Loma Linda University School of Medicine in 1983. The topic was psychic surgery, and ended with a demonstration.

Next, Randy Jones gave a very engrossing talk about his personal experiences with psychic surgery, and how it has affected his family (and possibly his fortune - he is being sued for \$20 million by followers of the surgeon in question).

Papers ignore disclaimer request on astrology columns

On October 12, we sent out a letter to the Features Editors of the following Valley newspapers which carry astrology columns. These are the *Arizona Republic*, the *Phoenix Gazette*, the *Scottsdale Progress*, and the *Tribune Newspapers*. In it, we requested that they carry a disclaimer advising their readers that the astrology column is for entertainment purposes only. At the same time, we sent out a press release to all local newspapers and tv and radio stations.

Response has been disappointing. We received a letter from Sharon Maher of the *Tribune* papers which stated that their readership understood the purpose of column. The letter failed to mention exactly what the purpose was.

We also received a phone call from someone at the *Gazette* who said that they would consider it. Since it has been nearly two months, we assume they've decided not to. Sam Lowe, columnist for the paper, did

mention our request in his column on November 20.

In an article in the *State Press*, the student newspaper of Arizona State University, it was reported that the *Arizona Republic* will not carry the disclaimer.

No response has come from the *Progress*.

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal reported recently that three more US newspapers were added to the fourteen that already carry disclaimers. The new papers are the *Honolulu Advertiser*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and the *Battle Creek Enquirer*. They also announced that they have launched a similar campaign in Canada aimed at 107 major papers.

Flyers needed

In order to increase the general level of doubt and uncertainty in the Universe, we've prepared a few flyers on paranormal topics. So far, we have flyers on Iridology, Firewalking, and Reflexology and Zone Therapy. We need more.

The idea is to have a one page (single- or double-sided) flyer that is easy to read and comprehend, full of facts, with references and suggestions for further reading. Each flyer should cover one topic (for example, crystals, UFOs, or pyramid power).

Psychic fair

A "Psychic Sampler" was held October 31 and November 1 at a Valley nightclub. Present were many astrologers, tarot card readers, clairvoyants, space beings, crystal power people and others of that ilk. There were even some local magicians there giving readings along with the rest. Michael El-Legion, Scottsdale resident from outer space, was there giving readings. It seemed that everyone drawn to his booth for a reading was from outer space as well, but didn't know this until told by El-Legion. A few dozen exhibitors were there. Lectures and demonstrations on spoon bending, hypnosis,

crystal power, UFOs, among others, went on throughout the weekend.

Unfortunately, we were not prepared for this event. Fortunately, Sam Lowe of the *Phoenix Gazette* wrote an article on October 28 that criticized the fair.

Focus on You

by Jim Lippard

At the Phoenix Civic Plaza on December 4-6, a "Phoenix Self-Discovery Expo" was held. This event, called "Focus on You", attracted New Age exhibitors and lecturers from around the country. Among those present to promote their paranormal and pseudoscientific ideas were Peggy Dylan Burkan (a firewalker), Terry Cole-Whittaker, Frances Pascal Steiger, Greg Neilson (dowser), Norman Fritz, Jonathan Chris (astrologer/psychic), Desi Arnaz Jr., Bernard Jensen (iridologist), Frank Baranowski (hypnotist and paranormal talk show host for KFYI), Jach Pursel (channeller of "Lazaris"), and many others.

Unlike for the "Psychic Sampler", we obtained sufficient advance notice of the Expo to take some action. Although our press conference on December 3 was sparsely attended (to say the least), we did get our point of view mentioned on television, on radio, and in the newspapers with some help from the Tucson Skeptical Society (TUSKS). On Saturday morning, an article by Phyllis Gillespie headlined "Expo offers help to cure what ails you: Vendors quacks, products fraudulent, critics contend" appeared in the *Arizona Republic*. It contained quotes from Kathy Smith of the Phoenix Skeptics and Jim Lowell of the National Council Against Health Fraud (and TUSKS). On Saturday afternoon, Jim Lowell and I appeared on Victoria Jones' talk show on KFYI along with nutripath Gary Martin and channeller Lise Hautzinger. The call-in response to the show was so great that Lowell and I stayed an extra hour beyond the two hours scheduled. On Saturday evening, the 10 o'clock news of both KTVK (Channel 3) and KTSP (Channel 10) covered the Expo. I was interviewed by KTVK and James McGaha of TUSKS was interviewed by KTSP (both interviews were conducted at the Expo, much to the dismay of many attendees).

Attendance of the Expo itself by members of the Phoenix Skeptics and TUSKS provided a great deal of literature from various promoters of the paranormal. Future similar expos are planned for Colorado and Southern California. We will be contacting skeptical groups there to pass on some of our information.

Channeling: Believe it or not

By Hans Sebald, Ph.D.

Professor of Sociology, ASU

How does a skeptic probe the verity, hoax or self-deception of a channeller? With this question in mind I attended an interview with the medium Jeannine Caloni who visited the Valley in Nov. 1987 to star in a psychic jamboree. And this still is the question after I listened and observed for nearly two hours. Perhaps it is impossible to test a medium's real, pretended, or honestly imagined channeling.

Anyway, with skepticism about a skeptic's success at achieving a definite answer, I joined Kieran Richardson, reporting for the *Arizona Republic*, to interview Jeannine Caloni from St. Louis, Missouri. Kieran did most of the talking and questioning. I mostly listened.

Mrs. Caloni is channeling two spirits, St. Thomas, the "skeptical Apostle", and Ezekiel. The medium mentioned that there is a virtual waiting line of additional spirits who would like to use her body as a channel. Caloni, however, decided to surrender her body to only the above-named spirits. While her body is temporarily transmuted into a reincarnation of the spirits, her own spirit leaves her body and, as she puts it, "stands beside her body looking on". This means, while the spirit is occupying her, she experiences an out-of-body existence. Apparently two spirits are too big a crowd for one body.

Caloni is a relatively new arrival on the channeling market. She discovered her "gift" when another medium she had called to her Missouri home to help exorcize spirits haunting the house (all of the houses she has ever lived in have been haunted) recognized a most elaborate "crown halo" around Caloni's head—a sign of extraordinary psychic abilities. I am not certain whether the

bothersome poltergeists were ever banned, but in any case Caloni's career as a medium soared henceforth. Ultimately she "went public", i.e., entered the business of psychic readings, made her name in the psychic circles, and apparently acquired a wide clientele who are mostly interested in getting in touch with deceased relatives. To establish the spirit connection, Caloni has to call the name of the deceased long enough for the spirit to hear and respond. Before the spirit is accepted as the right one, "confirmation" is needed, i.e. Caloni asks the client about various and sundry characteristics of the deceased so that she can "verify" the identity of the responding spirit. This, she feels, is necessary, because sometimes a prankster spirit will respond to try to confuse the medium. Moreover, it is possible that a number of spirits lived under the same name—think, for example, so she reminded us, of the many Smiths that have lived and are living. Sometimes she has to go through a dozen or more spirits to arrive at the correct one. Names like Smith and Jones can be very confusing to the spirit world. Once the "confirmation" is completed and the client has described the deceased sufficiently, Caloni begins to surrender her faculties to the spirit. She reports that dramatic scenes often develop: the client more often than not will break out in tears of joy (or sorrow) when conversing with a dear departed.

Kieran and I tried to be tactful about the issue of remuneration for the readings. In response to our timid inquiry in that direction, we were told that monies earned through psychic activity are given away to needy people, *must* be given away lest the spirits abandon the medium. Jeannine and husband Frank (who was present throughout the interview) assured me of their magnanimity by once in a while giving two or five dollars to "starving bums on the street".

I was just about to inquire about her family background and how her (very Catholic) family accepted her psychic activities, when Frank warned me that Jeannine was momentarily going into a trance. Ezekiel was announcing himself. (Incidentally, this Ezekiel was not the prophet of the Old Testament, but a nomadic

shepherd who lived 2,000 years ago in the Sinai desert.)

Caloni's face hardened into a masculine visage and her voice sounded guttural as Ezekiel began to speak out of her body. His first utterance was: "Where am I". Frank's information that he was being channeled in Arizona seemed perfectly plausible to the spirit. I wondered how a 2,000-year-old nomad from the Middle East could make sense of that information, since at that time New World geography was unknown to his people. After making small talk with Kieran, Ezekiel turned to me and volunteered a formidable prophecy. Apparently this is the type of service that spirits think people expect of them. He predicted that during the next two to three months I would make a trip to the east and in the process forget a certain item, unless I would first go to a store and purchase it. No specification was made as to distance of the trip, hence it could include a hike into the Superstition Mountains on the east side of my house. The more baffling aspect, however, was that the forecast is unfalsifiable, since I might forget something or buy the would-be-forgotten article. Then Ezekiel waxed clairvoyant and inquired about the welfare of my toe. After my puzzled assurance that all of them were in good health, he dropped the subject. I couldn't help thinking that someone must have observed my limping walk earlier when I entered the room. I had strained my knee a few days earlier. Ezekiel continued to ruminate and remarked that he finds me exceptionally quiet, but that he "knows" that underneath there is an active, actually overactive, mind. This seemed to worry him, because he suggested that I go on a regimen of Vitamin B₁₂ to calm down. Again I found it astounding that an illiterate nomad of 2,000 years ago would know about vitamins, a relatively recent bio-chemical discovery. What astounded me most, however, was the fact that the old nomad spoke modern American English perfectly—if we charitably disregard grammatical quirks and dictional limitations, which smacked of Missouri countryside.

Finally, Ezekiel announced his departure and Jeannine's spirit reentered her vacated body. She relaxed, regained her normal voice, continued to chain-smoke (something

Ezekiel abhors), and amiably expected us to be impressed. Also, had we any further questions? Not really. By then I fully understood the difficulty of determining verity, hoax, or innocuous self-deception of a medium. It becomes an issue of believing or disbelieving. To some of us it may also become an issue of absurdity.

In any case, I shall make a careful shopping list before going on a trip in an easterly direction.

Book Review

The Faith Healers by James Randi
1987, Prometheus Books, 314pp.
\$18.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Jim Lippard

James Randi's new book, "The Faith Healers", has just been published by Prometheus Books. I received my copy in the mail on Oct. 21 and read it that night (more or less at a single sitting—it is quite engrossing). It is a fascinating book, and also a disturbing one.

Following a brief introduction by Carl Sagan, Randi begins by describing the origins of faith healing from the New Testament ("Gifts of the Spirit" in 1 Corinthians 12; also see Mark 16:18 which Randi does not mention, probably due to its doubtful authenticity), through the Middle Ages, to Lourdes in the 19th and 20th century.

The book then describes the financial status of the faith healers. Randi tells of Peter Popoff taking limousine rides (with on-board champagne) to Los Angeles to have \$200 dinners with his wife. W.V. Grant's wife spending \$20,000 in one day on oriental rugs, \$25,000 on a single painting. Leroy Jenkins reporting a robbery of \$900 in pocket cash and a \$4,000 wristwatch.

Just as offensive are descriptions of trickery used by the faith healers. Before a show, W.V. Grant would ask people with canes to sit in wheelchairs he provided, then "heal" these same people and have them walk or run. Grant, Popoff, and others would have staff members obtain information from people in the audience (name, address, ailment, doctor's name, etc.) and then claim to be using the "Word of Knowledge" to "call out" these people for healing. Grant, Popoff,

Amazing Grace, and others have used this "Word of Knowledge" (allegedly God speaking directly to them) to "heal" members of Randi's investigative team of nonexistent ailments—calling them out by their pseudonyms.

The book covers the mail operations of the faith healers, medical and legal aspects of faith healing, and detailed accounts of the ministries of A.A. Allen, Leroy Jenkins, W.V. Grant, Peter Popoff, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Willard Fuller, Amazing Grace, Father Ralph DiOrio, and "the lesser lights".

Parts of the book are quite amusing, such as Pat Robertson's desire to videotape the Second Coming of Jesus (pp. 204-205). Other parts will make you angry—as in the many cases where the faith healers have encouraged ill people to throw away their medicine, resulting in their deaths.

Yet even with the evidence Randi has collected showing outright fraud in many cases, legal authorities are hesitant to take action. Their fear of violating the First Amendment's freedom of religion clause lets the faith healers get away with murder.

On the distinction between nonbelief and disbelief

by Hans Sebald, Ph.D.

The editorial in the current issue of *The Zetetic Scholar* (a cousin [of the kissing kind?] of the *Skeptical Inquirer*) ruminated on the distinction between dis- and nonbelief. The distinction was drawn so stringently that any statement of disbelief—denying the reality-basis of a claim and its believability altogether—called upon the disbeliever to prove the reality-basis of his or her disbelief, that is, actually to prove that the disbelieved phenomenon does not exist. On the other hand, nonbelief presumably assumes a somewhat agnostic point of view, a noncommittal attitude, merely expecting that the claim made will first have to be proven a fact and reality.

Though I respect the opinion and the writings of Marcello Truzzi, the editor of *The Zetetic Scholar*—after all, we both are skeptics and battle irrational and bigoted belief systems—I differ from him on the way he distinguishes between the responsibility that ensues from the disbelieving stance.

Certain claims or assumptions made about the nature of life and the universe are absurd. The word absurd means that a statement or assumption is "So clearly untrue or unreasonable as to be laughable or ridiculous" (Webster's). For example, an assertion that the center of the Earth consists of one gigantic patriotic apple pie is simply unacceptable to me, even as an hypothesis—regardless of whether or not I can *prove* its nonexistence. According to an overdrawn definition of disbelief I would *have to prove* my claim of nonexistence.

I think there are limits to which disbelievers may be held responsible to actually prove that certain claims have no basis. I do not consider a statement of disbelief as an article of faith that has to be defended when absurdity strikes.

In my view, I draw the line between disbelief and nonbelief according to the plausibility or absurdity of the claim. In spite of my inability to prove that the inner core of the Earth is *not* made up of apple pie (so far spared discovery by pie-witching dowzers), I do not have to prove it, because the claim is absurd. Admittedly, this is a facetious example, but it makes the point. And it is not more preposterous than the belief by certain fundamentalist Christians, who take the Bible to contain the literal story of the Creation. While a God-inspired Creation story [in terms comprehensible to the people of that era] is plausible, the literal 6-day Creation is absurd knowing what we know now. One could argue that the fundamentalist absurdity is greater than the apple-pie worshiper's. While apple-pie corers at least talk about a center that actually exists, fundamentalists talk about things that are verifiably incorrect. Both claims—apple-pie core as well as 6-day Creation—are absurd, because whatever reliable and empirical information we have about the nature of life and the universe abrogates the believability of them. The Bible is more realistically understood in the historical context that created its ideas and metaphors.

On the other hand, if someone asserts that clairvoyance works quite well under certain conditions, I would be an interested nonbeliever asking for demonstration and verification.

My point is a simple one, let's not enshrine the sanctity of nonbelief in absurd temples. I think there is absolutely nothing narrow-minded or dogmatic about disbelieving when it comes to claims characterized by such ill logic and absurdity that a *nonbelieving* stance would constitute a sham, a fake, and an absurdity in itself.

I am affirming, however, the virtue and advisability of nonbelief when we confront claims about observations and anomalies which deserve further clarification and explanation. The point is that a disbeliever should *a priori* neither be judged as closed-minded nor held responsible to bring proof for the denial of the reality-basis of absurdities.

I see nothing wrong in a strong dose of disbelief for a wide range of absurdities which our cultural heritage has imposed on us.

Book Review

The Psychology of Transcendence by Andrew Neher

1980, Prentice-Hall, 361 pp.

Reviewed by Jim Lippard

What is the cause of belief in paranormal phenomena? In many cases, people have subjective experiences which they are unable to explain by normal means, so they resort to a paranormal explanation. While we as skeptics tend to discount such explanations, this does not mean that the experiences do not occur. Important discoveries of legitimate science have come from investigation of the paranormal—hypnosis from Mesmer's "animal magnetism", for example.

Andrew Neher's *The Psychology of Transcendence* is an examination of "transcendental experiences" of all sorts—out-of-body experiences, ESP, magic, water witching, prophecy, and so on. He takes a "middle course between the believers and the debunkers", adopting "the believers' interest without adopting their blind faith" and "the debunkers' questioning attitude without adopting their cynicism" (p. 6).

I think he succeeds admirably. He begins by examining physiological effects which are not common knowledge which can produce effects which are characterized as "transcendental"—yet are not paranormal. He

describes "floaters" and blood cells in the eye which cast shadows on the retina and how to train yourself to see them. He mentions that he "once knew a psychic study group who thought, when they saw such displays, that they had successfully trained themselves to perceive the movements of molecules in the air!" (p. 12). Other such effects include phosphenes (images on the retina which arise due to pressure on the eyeball), afterimages, autokinetic effects (unconscious movements of the eye which make solitary and stationary objects against a solid background appear to move), and neural habituation and inhibition (unchanging stimuli in the environment are "filtered out").

Neher then discusses conditioning effects: meditation, creative imagery, classical and operant conditioning, hypnosis, contagious behavior, placebo effects, biofeedback, unconscious behavior, and multiple personalities. This is followed with an analysis of the cultural context of transcendental experiences.

But this is all just background material. He then jumps into the transcendental experience itself—what it is, under what conditions it tends to occur, and what its effects are. He covers "mystical experiences", "psychic experiences", and "occult experiences" with numerous examples. Among specific topics discussed are ESP, psychokinesis, psychic healing, fakirs (including how to walk on broken glass), seeing auras, possession, astrology, numerology, I Ching, Tarot cards, Atlantis, the Bermuda Triangle, and UFOs.

Throughout the book, Neher provides exercises on how to experience "transcendental" effects yourself. The book is well documented (757 sources in the bibliography, a great number of which are skeptical). Neher concludes that none of the phenomena he describes require a paranormal explanation, though he points out that several studies in precognition (most notably those

by Helmut Schmidt) may ultimately require such explanation. The book is quite enjoyable and would probably serve as a good introduction to skepticism for non-skeptic. It covers such a wide range of topics that even a knowledgeable skeptic has much to gain from reading it.

Unfortunately, the book is out of print. I am presently trying to find a used copy to purchase for future reference, any pointers would be appreciated. The book is available at the ASU library and probably at the Phoenix Public Library.

Editor's Ramblings

We are still interested in contributions from our members. Book reviews, articles, cartoons or whatever are welcomed. Send them to us at our address, or call Ron Harvey at 863-0284.

As of the beginning of February, the phone number for the Phoenix Skeptics will no longer be 437-3778. It will be 943-2723. Our mailing address will continue to be Phoenix Skeptics, P.O. Box 62792, Phoenix, AZ 85082-2792.

Upcoming Meetings

Our meetings are normally held on a Saturday near the end of the month. Meetings start at 12:30pm and are held at the Jerry's restaurant at 1750 N. Scottsdale Rd in Tempe (south of McKellips).

December 19. Normal meeting time and place. Guest speaker will be Jim Speiser, local UFOlogist. He is also the administrator of Paranet, a local computer bulletin board system that deals with the paranormal.

January 30. Normal meeting time and place. Speaker and topic unknown at press time.

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

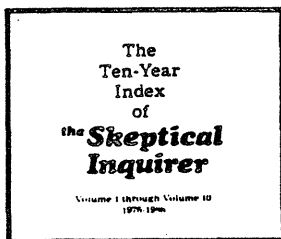
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The want ads
The want ads

Surveyor Needed

We are planning to do an experiment on dowsing and need the services of a surveyor (and equipment). If you know of anyone willing to volunteer to help us, please contact Michael Norton. Mr. Norton may be reached at 437-3778 or through the mail c/o Phoenix Skeptics. He is also interested in hearing from people interesting in helping with other areas of the project.

Wanted!

I would appreciate receiving information concerning the phenomenon called "hypnagogic" imagery or dreams. It deals with the dreams that sometimes (perfectly normal) persons experience while they are in-between the state of being asleep and awake, a state close to what is also called reverie. Presumably, if the dreamer's eyes are open during the dream, the brain's control centers monitor the imagery as empirical reality, often so convincingly that the person confuses dream with reality.

I am interested in knowing about pertinent literature, case studies, and personal reports.

Hans Sebald
Dept. of Sociology, ASU
965-3768

Wanted!

Contractual Obligation Ad

The *Skeptical Inquirer* is the organ of CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Published 4 times a year, each issue contains results of investigations, opinions, news bits, and much well-research information on the paranormal.

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