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Intercessory prayer, two

by John Blanton

In the August issue I discussed a controversial study of intercessory prayer (IP) that was conducted at the Mid America Heart Institute (MAHI) in Kansas City. The report “A Randomized, Controlled Trial of the Effects of Remote, Intercessory Prayer on Outcomes in Patients Admitted to the Coronary Care Unit” was published in the *Journal Archives of Internal Medicine*, and it claimed a P value (a measure of statistical significance) of 0.04. P values less than 0.05 are considered statistically significant for clinical trials such as this one.¹

A subsequent study of intercessory prayer was published in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* in September 2001. The authors, Kwang Cha, Rogerio Lobo, and Daniel Wirth, described using “prayer groups in the United States, Canada and Australia” to assist in the success of patients undergoing in vitro fertilization treatment at Cha Hospital in Seoul. They claimed that IP was associated with a higher pregnancy rate: a success rate of 50% versus 26% for the control group. Associated with the study sample size of 219 patients this represents a P value of 0.0013—well below the 5% required for success. Also, the IP group had a higher success with implantation, 16.3% versus 8% for a P value of 0.0005.²

According to an article that ran on 9 June of this year in *The New York Sun*, Rogerio Lobo, an M.D. with Columbia University, was listed in a press release from the university as the lead researcher. The *Sun* also reported “[a] 2001 article in the *New York Times* credits him with being the lead author.”³

Kwang Cha, also an M.D., was a researcher at Columbia at the time of the study, and his Cha Hospital funded the study. According to the *Sun* article he also runs a fertility clinic in California.

Interestingly, the third author has no medical or scientific credentials. Daniel Wirth is a lawyer who has been notable in the past as a psychic researcher.

EVENTS CALENDAR

September Program

Saturday, 11 September at 2 p.m. ...Center for Community Cooperation, 2900 Live Oak Street, Dallas

9/11 and the Big Lie

Fables and Frauds Associated with the 9/11 Attacks

Frauds and conspiracy theories related to the 9/11 attacks have already become a thriving cottage industry. What with the success of Thierry Meyssan's absurd book and other fabrications by home-grown kooks, there's a lot to be skeptical about.

John Brandt, Mike Selby, and Danny Barnett will give the low down.

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Soon after the study was published a number of objections were raised. In particular, Dr. Bruce Flamm told the *Sun* that “The entire thing may be fraudulent.” Dr. Flamm is director of research at Kaiser Permanente California, and he has long been a critic of alternative medicine. He badgered Columbia officials and the study’s authors for over two years trying to get resolution. Some of the facts that came out during this period are enlightening if not distressing.

For one, it was disclosed that “lead researcher” Dr. Lobo did not even learn about the prayer study until “six to 12 months” after it had been completed, which puts a new spin on the word “research.” When questioned about this strange coupling of attribution and participation, Columbia spokeswoman, Anne Bayne, said the “description of Dr. Lobo’s role ‘is in line’ with serving as senior author and not lead author.” As reported in the *Sun* “Dr. Flamm said if Dr. Lobo only provided editorial review and assistance, he should never have been listed as an author. ‘You just don’t put your name on it because you looked at it,’ he said. ‘You had to play a significant role in the study. You should be involved with the design and conduct of the study. You should be willing to stand by the entire contents of the study.’” Columbia now claims Dr. Cha was the lead author.

As for Dr. Lobo, he has since stepped down as chairman of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia and has declined to be interviewed on the matter. Columbia University has announced it was not taking any action against Dr. Lobo for his part in the fiasco. He is also still on the advisory board of the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, the peer-reviewed journal that originally published the study report.

In the final analysis, this turns out to be just another case of a failed prayer study

Psychic researcher Daniel Wirth is another matter. He will be talking mostly to his own lawyer for a while after pleading guilty earlier this year to criminal charges in a matter unrelated to the prayer study.

Meanwhile, the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* has withdrawn the study report and has investigated its findings, according to a statement that managing editor, Donna Kessel, gave to the *Sun*.

Once again, some are concerned about the use of unwitting human subjects in a supposedly medical study. As mentioned in my previous report on the Mid America Heart Institute study, the issue is that if prayer actually works there is no reason to believe it is always *beneficial* to a patient. In particular, the *Sun* reported, the “Department of Health and Human Services conducted a review of the study...” concerning the use of human subjects.

In the final analysis, this turns out to be just another case of a failed prayer study. One would have thought these authors, publishing so soon after the suspicious Mid America Heart Institute study, would have been

more circumspect. After all, who wants to be the second person to step in the same cow cookie?

The thinking behind these studies is curious, as well. Some people, who wouldn't for a moment consider using prayer to levitate a heavy object such as a car, are still inclined to believe prayer can affect the outcome of medical treatment. Apparently the violation of everyday experience is too apparent in the case of a levitating car, but those who haven't studied medicine or biology may think of the human body as some mysterious place where magical processes are routine. That still doesn't explain how doctors, who supposedly have completed rigorous training in these subjects, can fall into the same trap.

I will allow myself to do a little editorializing here. What were the editors of the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* thinking when they decided to publish this report? How come alarms didn't go off in their heads? Why didn't they suggest the alternative title "Voodoo trumps science—discard 500 years of research and get out the magic beads?" If that had been the actual title submitted by the authors, this report would have received the intense scrutiny it deserved, and the authors would have found themselves up to their necks in skeptics before they could get their shoes on.

What I suspect happened is this. The journal editors didn't see the word "magic." Instead they saw the word "prayer," something with which deeply religious people, including many scientists, can readily identify. And they forgot, for a moment, where it was they were and what it was they were supposed to be doing.



References

1. "A prayer a day" in the August 2004 issue of The North Texas Skeptic, available on-line at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2004/2004august/august2004.htm#prayer>.
2. Cha KY, Wirth DP, Lobo RA. "Does prayer influence the success of in vitro fertilization-embryo transfer?" *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* 46:781-787, 2001.

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=11584476
3. Jacob Gershman, "Sound Science?" *The New York Sun*, 9 June 2004. Most of the material for this report is taken from the *Sun* report. A copy is on-line at <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic06-11-04.html>.

Intercessory Prayer: References

It was not possible to cite all the material available for this study. Here are some Web links for further reading. We have copies of the originals in case these links later go stale.

- Kwang Y. Cha, M.D., Daniel P. Wirth, J.D., M.S., and Rogerio A. Lobo, M.D.
Does Prayer Influence the Success of in Vitro Fertilization-Embryo Transfer?: Report of a Masked, Randomized Trial
J Reprod Med 2001;46:781-787
<http://lkm.fri.uni-lj.si/xaigor/slo/znanclanki/prayer.htm>
- Faith Healing by Prayer: Review of a Questionable Study (Bruce L. Flamm, MD)
<http://www.quackwatch.org/11Ind/wirthstudy.html>
- Questioning Healing Prayer
A reevaluation of a study threatens to tarnish the reputations of two prestigious institutions
By Leon Jaroff

<http://www.time.com/time/columnist/printout/0,8816,660053,00.html>

Distant Intercessory Prayer and Task Performance
<http://www.highway61.com/cgi-bin/netoh/jump.cgi?ID=2139275&d=1>

The significance of belief and expectancy within the spiritual healing encounter. (Daniel P. Wirth)
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=7667686

Prayer Study Flawed and Fraud
http://www.valleyskeptic.com/Prayer_Study_Flawed_and_Fraud.html

Exposed: conman's role in prayer-power IVF 'miracle'
The Observer International
<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1227841,00.html>

Thierry Meyssan and the big lie

by John Blanton

Forget about the hapless “tourist guy” of 9/11, the rigged photo of a parka-clad sightseer atop the World Trade Center, with his back toward the oncoming airliner. Forget about the four thousand Jews who didn’t show up for work that day. French author Thierry Meyssan spins a yarn that shades both these tall tales.

According to Meyssan’s book *L’Effroyable Imposture* (The Frightening Fraud), American Airlines flight 77 did not crash into the Pentagon building. Instead, a crafty plot by the U.S. government employed a truck bomb or a missile strike to further the pretense of the Twin Towers attack.

There’s a lot of wild stuff in the book, but chapter 1, “The Pentagon’s Phantom Plane,” is the best part. Here Meyssan describes the attack on the Pentagon, essentially going over the official account. Then, barely pausing for a breath, he explains why the official account is a bunch of lies. In the process, he spins a yarn that would make a Minnesota fisherman blush.

The first and most audacious assertion of Meyssan’s is that photographic evidence demonstrates an airplane could not have done the damage shown. Incredibly, he superimposes the outline of a Boeing 757 over an aerial view of the impact site and says “...it can be seen that only the nose of the Boeing entered the building. The fuselage and the wings remained outside.”¹

He also refers to the Associated Press photo on the front of his book. The photo was taken shortly after the impact and shows the firefighters and ambulances, shortly before the roof of the damaged area collapsed. “[Y]ou will clearly observe that there is no plane,” he writes.

One wonders. Would an airliner, traveling at the speed this one was, come to rest on the Pentagon lawn after impacting the side of the building? It may be that left wing radicals skip high school physics, because the absurdity of the proposition seems to have escaped him. Furthermore, Meyssan claims no wreckage of the jet was found.

So, although officials, members of Congress and military personnel all claimed to have seen the aircraft fall, no one saw the smallest piece of the plane, not even from the landing gear: there were only unidentifiable metal fragments.

Meyssan pretends to be unaware of the vast body of evidence and eye witness accounts that contradict this statement. An on-line account titled “The Pentagon Attack and American Airlines Flight 77” by John Judge includes statements by a number of witnesses.

I have spoken to dozens of other witnesses to the event, and to others who know the reports. Wayne Madsen, a respected local journalist, spoke to a camera person at WJLA-TV 7 who had been driving to the Pentagon on instructions from his office, expecting a public statement from authorities there in response to the events in

New York City. Shortly after the crash he saw a woman standing by the road at the edge of the Pentagon, next to her car, and apparently in shock. He stopped to help her and found she could not speak. But she pointed him to the far side of her car. The passenger side had been sheared off in part and sections of the landing gear from the plane were on the ground nearby. Others I

have spoken to, including pilots, either saw the crash happen and identified the plane, or saw parts of the plane in the wreckage days afterwards.²

Others who were in the Pentagon at the time of the crash describe finding aircraft parts, including landing gear, within the building.

After trying to convince us the aircraft only partially penetrated the building, Meyssan seems to contradict himself later in the book.

The Aircraft penetrated the building without causing major damage to the façade. It traversed several rings of the Pentagon, opening successively wider holes in each partition as it passed.

For this absurdity Meyssan has a ready explanation that takes a long pull on my credulity.

All of this testimony and these observations could correspond with the firing of one of the latest generation of AGM-type missiles, armed with a hollow charge and a depleted uranium BLU tip, and guided by GPS.

One wonders. Would an airliner, traveling at the speed this one was, come to rest on the Pentagon lawn after impacting the side of the building?

Oliver Stone, take a hike.

So, what kind of researcher is Thierry Meyssan, who so carefully loads his weapon (206 references cited in the back of the book) and discharges it into the ground? He has been characterized by *National Review Online* contributing editor James S. Robbins as a left wing radical (apparently with no love for the United States).³ Vasily Bubnov, writing for the on-line edition of *Pravda*, hints that Meyssan is “craving for glory.”⁴ I do not hasten to dispute these worthies.

And the book? The English translation is “9/11 The Big Lie.” It’s available from Amazon through the NTS Web site, but I will not feel slighted if you put off the purchase. I will even let you read my copy.⁵

Meyssan obviously had access to the same information as the rest of us. So, is he a liar or a fool? I will allow the possibility the answer is more subtle. A famous song by Paul Simon contains the advice “Still a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.”

If this is mere self-deception, then Meyssan is not alone. It only took me a few seconds to turn up another source devoted to debunking the official account of the Pentagon attack.⁶ The “Killtown” Web site pushes high-profile conspiracy theories related to 9/11 and the Bush administration. Its page titled *Did Flight 77 really crash into the Pentagon?* has many photos of Flight 77 wreckage along with arguments against their authenticity.⁷ Obviously, 9/11 conspiracy stories are going to be a thriving cottage industry for years to come.



References

1. The original photo is from the Defense Department at <http://www.defenselink.mil/photos/Sep2001/010914-F-8006R-006.html>.
2. <http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/JohnJudge/PAandAAF77.html>
3. <http://www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins040902.asp>
4. <http://english.pravda.ru/main/2002/05/23/29196.html>
5. <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/otherbooks.htm>
6. The 9/11 Commission Report available at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/books.htm>.
7. <http://www.geocities.com/killtown/>

Tom Siegfried

In August science writer Tom Siegfried came by to talk about his latest book. Tom is science editor for *The Dallas Morning News*, and he writes a weekly science column that comes out in the Monday edition. His book is *Strange Matters: Undiscovered Ideas at the Frontiers of Space and Time*. He has previously written *The Bit and the Pendulum* and was a contributing editor to *A Field Guide for Science Writers*.



Tom Siegfried explains *Strange Matters* at the August meeting

There’s a lot of matter out there, he told us, and much of it seems to be strange. By *strange* one needs to understand that it’s not your grandfather’s solid, liquid, gas.

First of all, there’s anti-matter, and Tom explained how it seemed to be predicted by Einstein’s special relativity. $E = mc^2$ states that the rest energy of ordinary matter (the m in this equation) is related to the square of the speed of light, C . However, if you solve this equation for m , you get two possible answers, because the square root of C has two possible values, one positive and one negative.

Paul Dirac, way back before I was born, decided there must be two kinds of matter, to satisfy the two possible solutions to this equation. He decided there must be matter and anti-matter. Though he was reluctant to pursue this absurdity, it turned out to be true when somebody else noticed tracks in a bubble chamber that indicated the mass and charge of an electron, but with a positive charge instead of a negative charge.

So strange is anti-matter, in fact, that the combination of matter and its equivalence in anti-matter is no matter at all. When the two meet only pure energy results. Go back and check out the equation two paragraphs up.

Then there are the neutrinos, that can pass unaffected through light years of lead, and there are quarks, which make up neutrons and protons. And quarks come in different kinds, including colored quarks. And there are strange quarks. Strange, indeed, is strange matter.

It was a grand talk, and it ended too soon. Afterwards Tom answered questions and signed copies of his book. I got mine. You can get yours, too, from Amazon through the NTS Web site: <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/newbooks.htm>. We plan to have Tom back again in two years to discuss his next book.

Strange Matters

The Berkeley Publishing Group (Penguin), New York
351 pages, including index (paperback)
\$15.00



Creationist club at UT Dallas

We take note that with the start of the fall semester the IDEA (Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness) Club is active again at the University of Texas at Dallas. Club president Wilston Nkangoh has provided us with a schedule for the coming events. Some of the sessions are related to club business and are not open to the public, but among the available meetings and lectures are the following:

- 22 September: Can Intelligent Design Be Detected in Biology?
 6 October: Lecture
 20 October: The Privileged Planet
 17 November: Star Trek Voyager: Distant Origin

Details of the 6 October lecture are not available; however, last April the featured lecture was an excellent presentation by creationist Robert Koons, a fellow of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture (CSC) and also a philosophy professor at the University of Texas at Austin. The CSC is the main powerhouse behind the "intelligent design" brand of creationism currently in vogue in the U.S.

All meetings are Wednesday at 2 p.m. For details, including meeting location, you may contact Wilston at wilston@student.utdallas.edu. You can also visit the IDEA Club's Web site at <http://www.utdallas.edu/orgs/idea/>. □

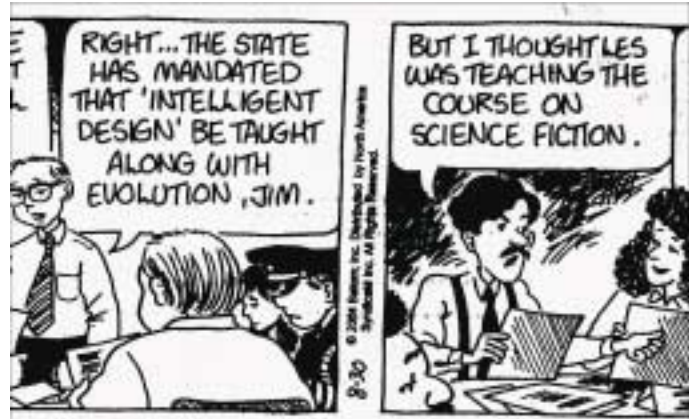
Funky evolution

Tom Batiuk draws a daily comic strip called *Funky Winkerbean*. It's about teenagers, who have now grown up and are facing real-life situations.

By real-life, we mean current hot topics. To illustrate, this week's *Winkerbean* is dealing with creationism in the schools. Monday's strip launches the issue with a science teacher being assigned to teach "Intelligent Design." Putting it better than I could, the teacher complains "But I thought Les was teaching the course on science fiction."

Ouch!

Wait, there's more. The following day two students are discussing the situation. One says "Boy, Mr. Kablichnick is sure steamed about having to teach intelligent design along with evo-



Teachers discuss having to teach creationism in Funky Winkerbean

lution." The other student suggests maybe they could deal with the topic in their cartoon strip for their school paper. The first student is hesitant: "I don't know... People are going to accuse us of being anti-Johnny Hart." He's referring, of course, to the creationist who draws the popular B.C. comic strip and sometimes sticks in adverts for creationism.

As I write the week is still young, so stand by for still more. And, if you haven't already, give *Funky Winkerbean* a look. □

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.]

Climate change: is the climate changing in the White House?

The U.S. Climate Change Program submitted its biannual report to Congress this week. Two years ago, the President described the report as "something put out by the bureaucracy." This time, it came with a cover letter signed by the Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of Commerce, and the President's Science Advisor. It reinforces what most scientists said all along: emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases are the only likely explanation for global warming over the last three decades. Responding to claims that increased CO2 makes crops grow faster, several important invasive weeds were found that grew even faster. Although the President finally seems to acknowledge that emissions are a problem, he's not proposing to do anything.

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004.
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Project Steve: the evolutionary advantage of being “Steve”

In 2001, the Discovery Institute published ads listing names of 100 “scientists” who doubted Darwinism. The National Center for Science Education parodied the ads by collecting signatures just of scientists named “Steve” on a statement endorsing evolution. “Steve” was chosen to honor the late Stephen J. Gould, a renowned evolutionary biologist. The 440 “Steves” are co-authors of a paper in the *Annals of Improbable Research*, and can note on their resumes that they co-authored a paper with Stephen Hawking and Nobel laureates Steve Weinberg and Steve Chu.

Dietary guidelines: advisory panel embraces “the physics plan”

This week, the 13-member federal advisory panel revising Dietary Guidelines for Americans held its final meeting in Washington. Responding to the currently fashionable low-carbohydrate diets, the panel flatly stated there is no value in using the glycemic index and recommended that to maintain weight calories consumed should not exceed calories expended. This of course is just the *What’s New* “physics plan” (WN 25 Feb 00), the only diet plan endorsed by the First Law of Thermodynamics.

2. Space Station: Will U.S. astronauts have to fly tourist-class?

The Iran Nonproliferation Act of 2000 makes it illegal to pay Russia to take US astronauts to the ISS. Astronauts have been getting free Soyuz rides since the shuttle grounding, but that deal ends in 2006. After that, Russia says they need the seats for paying passengers <http://www.aps.org/WN/WN02/wN042602.cfm>. I called Ada Parvenu, who handles billionaire relations for NASA. “We’re being shut out of the ISS,” I shouted, “after investing \$35B.” “Calm down” she soothed, “it’s actually a terrific deal. It cost \$500M to fly a shuttle to the ISS. Russia takes tourists there in a Soyuz for \$20M. So we’ll call astronauts ‘tourists.’” I was yelling now, “the law won’t let us pay Russia for tourists either.” “We’ve thought about that,” she said calmly, “we’re recruiting billionaires to be astronauts. They’ll be able to pay for their own tickets.”

Cold fusion: just when you think life can’t get any sillier.

The cover of *Popular Mechanics* for August warns that “Cold Fusion Technology Enables Anyone To Build A Nuke From Commonly Available Materials.” A nuke? The cold fusion guys can’t brew a cup of tea. The article: “Dangerous Science” is by Jim Wilson, whose cover story in April proclaimed

the dawn of the age of atomic aircraft powered by hafnium-178 isomer reactors, which don’t exist and never will (WN 16 Apr 04). OK, so grownups aren’t supposed to read *Popular Mechanics*, but if the cold fusion faithful think they’re going to get a cover story in *Time*, get over it. DOE recently announced that cold fusion research will be reviewed, and believers imagined they’d been vindicated (WN 02 Apr 04). Wilson says Eugene Mallove of *Infinite Energy Magazine* assured him that the experimental evidence for cold fusion is too compelling for DOE to ignore.

Events Calendar continued from page 1

NTS Social Dinner and Board Meeting

Saturday, 25 September at 7 p.m.

Sweet Basil Italian Restaurant

Midway Road and Trinity Mills
17610 Midway Road
Dallas, TX
972-733-1500

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