



*The North Texas*

# Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

## Mind pit

by John Blanton

**P**eter Castillo phoned. I should have known.

And you should have known, if you don't by now, that five members of the NTS underwrite a \$12,000 prize for anybody who can demonstrate the "paranormal." It's not as much as you can (not) get by winning the James Randi prize of more than million. However, \$12,000 is about all we can afford not to lose.

Peter is from Chicago, and he wanted to come down and try out for the prize. I reminded him we require a demonstration before we will consider setting up a formal test. We have done a lot of this in the past. People say they want to test for the prize. We say we first want to see if there is anything to test. It turns out this has saved everybody concerned a lot of time and expense.

Of the half a handful of applicants, not a one has brought to the table anything worth testing.

Russell Shipp from New Braunfels said he could move things with his mind. We said "show us first." He came. Three times. Empty-handed. Nothing moved.

Rosemary Hunter came from Cleveland (that's in Ohio). She came to Salt Lake City (that's in Utah where I was). She said she could read my mind. We both should have stayed home. Only my wife can read my mind.

Rechey Davidson said he could locate lost objects by dowsing a map. I mentioned I don't have any lost objects. I know where all my stuff is. He said he could locate hidden objects. He is from Quinlan (that's in Texas). I advised him to try this at home before coming all the way to Dallas. We agreed to a demonstration involving a map of my house and a "hidden" camera. Rechey went zero for twelve, and we saved everybody the trouble and expense of setting up a formal test.

### EVENTS CALENDAR

#### December Party

There will be no program or social meeting for December. In keeping with our usual tradition, we will have our annual Christmas get together/party.

For the party, bring snacks and drinks. No alcohol. Bring your latest on the Darwin awards, skeptical videos, games.

**Saturday,  
December 20, 2008  
at 2 PM**

Center for Nonprofit  
Management, 2900 Live Oak  
Street, in Dallas

Let us know if you are coming.  
These meeting dates are  
sometimes changed.

214-952-3663

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The North Texas Skeptics is a tax-exempt 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings on topics of current interest or social events.

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Peter Castillo said he could transmit his thoughts to me. I was sure this was quite impossible, and I advised him to try this at home. He said he had tried it and was sure it would work, so he came on down to Dallas to give a demonstration at the November meeting.

Greg Aicklen, Prasad Golla and Mike Selby are underwriters of the Challenge, along with John Thomas and me. Greg, Prasad and Mike met with me prior to the meeting, and we introduced ourselves to Peter from Chicago. That was when he told us he hadn't really tried this at home.

We should have known.

Those in attendance were treated to a double delight. Kristine Danowski gave an engrossing presentation on vegetarianism, skeptical and otherwise. Who would have known this would be such a deep topic? We should have. Kristine allowed her talk would not take up all the meeting schedule, and she graciously invited us to present Peter's demonstration first. Here is how it went:

Peter claimed he could look at a playing card and project his thoughts to me so that I would be able to correctly identify the card. We agreed to the following:

1. A successful demonstration will require the Underwriters to conduct a formal test of Peter Castillo's paranormal abilities, such successful test requiring the Underwriters to pay the award of \$12,000.
2. This agreement is between Peter Castillo and the Underwriters and does not involve the North Texas Skeptics and does not obligate that organization in any way.
3. Peter Castillo will not be compensated in any way by the Underwriters for his participation in this demonstration.
4. Both parties (Peter Castillo and the Underwriters) will be allowed to make public all or any part of the details of this demonstration and the results. Both parties will be allowed to make public all or any part of the correspondence related to this demonstration. Both parties will be allowed to obtain monetary profit from such publication.
5. John Blanton will manage this demonstration and will be the sole arbiter of a successful demonstration.
6. The demonstration proposal previously submitted by Peter Castillo will be amended, and the demonstration will be conducted as follows:

John Blanton, or a person designated by him, will be the SUBJECT.

Peter Castillo will project his thoughts to the SUBJECT, and the SUBJECT will by this means learn which playing card face value Peter Castillo is projecting.

The playing card will be selected by an ASSISTANT appointed by John Blanton. The ASSISTANT will select the

playing card by a random process. This random process can possibly involve the ASSISTANT's drawing a card from a deck.

The ASSISTANT will record the card being projected, and will notify the Subject that a trial has started.

The Subject will determine by receiving Peter Castillo's thoughts which card is being projected, and the SUBJECT will record the face value of the card and will notify the ASSISTANT that the trial has ended.

Recording of which card is projected for each trial will be by noting the card value on a paper form or by saving a card in an envelope. John Blanton will select the method used.

If the card selected by the SUBJECT is the same as the card selected by the ASSISTANT and projected by Peter Castillo, the trial will be recorded as a hit. Else, the trial will be recorded as a miss.

A session will comprise nine consecutive trials as just described. Peter Castillo must score four hits in each of 3 consecutive sessions for the demonstration to be considered successful.

7. Peter Castillo agrees with all conditions of the demonstration, including any modifications or additions to the above made by John Blanton at the time of the demonstration. Nothing in the presence or absence of persons or the location and environment of the demonstration will interfere with a successful demonstration.

OK, we did that.

While members attending looked on, Prasad Golla worked as the ASSISTANT and ran the proceedings. Prasad had his paper forms, and I had mine. Each trial lasted one minute. We ran through three sessions in quick order with Peter projecting and his projections going into the deep pit that is my mind. Greg Aicklen took photos. NTS board member Jack Hittson timed each trial. I recorded my receivings.

All done, we clamped the forms together and enjoyed Kristine's presentation. Following that, Prasad took the forms and stepped to a large white board at the front of the meeting room. He wrote the results. See the side bar.

Out of 27 trials Peter scored three hits, all in the second session. Three out of 27 is what would be expected by chance. By chance, in the mathematical field of probability theory and statistics this is called the expected value. It is what you would expect if there were no connection between Peters brain and mine.

We should have known.

Peter was a great participant. After presenting the results Prasad interviewed Peter and me and made a video. Peter acknowledged that his perceptions of paranormal ability were possibly misinformed, and he left with a changed outlook. Hopefully he got a chance to take in some of Dallas' star attractions before heading back to Chicago.

For my own part, I have this satisfaction:

Groups like the Discovery Institute, and the Discovery Institute in particular, complain that main stream science will not acknowledge and incorporate the supernatural in its studies. That's where the Paranormal Challenge comes in.

Science has no reason to consider the supernatural, because the supernatural does not exist. For over fifteen years we have offered this prize for any demonstration of the supernatural. We still have our money.

We should have known.

## Test results

The results are shown here. Each session comprised nine trials. Prasad selected from card values 2 through 10 (nine cards, hearts suit) using a random draw. He marked his sheet, showed the card to Peter and notified me the trial had started. The score sheets show Peter's card and my guess (NTS) for each trial.

Session 1		
Trial	Castillo	NTS
1	9	4
2	2	3
3	4	9
4	7	6
5	10	3
6	7	5
7	5	8
8	7	2
9	5	9

### Session 2

Trial	Castillo	NTS
1	2	2
2	10	4
3	8	6
4	6	6
5	9	4
6	2	3
7	9	8
8	8	8
9	3	10

### Session 3

Trial	Castillo	NTS
1	3	2
2	2	5
3	5	8
4	8	7
5	10	8
6	8	10
7	2	4
8	3	4
9	5	6

### January Elections

On Saturday, January 17, the North Texas Skeptics will hold its annual election for the NTS Board of Directors. All dues paid up members of the NTS may vote. After the election of the Board, the members of the Board will then elect the officers of NTS. Remember, it is you, the members of the North Texas Skeptics, who will decide who runs the organization for the next year.

**January 17, 2009, @ 2 pm**  
Center for Nonprofit Management  
2900 Live Oak Street  
Dallas, Texas

## Out-of-body experiences

### Part I

by Kristine Danowski

(Part II will follow in the January issue.)

**O**ut-of-body experiences (OBEs) have been in the news recently because scientists in Europe have apparently found a cause. We'll get to that presently. First, let's look at what OBEs are, who has them and why, and how they are researched.

An OBE is an experience in which a person seems to perceive the world from a location outside her/his physical body. A subset of OBEs, near-death experiences (NDEs) are OBEs occurring in people resuscitated from near death, extreme incapacitation, or surviving life-threatening events. Surveys indicate that 8% to 34% of people have reported an OBE, and most report no more than one or two OBEs in a lifetime. OBEs have been reported in people of all ages, genders, cultures, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and prior beliefs about the experience. OBEs can be profound, and NDEs can be the most dramatic and life-changing OBEs.

People have reported many different sensations during OBEs. The most common sensation is floating outside the physical body and seeing and moving without it. Being a single perceiving point in space capable of moving and observing the physical world is another. Most people report seeing and traveling through walls and other physical barriers at will. Others report visiting mystical or bizarre other worlds and acquiring information via an unknown mechanism. Many people report that they observe physical world objects as strangely illuminated, even at night, and that physical world objects appear distorted. Less common is the sensation of possessing a duplicate body or a double (*doppelganger*), assuming other shapes, being in two separate locations simultaneously (*bilocation*), and manipulating objects at will.

Regardless of the OBE type or characteristics, the sensation is completely vivid and real, unlike a dream, daydream, hallucination, or imagining. Many people who experience an OBE, especially a NDE, regard it as an extremely significant or life-changing event. However, an *experience* of being outside one's body is not necessarily a *fact* of being outside one's body.

In order to leave one's physical body, one's consciousness, psyche, soul, spirit, etc., must be able to function independently of it. Called *dualism*, this concept has a long history. The

ancient Greeks believed that the spirit is physically imprisoned within and can be separated from the body. What we physically see is inferior to what the spirit could see if it were released. The liberated spirit can communicate with other liberated spirits. According to the ancient Egyptians, the *ba*, soul, and *ka*, spiritual body, remain with the physical body until death. Dualism is prominent today in several religions. In Buddhism, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, among other works, describes preparing the soul for its transition at death. In Hinduism the soul survives the death of the physical body and is reincarnated into a new body. In Christianity the soul survives the death of the physical body and faces the Christian god's judgment in an afterlife. Many African, Pacific Islander, and indigenous South American cultures regard dreams as the soul's travels while the body is asleep.

Folklore of numerous world cultures contains beliefs in a wraith or duplicate that accompanies us without our being aware of it. The Norse *vardøger*, the Scottish *tàslach*, the German *Doppelgänger*, and the English *swarth* or *fetch* are some examples of this belief. According to the English, however, only people with "second sight" can see them. The literature of these and other cultures describes doubles playing silly tricks such as arriving at the pub before we do and confusing everyone. Doubles are usually harmless, but they can have sinister overtones. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Double* are literary instances of disturbing doubles doing more than innocuous pranks. Doubles *per se* are not connected to OBEs, but they are other examples of dualism.

OBEs can be divided into three broad categories of causation: physiological, psychological, and paranormal. Let's examine the physiological first.

Many OBEs can be induced using pharmaceuticals. Psychedelics such as LSD, psilocybin ("mushrooms"), mescaline, peyote, and Ecstasy; dissociatives such as PCP ("angel dust"), ketamine ("special K"), marijuana, nitrous oxide, amyl nitrite ("poppers"), and absinthe; and anesthetics commonly produce OBEs. Naturally, recreational and medicinal users of these drugs are well aware of this. A reasonable hypothesis is that since these drugs affect the brain, then the cause(s) of OBEs lie within the brain. Other physiological states such as stress, exhaustion, fatigue, and, conversely, relaxation and sensory deprivation can generate OBEs. In addition, neurological illnesses such as stroke, seizure disorders, and migraines can induce OBEs. Finally, oxygen deprivation is another cause. Fighter pilots experiencing multiple *g*-forces which compress the blood vessels and force oxygen out report OBEs and NDEs.

OBEs are not well understood physiologically, and several theories remain viable. Of course, physiological theories reject

dualism; the mind and body must be united if affecting the brain causes OBEs. One physiological theory is electrical stimulation of the brain. Stimulation of the temporal lobe is known to cause OBEs; this phenomenon may be connected to the "god module" theory of religious experiences. Another theory is neural disinhibition, that under certain conditions neurons fire indiscriminately giving rise to OBEs. Combined with faulty memory, this theory could explain inaccurate descriptions of real locations reported during OBEs. Other theories are hypoxia, sleep deprivation, and hyponogogic or hypnopompic hallucinations. OBEs do not occur during REM sleep. To confound things further, a few people can induce OBEs intentionally under ordinary conditions.

The second broad causation category of OBEs is psychological. Trauma or abuse survivors often report observing the occurring abuse from outside their bodies. Thus this "splitting" is an involuntary, automatic defense mechanism against psychological trauma. Psychopathology, including dissociative disorders, autoscopy, and mood disorders, can cause OBEs. Hypnosis and relaxation are other causes, as is religion. Some religious people report being "filled with the spirit," or "raising power" during prayer or other religious activities. Finally, some OBEs are spontaneous with no known cause. Although psychological mechanisms are not well understood, all psychological OBEs can, strictly speaking, be considered physiological since they originate in the brain.

The third causation category, paranormal, involves astral projection. Invoking dualism, paranormalists claim that we all have astral bodies that are independent of our physical bodies. The astral body is the seat of feeling and desire. It is attached to the physical body by a thin, elastic, silver cord called Ariadne's thread. Ariadne's thread can be infinitely stretched so that the astral body can visit anywhere from the next door neighbors to other galaxies. During OBEs the astral body hovers above the physical body before moving on. It can perceive objects by some mysterious power not yet discovered. Unfortunately for their proponents, there is no evidence that astral bodies exist.

Another paranormal theory involves remote viewing (a.k.a. ESP or clairvoyance).

Remote viewing is the ability to perceive places, persons, and actions that are not within the range of the usual physical senses. To view remotely, one's astral body leaves the physical body to observe distant locations. Remote viewing is allegedly instantaneous and unlimited. It is also demonstrably unreliable. For example, different people claiming to remote view the same location get basic details wrong.

There are paranormal explanations for other OBE-inducing phenomena as well. For example, meditation and hypnosis produce OBEs by accessing the astral body or the psychic world. Religion produces OBEs by actually communing with a deity or sacred person or the soul surviving death in NDE cases.

Increasing the consternation of skeptics, some paranormalists appeal to pseudoscience to explain astral projec-

tion and OBEs. Quantum mechanics can explain anything and everything, since, after all, no one *really* understands it. Another victim is cosmology, especially the multiple universe theory and string theory. Astral projection allows us to visit to other universes and planes of existence, and multiple universes conveniently explain various astral planes. Some of the convolutions proponents of the paranormal use to try to fit astral projection and remote viewing within existing cosmological theories are truly amazing. Real physicists deny any connection between the two.

Many critical questions naturally occur from paranormalists' belief in astral projection and remote viewing. For example, how does one see without eyes, hear without ears, etc.? How do astral bodies convey information? Why are physical descriptions of objects seen during OBEs often incorrect? Why do descriptions of the same location visited by different people disagree? How can astral bodies visit the planets or other stars and do so instantaneously? Do astral bodies ever get lost? Do they ever return to the wrong bodies? Do they ever abandon physical bodies altogether without the physical body dying? Do Ariadne's threads ever get tangled? If OBEs are strictly physiological or psychological phenomena, then none of these problems arise.

OBE research is conducted in four basic ways. First, survey studies differentiate OBEs from dreams and other mental phenomena. Though subjective, surveys also indicate the personal impact of OBEs.

Second, research has attempted to detect astral bodies. Magnetometers, thermistors, gravimeters, and ultraviolet and infrared instruments have not detected an astral body, soul, or double during OBEs. Humans, both self-described "psychic" and non-psychic, have also failed to detect a soul or double. Some people claim that their pets recognize their astral bodies during OBEs. However, under testing conditions non-human animal data are inconclusive.

Third, research has attempted to examine the information transfer process during OBEs. Experimental evidence is very weak that people can return reliable information. As mentioned previously, descriptions of common objects and locations differ among subjects. Subjects have also failed to convey target numbers, phrases, pictures, or descriptions of physical objects. Researchers have placed specific items in a room (a laboratory, emergency room, or operating room) so that they could only be seen from the ceiling or another OBE vantage point. At this writing paranormalists have done the only studies to confirm information transfer during OBEs, and scientists have not been able to replicate these studies under rigorous testing conditions.

Fourth, drugs or electrical stimulation induce OBEs, and the affected areas of the brain and physiological states are studied to elucidate the physiological causes of OBEs. □

*Kristine Danowski is Vice President of the North Texas Skeptics*

## What's new

By Robert Park

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

### **COLD FUSION: OR IS IT THE "FLEISHMAN-PONS EFFECT"?**

It's been almost 20 years since the March 23, 1989 announcement that cold fusion had been discovered by two chemists at the University of Utah. By June, cold fusion was an object of ridicule. A small band of embattled defenders retreated to holding annual conferences of like-minded scientists to which skeptics were not welcome. The story now seems to be entering a new chapter. Believers have begun showing a willingness to confront skeptics, submitting papers to open meetings of major scientific societies. They no longer use the term "cold fusion," preferring the less contentious "low-energy nuclear reactions" (LENR) to describe their field; LENR more accurately describes what, if anything, is going on. However, the use of LENR has been undone by referring to "excess heat" as the Fleischmann-Pons effect. This only serves as a reminder of the outrageous conduct of the university administration and the incredibly sloppy research on which the claim was based. This year, there is great excitement over the work of Yoshiaki Arata, a respected professor at Osaka University. In May Arata demonstrated the production of excess heat to an audience of 80, but there have been many such claims over the years and until it is replicated by someone outside the LENR community and a plausible explanation is advanced, it will change few minds.

### **SCIENCE ADVISOR: NO, I HAVEN'T HEARD A WORD.**

It was clear back in mid-September that Wired had a brief article naming a group of scientist who were advising the Democratic candidate: Harold Varmus, 1989 Nobel in Medicine and former director of NIH, led the group, which included Gilbert Omenn, 2006 Nobel Prize in Medicine, professor of medicine at the University of Michigan, Peter Agre, 2003 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, dean of medicine at Duke, Donald Lamb professor of astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Chicago, who does not yet have the Nobel Prize, and Sharon Long, plant biologist and former dean of science and humanities at Stanford. It is a sterling group of independent thinkers. Heavy on the bio-medical end perhaps, reflecting the great progress in that area in recent years. But their names have not come up since, and the focus in Obama's camp has been on technologists.

## Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2008. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



### ISS TURNS TEN: TIME TO CHANGE THE WALLPAPER.

It was a busy week on the ISS which had its tenth birthday. The space shuttle Endeavor was docked to the station to help with the remodeling, which added two bedrooms and a second toilet. It took four space walks to free a rotating joint on a solar panel that must face directly toward the sun to provide additional power, needed to double the crew from three to six. My joints don't work like they used to either. They look great on the evening news, but space walks are the most dangerous part of an astronaut's job. Inside the ISS they tinkered with a device to convert urine and perspiration to drinking water. The technology is not exactly new; the city of Washington takes its water out of the Potomac above the city, passes it through the guts of two million people, and returns it to the river below the city as pure as bottled water sold as "pure spring water," but that's another story. The extra water is needed for a crew of six.

### GINKGO BILOBA: A TIP ON WHERE YOU CAN CUT EXPENSES.

Annual sales of the herbal remedy Ginkgo biloba in the US are at \$249 million. It is alleged to prevent memory loss. It doesn't. In its first large trial, half of 3,069 volunteers 75 and older were given of Ginkgo biloba daily, while the other half were given a placebo. They were assessed for signs of dementia every six months for 6 years. Neither the patients nor the doctors doing the assessment knew which group patients were in. The group getting the placebo actually did slightly better, although the difference was not statistically significant. France is planning an even larger study. Ginkgo has a lot of company. One after another, the most popular herbal supplements, ephedra, Echinacea, St. John's Wort, have failed in double-blind, placebo controlled studies. □

Bob Park can be reached via email at [whatsnew@bobpark.org](mailto:whatsnew@bobpark.org)

## Another challenge. . . . not

by John Blanton

17 November

Somebody phoned from Pennsylvania today. He said he was from Pennsylvania. I told him I knew that. I said my cell phone told me. After all, we are not psychic.

He said God spoke to him. He said he had experienced a Near Death Experience, and he now has paranormal powers.

He said he went into a book emporium and found a crystal. He said he discovered he could make it move.

I said we wanted a demonstration. We wanted to see him make it move without touching it.

He said, no. He had to be touching it.

I told him we did not think that was a paranormal ability. I said we could do that, ourselves.

He asked, then, what was the Challenge for?

I told him he needed to make the crystal move without touching it. We would pay \$12,000 for that.

The phone went strangely silent. It was as though we had been cut off. As though somewhere a phone had gone on-hook.

I'm telling you folks, it's spooky out there. □

North Texas Skeptics  
P.O. Box 111794  
Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

**FIRST CLASS**

Address Correction Requested

**Application for Membership**

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Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794 (972) 306-3187

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