



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

The grim reaper

Death struck four times recently among notables in the skeptical community.

John Mack

First, Harvard professor John Mack, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and noted advocate for the case of alien abductions, has been killed in an automobile accident in London.

The Boston Globe reported:

According to Will Bueche, of the John E. Mack Institute in Cambridge, Dr. Mack had been attending a conference in England on T.E. Lawrence. Lawrence is the subject of his psychoanalytic account, "A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence," which won the 1977 Pulitzer Prize for biography. Dr. Mack was struck by a car while crossing the street. London police pronounced him dead on the scene.

The Globe also noted:

In 1990, Dr. Mack began his research on people who say they have encountered extraterrestrials. He held that such encounters were real, though probably more spiritual than physical in character. His work drew widespread attention in 1994 with the publication of a best-selling book, "Abduction."

That year, Harvard Medical School appointed a special faculty committee to review Dr. Mack's clinical care and clinical investigation of his subjects. After a 15-month process, the committee declined to take any action against him.

Dr. Mack eventually interviewed some 200 individuals who said they had encounters with extraterrestrials. Although he was subjected to widespread ridicule because of his work, Dr. Mack saw it as a unique opportunity to study spiritual or transformational experience, a theme that ran through much of his earlier work.

"No one has been able to come up with a counter-formulation that explains what's going on," Dr. Mack said in a 1992 *Globe* interview in which he discussed his view of alien encounters. "But if people can't be convinced that this

EVENTS CALENDAR

November Program

The Secrets of Map Dowsing

Saturday, 13 November 2004, at 2 p.m., Center for Community Cooperation, 2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas (corner of Live Oak Street and Liberty Street)

Everybody knows how hard it is to find water or lost objects using only a simple twig or piece of bent wire. Map dowsers go one better. They locate water and lost or buried objects by applying the same process to map or a simple drawing of the region in question.

At the November meeting we will explain how this bizarre process works or does not work. We will also recount the results of our test involving a map dowser.

NTS Social Dinner and Board Meeting

Saturday, 27 November at 7 p.m.— Good Eats Grill
(214) 691-3287

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 on topics of current interest or social events.

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is real, that's OK. All I want is for people to be convinced that
 there's something going on here that is not explainable."

He published another book on the subject, "Cosmos: Human
 Transformation and Alien Encounters," in 1999.

John Mack was 74.

The following URL links to the news source:

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2004/09/29/pulitzer_winner_is_killed_in_accident/

Joyce Jillson

This famous target of skeptical taunts has died of kidney disease at
 the age of 58.

Jillson became famous as the astrologer for the Reagan's while Mr.
 Reagan was president of the United States.

The Los Angeles Times reported:

Jillson earned worldwide publicity in May 1988 when she said
 that the Reagans regularly consulted astrologers and said she vis-
 ited the White House after the assassination attempt on the presi-
 dent in 1981. She also said she made charts that determined
 George Bush was the best choice for Reagan's running mate in
 1980.

At the time, the first lady's spokeswoman acknowledged that
 Nancy Reagan often consulted "a friend that does astrology" in
 Los Angeles to seek reassurance of her husband's safety. But the
 White House denied that the president and his wife consulted or
 even knew Jillson. Then-White House spokesman Marlin
 Fitzwater dismissed her as a publicity seeker.

Jillson claimed among her corporate clients 20th Century Fox,
 Ford Motor Co. and the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Her astrology column has appeared in *The Times* since the death
 of horoscope icon Sydney Omarr in January 2003. The feature
 originally was syndicated by the Chicago Tribune — which, like
 The Times, is owned by Tribune Co. — but it is currently han-
 dled by Creators Syndicate.

Little mentioned in the uproar over her role as astrologer of the stars
 has been her career as an actress on Broadway and in the movies.

The NTS and noted skeptic James Randi have long held Jillson's as-
 trological readings and predictions up to ridicule, a position from which
 we do not retreat.

The following URL links to the news source:

<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/california/la-me-jillson6oct06,1,7757812.story>

Jacques Benveniste

HOMEOPATHIC E-MAIL: LOOKS LIKE THE TEST WILL BE DELAYED AGAIN.

<http://www.aps.org/WN/WN04/wn101504.cfm>

Jacques Benveniste, 69, died last week after a heart operation. The French biologist claimed in 1988 that biological effects of a dissolved substance persist, even after the dilution limit is exceeded. A decade later he discovered that infinitely dilute solutions emit an electronic signature that can be captured by a coil, digitized, and transmitted over the internet to transfer homeopathic properties to flasks of water anywhere in the world. I challenged him to a simple international double-blind test in which he would be asked to identify which of several flasks had been activated. The challenge was carried in a Time magazine article by Leon Jaroff (Time, 17 May '99). I met with Benveniste that June. A pleasant man, he agreed to everything, but said he needed time to get ready (<http://www.aps.org/WN/WN99/wn051499.cfm>).

Weeks became months. Years passed, trees fell, but to the end Jacques Benveniste needed more time. We all do.

UFO Figure Dies [Betty Hill]

Betty Hill, who in 1961 claimed she and her husband Barney were abducted by UFO extraterrestrials, has died from lung cancer at the age of 85.

The Boston Globe reports

They gained international notoriety, traveled across the country and made numerous television and radio appearances telling their story, which was retold in the book "Interrupted Journey" and a television movie.

After returning home from their trip, the Hills were puzzled by Betty's torn and stained dress, Barney's scuffed shoes, shiny spots on their car, stopped watches, a broken binocular strap and no memory of two hours of the drive.

Under hypnosis three years later, they recounted being kidnapped and examined by aliens.

She retired from lecturing about UFOs in her 70s and complained that the quest for knowledge about extraterrestrials had become tainted with commercialism.

Later in life she seemed to become disenchanted with where the UFO community was headed.

"In the beginning, people were looking for information," she said. "Now, it certainly has turned commercial."

She also said media had fueled UFO fiction.

"The media presented them as huge craft, all brightly lighted and flashing, but they are not," she said. "They are small, with dim lights, and many times they fly with no lights."

Hill had gone a bit commercial herself, trying to fight UFO fantasies with a 1995 self-published book, "A Common Sense Approach to UFOs."

The following URL links to the news source:

http://www.boston.com/news/local/new_hampshire/articles/2004/10/18/ufo_figure_dies/



The Privileged Planet

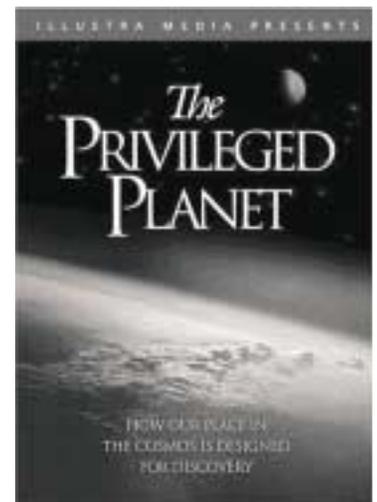
by John Blanton

If you think Texas is Heaven on Earth, think larger. Apparently Earth is Heaven on Earth as well.

A new video from the Discovery Institute comes to us by way of Illustra Media, and it seeks to remind us how fortunate we are. Not just for living in Texas, but for being born on the planet Earth. Aliens, eat your hearts out, both of them.

By now, we are quite familiar with the Discovery Institute (DI). Its Center for Science and Culture is a think tank for the new creationism called Intelligent Design. Illustra Media, you will recall, is the production company that a few years back gave us another creationist video, *Unlocking the Mystery of Life*.

The Privileged Planet, as the title suggests, wants to make the case that not only are we lucky to have been born on this planet, but Earth is lucky to be here at all. It doesn't take long



for the narration to get around to reminding us that this was not all just dumb luck. Broad hints at a guiding hand are dropped everywhere.

Wilston Nkangoh is the president of the Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) Club on the University of Texas at Dallas campus, and he was kind enough to invite me to a showing of the video at their October meeting. Although IDEA clubs are promoted through the DI at campuses across the country, Wilston does not receive financial support, and he purchased his own copy of the DVD.

A companion book of the same title is by Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Wesley Richards, who also appear in the video. Dennis Danielson also appears in the video and has given the book a resounding endorsement:

"Impressively researched and lucidly written, *The Privileged Planet* will surely rattle if not finally dislodge a pet assumption held by many interpreters of modern science: the so-called Copernican Principle (which isn't actually very Copernican!). But Gonzalez and Richards' argument, though controversial, is so carefully and moderately presented that any reasonable critique of it must itself address the astonishing evidence which has for so long somehow escaped our notice. I therefore expect this book to renew—and to raise to a new level—the whole scientific and philosophic debate about earth's cosmic significance. It is a high class piece of work that deserves the widest possible audience."

This is impressive, considering Danielson is a professor of English at the University of British Columbia. He is also editor of *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking*.

Gonzalez and Richardson are with DI and are featured prominently in the video. Although a number of other notables weigh in, it's Gonzalez and Richardson who do all the heavy lifting.

It is hard to argue with the major points these creationist make here. Who would deny, for example, that if the sun were hotter, if the Earth were not the right distance from the sun, and if water weren't wet, life in Texas would not be as we know it today. The video gives a list of these critical factors with a probability of 0.10 for each, and it is clearly demonstrated that when you multiply them all together our odds of being here are vanishingly small. You stand a better chance of finding a winning lottery ticket stuck under your windshield wiper.

I only had a chance to watch the video through one time, but I came away with the impression that Gonzalez and Richardson ran out of good ideas half way through and began to cast about

for material to fill the rest of the time. Some of the later arguments could best have been left on the cutting room floor.

For example, the authors assert that things seem to have been engineered just right so our great thinkers and scientists would be set up to succeed. If Earth's atmospheric characteristics were different, they say, we would have had a hard time seeing the stars, and I guess the science of astronomy would have been replaced by the science of peering into the murk. What the astrologers would have done for a living is anybody's guess.

If we were not in such an opportune location within our own galaxy, it would have been a lot harder to figure out the Milky Way's exact shape. Again, I am only guessing, but there would likely have been a Nobel Prize for solving that puzzle.

All those points aside, a key issue discussed is *fine tuning*. Again, few would doubt that if the constants of nature, those eight and nine-digit numbers we all learned to memorize for the strength of gravity and the mass of the electron, were just a little off, the Universe would be a whole new ball game, and you would not be reading this newsletter. Paul Davies is a real scientist and not associated with DI. He has written a number of books on the mysteries of the Universe, including *The Forces of Nature*. In the video he explains the delicate balance of these forces. There is no denying: Either these supposedly independent factors are all tied together somewhere off where we can't see just yet, or we have indeed won the grand jackpot.

My guess is it is some of both. First of all, underlying tie-ins are the history of scientific discovery. Aside from that, it seems a bit self centered to believe a world unsuited for humans would be a tragedy of the first magnitude. It would appear the creationists are attempting to use their point to make their point. Nice try, though. □

Notes:

1. You can purchase the books and videos mentioned in this article from Amazon.com by linking through the NTS Web site. Just go to www.ntskeptics.org and use the search feature to find the title and the Amazon link. This story will carry the links when it is posted on the Web at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2004/2004november/november2004.htm#planet>.
2. We have previously discussed the UT Dallas IDEA Club in the April 2004 issue of this newsletter. A copy of that issue is available on the NTS Web site.

Web news

The World Wide Web is a wonder source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

Man on Quest for Knife-Proof Body Bleeds to Death

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-08-25.htm#knife>

<http://www.reuters.co.uk/newsPackageArticle.jhtml?type=topNews&storyID=570495§ion=news>

Aug 24, 8:08 AM (ET)

A man suspected of robbery in the Kasulu district of Tanzania went to a witch doctor to obtain resistance against knife and bullet wounds. Ritual wounds inflicted on his body by the witch doctor proved fatal. The phony doctor fled, and the dead man's three partners in robbery were arrested after they sought treatment at a hospital.

God's Number Is Up

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-08-25.htm#god>

<http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=000E350F-2F66-10CF-AD3D83414B7F0000&chanID=sa008>

Among a heap of books claiming that science proves God's existence emerges one that computes a probability of 67 percent.

By Michael Shermer

Naked faith is what religious enterprise was always about, until science became the preeminent system of natural verisimilitude, tempting the faithful to employ its wares in the practice of preternatural belief. Although most efforts in this genre offer little more than scientific cant and religious blather, a few require a response from the magisterium of science, if for no other reason than to protect that of religion; if faith is tethered to science, what happens when the science changes? One of the most innovative works in this genre is *The Probability of God* (Crown Forum, 2003), by Stephen D. Unwin, a risk management consultant in Ohio, whose early physics work on quantum gravity showed him that the universe is probabilistic and whose later research in risk analysis led him to this ultimate computation.

Rumors Put Through Mill

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-08-25.htm#snopes>

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-snopes22aug22,1,1649916.story?coll=la-headlines-california>

August 22, 2004

Agoura Couple's Website Seeks to Separate Fact From Fiction

By Amanda Covarrubias, Times Staff Writer

Snopes.com is a well known site to skeptics on the Web, because David Mikkelson has been a correspondent on the Skeptics List for years.

With about 150,000 visitors per day, snopes.com has for many Web surfers become an authority not only on urban legends and folklore but on more topical matters, including politics and current affairs. Even journalists have been known to quote the site.

Dave and Barbara Mikkelson sink between \$2000 and \$3000 a month keeping the site going and try to make it back on advertising.

Skeptics know they can turn to snopes.com to settle just about any urban legend dispute. Say, isn't this how the *Guinness Book of World Records* got started?

Narconon Banned From San Francisco Schools

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-09-01.htm#narconon>

http://alcoholism.about.com/b/a/2004_08_30.htm

August 30, 2004

According to their Web site at <http://www.narconon.org/>: "Narconon is a non-profit drug rehab program dedicated to eliminating drug abuse and drug addiction through drug prevention, education and rehabilitation."

School health officials in San Francisco, however, have banned the program from their classrooms due to its ties with the Church of Scientology. This is the fifth school district to ban Narconon.

Four other districts in California, including Los Angeles, have abandoned the program after finding it incorporates indoctrination in Scientology.

Superintendent Arlene Ackerman determined the Narconon teachings are not accurate, and she "has requested an outside scientific appraisal of the program."

Thirty-four other California school districts have used Narconon, and State School Superintendent Jack O'Connell has ordered an evaluation of the program. This evaluation is due to be available in October.

Superintendent Ackerman picked up on a report in *The San Francisco Chronicle* that revealed Narconon lectures taught the scientifically unfounded belief "that drug residues remain indefinitely in body fat and cause recurring flashbacks and drug cravings..."

Creationist article stirs debate

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-09-01.htm#debate>

<http://washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20040830-034540-7743r.htm>

A paper by creationist Stephen Meyer, published in the scientific journal *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* has touched off a storm of debate.

The National Center for Science Education reports "But Meyer's "The origin of biological information and the higher taxonomic categories" is a review article (as opposed to a research article) arguing, in usual "intelligent design" fashion, against the sufficiency of evolutionary processes to account for life's history and diversity. The article is available on the Discovery Institute's web site..."

[<http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=2177>]

The small journal, , published in its June issue a paper scientists say erroneously critiques the theory of evolution. The paper was authored by Stephen Meyer, project director of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, a proponent of "intelligent design" based in Seattle.

The Oakland, Calif.,-based National Center for Science Education, a staunch defender of the teaching of evolution in schools, said it "has already heard from a number of members of the Biological Society of Washington ... who are concerned about the reputation of the society and its journal after the publication of such a piece of substandard work in the apparent service of a non-scientific ideology."

Ghost hunters reach a higher plane with the help of technology

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-11-02.htm#ghost>

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/fea/texasliving/stories/103004dnlivhaunts.cad7f.html>

Who you gonna call? Not the NTS, apparently.

Friday, October 29, 2004

Aline McKenzie of *The Dallas Morning News* phoned us up and asked our advice on ghost hunters. She was doing a story and wanted to know about some of the ghost hunters' tools of the trade.

As luck would have it, we have recent experience in that department, having earlier this year participated in the taping of an episode of *The Mystery Hunters* (Discovery Channel). The story had to do with the use of thermal imaging systems by ghost hunters, and Prasad Golla and I had a chance to analyze some of the imagery they produced for the show.

Prasad and I talked to McKenzie early in October and filled her ear with our latest and best advice, including the fact there is no such things as ghosts, and so-called ghost hunters are at best just playing with themselves and having a good time at it. We may as well have been talking to a ghost. She wrote:

The spirit world has gone high-tech.

So if you want to be a ghost hunter, it's easier than it's ever been – an array of electronic gadgets will get you in on the ground floor of the astral plane.

"I have a lot of toys here," says Joel-Anthony Gray, director of the Society for Paranormal Investigation in Dallas, a semiprofessional group dedicated to studying spirits.

There's the Geiger counter, the tape recorder, the laptop computer, the motion detector.

And don't forget the cameras (still and video).

"The theory is they borrow energy or project energy," says Jackie LaRocca, the group's assistant director, who has just moved to Washington. That can mean light, heat, sound or radiation.

Nary a hint that ghosts don't exist. However, *The News* writer was able to obtain a lot of valuable information from Joel-Anthony Gray, "director of the Society for Paranormal Investigation in Dallas [SPI], a semiprofessional group dedicated to studying spirits."

"I have a lot of toys here," Gray said, and he provided serious and amateur practitioners some sound advice.

You can spend thousands of dollars on equipment, and head out for hours and hours of recording dust specks in the flash of your camera, breezes on your motion detector and other unspiritual phenomena.

"That's not hundreds of ghosts congregating around you," says Mr. Gray, 35, a computer consultant who lives in Dallas.

An electromagnetic field detector can pick up readings from fluorescent lights, circuit breakers, aquariums or just about anything that runs on electricity.

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004.
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It's not as though McKenzie didn't thoroughly research the topic. She also talked to Kira Connally of Mystic Ghost (www.mysticghost.com), Billy York of North Texas Paranormal Investigation and Research Studies, and even Fran Baskerville, the famous singing psychic of Dallas.

Joel-Anthony Gray of SPI summed it up for us:

"Some people are perfectly happy and comfortable with their ghost, and they want to show it off," he says. "I'm perfectly serious. They say, 'This is part of our family. We call him Bob.'"

Others may want the ghost to go. That power is within their reach, Mr. Gray says. All it may take is to firmly tell the spirit that it's not welcome and that it should leave.

"In most cases, it's not something very malicious and dangerous, and we tell them so," Mr. Gray says.

He says the measure of the group's success is that people who have called on them say that they're glad they did.

"That's the satisfaction," he says. "It's not getting a full-body apparition on film. That's virtually never going to happen."

It would appear Mr. Gray is a master of understatement.

What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Warped science

Making the rounds in Washington this week is a 75-page Air Force Research Laboratory report, Teleportation Physics Study (my spell checker balks on "teleportation," and well it should). This is not the IBM entangled photon stuff; this is transporting people across space. The subway does that, but it's not included in the report. Instead it describes "conveyance of persons by psychic means," and "transport through extra space dimensions or parallel universes." The contractor for the study was Warp Drive Metrics in Las Vegas, and the author was Eric W. Davis, PhD, FBIS. We couldn't find Dr. Davis in American Men and Women of Science, so we googled him and Warp Drive Metrics. Warp Drive Metrics has no website. We did find an article by Dr. Davis, Wormhole Induction Propulsion, prepared for the 1997 NASA Breakthrough Propulsion Physics Workshop, which NASA had refused to allow me to attend (WN 15 Aug 97). His affiliation then was the National Institute for Discovery Science, Las Vegas. The NIDS

Web site displays an Oct 15, 2004, notice from its president that the Institute is on an "inactive status." Desperate for information, we contacted the Project Manager of the study, Dr. Franklin Mead, Senior Scientist of the Advanced Concepts Office. He's not listed in American Men and Women of Science either, but he has a 1996 Patent (5,590,031) for a system to convert zero point energy to electrical energy. Apparently it's not available yet. He could not give me the exact cost of the teleportation report, but said the subcontractor, ERC Inc., would know. We called ERC, but teleportation is just one small part of a huge contract. Two weeks ago we learned of the Air Force positron bomb (WN 15 Oct 04). How many fantasy weapons are taxpayers buying?

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

Events Calendar continued from page 1

6950 Greenville Ave
Dallas, TX 75206

Let us know if you are coming. Send e-mail to mselfy@ntskeptics.org, or phone 214-335-9248. We sometimes cancel these events or even change the location at the last minute.

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