



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Son of Flim-Flam

by John Blanton

An essential book for skeptics is *Flim-Flam* by James Randi. If you do not already have a copy, you can get one through the following link. After you get your copy continue reading the rest of this essay. Those who already have a copy can resume reading right now:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0879751983/thenorthtexaske>

Randi started life as a stage magician and escape artist, but in doing magic for audiences he came to realize that many people believed in magic. That is, they believed in supernatural things and other foolishness. Randi produced *Flim-Flam* to relate his experiences with the hucksters and the true believers, and the last chapter is titled "Put Up or Shut Up."

In 1964, as Randi tells it, a caller to a radio program advised him to put his money where his mouth was. That is, if Randi insisted on denying ESP and other paranormal abilities, he should go beyond just proclamations. From that point forward Randi carried with him a check for \$10,000 to be paid to the first person who could demonstrate proof of some claim for the paranormal under controlled conditions. That \$10,000 has since grown, and a prize in the order of \$1 million is now available.

About twenty years ago some of us in The North Texas Skeptics took heart from Randi's proposition, and we decided to put our money where our mouth is. We established the North Texas Skeptics Paranormal Challenge. Our initial prize was \$2000, and it eventually grew to \$12,000 as additional underwriters came on board. That's an important point: The NTS Paranormal Challenge is underwritten by various individuals and is not the responsibility of The North Texas Skeptics, which is a non-profit corporation, incorporated in the state of Texas.

Correspondence with claimants and tests of claims of the paranormal are managed by the underwriters. The details of the Challenge are posted on the NTS Web site along with a history of some of the Challenge applications:

EVENTS CALENDAR

December Program

Saturday, 10 December
at 2 p.m.

Center for Community
Cooperation
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

NTS year-end party. Stories, songs, festivities. Bring snacks and drinks (no alcohol). Possible Darwin awards presentation.

Board Meeting and Social Dinner

Saturday, December 3,
(not a misprint)
7:00 p.m.

Fadi's Mediterranean Grill
14902 Preston Rd.
Dallas, TX
(972) 934-8500

If you plan on attending, please call. We sometimes change or cancel these events.

214-335-9248

skeptic75287@yahoo.com

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 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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<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/challenge.htm>

Early on I received some push back from an earnest reader who considered the display of this Challenge was a bit of grandstanding that was not fitting of a responsible organization such as the NTS. I gave this advice a few seconds of thought and decided, "No." We need this for a number of reasons and one in particular.

From time to time I encounter someone who reports glowingly on the truth of astrology, ESP, faith healing and such. They tell me I have never given the supernatural a proper look. More specifically, people at the Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC) decry the reliance mainstream science places on "materialism." By *materialism* I take it to mean *the real world*. Stephen C. Meyer, Philip Johnson and other supporters of Intelligent Design insist that mainstream science should also encompass the possibility of the supernatural.

When facing such people I would like to be able to tell them that for twenty years I have invited people of all kinds to demonstrate the supernatural and take home a large monetary prize. I will also tell them that in all of this time, nobody has ever demonstrated anything close to the supernatural in any form. On that basis I would like to reject these creationists' pleas for the consideration of the supernatural in science. Science that excludes the supernatural encompasses the origins of people and other life forms on this planet.

After posting notice of the North Texas Paranormal Challenge in our newsletter in April 1991, we waited anxiously for claimants to pound on our door, eager for the prize. Initially we had set the prize at \$2,000, which was worth a lot more then than it is now. Apparently not enough. We waited and waited.

There was an episode in 1992 with Bette Epstein, a member of the American Society of Dowsers. An item in the January 22 issue of *The Dallas Morning News* had attracted our attention, and we contacted Ms. Epstein by postal mail requesting a demonstration. We were politely rebuffed and continued our wait.

We received other inquiries following that, but I only started tracking them on our Web site after receiving a challenge from Robert de Boer. The irony of the whole episode would have been remarkable even without the terrible tragedy associated with it.

Robert de Boer is from New Zealand, and he asserted he could predict world calamities and other significant events through his dreams. Specifically he mentioned political changes and such. The initial contact was in early September of 2001, and negotiations rambled over several days.

Finally, on 12 September I kindly pointed out to Robert de Boer that he had failed to predict a very significant event or even to hint at it. He was immediately offended at my crass response, but I reminded him that this was the very kind of thing he claimed to hold power over. We did not hear much from Robert de Boer after that.

By then the prize was up to \$12,000, making it more attractive to serious claimants. The inquiries continued to trickle in by e-mail and by phone. Whenever somebody phoned or sent a postal note, I asked that communications be immediately switched to e-mail. This gives us a verifiable record of all transactions and also allows me to copy and paste the communications into our newsletter and Web pages. It also speeds up the progress of some of these dialogs.

Following Robert de Boer's inquiry in September we received a note from Robert Cioffi in defense of phony psychic Elizabeth Joyce. Our Web page on challenge histories lists 23 people who have contacted us about the prize. This list is not exhaustive. Some of the inquiries have been abortive and incomplete. We would receive a brief note (sometimes nasty), then no more. Some others I have neglected to post, putting this chore off for quieter moments. The Challenge activity page is at the following link:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/challenges.htm>

A number of the contacts eventually progressed to informal demonstrations. We require some sort of demonstration prior to taking on the time and expense of a formal test. A successful test under controlled conditions is required before we will award the prize. To this date nobody has ever progressed to a formal test. Those who showed up for a demonstration invariably failed to bring along anything to demonstrate.

This is to be expected, because what these people claim is the ability to do the impossible. One person said he could look at a map of my house and determine where I had placed my digital camera. Another said that if I wrote a word on a piece of paper (without letting her see what I wrote) she would be able to tell me what word I had written. One person said he could move small objects with his mind.

All these things are impossible, and we are prepared to pay the prize to anybody who can actually do them. Even though we caution people to carefully test their abilities in advance, they still come, and they still fail to show anything positive. I think these people do not really test themselves before coming, even though they tell me that they have. It would appear there is more wishful thinking than real action going on.

In the previous issue we mentioned Anita Ikonen who claims powers of medical dowsing. After a bit of back and forth we received this note from Anita:

As if by special request, there may be a much simpler test protocol possible! I did readings on three skeptics last night and in one of those, while the person was sitting with their back against me, I saw that she had very dark brown eyes, unusually brown eyes. This was one of my strongest perceptions of her.

Yet logically I was having a hard time believing it could be true, because of her fair complexion and hair color. When after the reading she turned around and I saw her eyes, they were indeed unusually brown!

I will perform more readings on skeptics in which I try to determine their eyecolor. If I am successful, this would provide with a testing protocol which would be ridiculously easy to set up!

I will keep you updated!

She has not kept us updated. Some weeks after receiving this note I sent an e-mail to Anita asking if she is still interested in going for the prize. I have received no additional communications from Anita Ikonen.

In November of this year we received two additional inquiries concerning the prize.

Justin Johnson lives in Georgia, and he says he has special ESP powers. After an initial e-mail and a reply from me I did not hear any more from Justin. Finally I received this:

I'm sorry that I didn't reply sooner but i've been sort of busy. I will like to show and prove to you and your associates that I have esp-telepathic abilities that I have started to develop and is getting stronger I guess the older I get! To tell you the truth all you have to do is meet with me and you will see or hear. So I will like to get started as soon as possible with the process. My home number is (229)xxx-xxxx and my cell is (229)xxx-xxxx. Thank you for caring about my claim. Hope to talk to you soon! (Justin Johnson)

I have blanked out Justin's phone numbers as I always try to do, because I don't want to be responsible for his receiving phone calls from a bunch of kooks who may read this on-line.

Justin can't come to Texas for a demonstration, so that may be all we get from him.

Fernando Quezada lives in Alamo, Texas, and he says he has telepathic abilities. After an initial dialog we settled on a simple mind reading demonstration, which he says he has tested with other people and is sure is the real thing. Alamo, Texas, is not far from where I live, so we may soon have a report on a demonstration by Fernando Quezada. I will provide an update as new details emerge.

Readers of this column don't have to sit idly by waiting for events to transpire. You can get involved in the North Texas Paranormal Challenge. What is required primarily is to become an underwriter. Right now the prize is \$12,000, and we have five underwriters, making each of us responsible for \$2400 of the total.

I am retired, living on Social Security and some retirement funds, but I could pony up my share if the need ever arises. For one thing, I consider there is zero risk involved. That's because the probability of having to pay for the impossible is zero and zero times \$2400 is still zero. That's a lot safer than the stock market and safer even than some banks. And besides, there is a lot of fun involved.



Vortexes of the mind

by John Blanton

It's a nice vacation spot. Great place to live, too, if you can afford it.

Sedona occupies a spectacular valley at the end of Oak Creek Canyon in western Arizona. This area is known as Red Rock Country owing to the magnificent red sandstone cliffs that adorn the canyon walls and the local mesas. It also hosts a thriving business in the woo-woo arts.

The resort advertised a free lecture by Pete A. Sanders, Jr. on the scientific explanation of vortexes. We were intrigued. A



A premier vortex shop in Sedona

Photo by John Blanton

scientific explanation would be immensely gratifying. Besides, what is a vortex, anyhow?

Another lecture preceded the one by Sanders. This was given by a geologist named Howard, and it lasted 30 minutes. Unfortunately, Howard did not give out his last name, but this was most likely geologist Howard Green, who runs the local Redstone Tours. Howard's talk was straight forward, informative, factual and interesting to a maximum degree. That's what real science is like. At the end you really wanted him to hang around for a few hours more.

However, Pete Sanders was up next, and he fascinated us with his explanation of vortexes.

I've been to Sedona a number of times and shortly became aware of the area's fascination with vortexes and other paradigms of the paranormal. One can imagine that with all the cliffs, mesas and buttes there would be wind vortexes

galore. You would be mistaken if you associated wind vortexes with the vortex industry that permeates Sedona.

Pete Sanders was going to explain what a vortex is. We were going to learn. If only we did.

A Sanders handout elaborated on all the vortex and other woo-woo activities available in the region. The four-page "Free Soul News" featured a various items of interest. A partial list will give a shallow peek into the industry:

- Explaining angels & Guides thru Science
- Who Are Your Guides ["Your Guides are Souls that have mastered life on Earth or at least major portions of it dealing with your Life Purpose."]
- Guides Connections to the Expansive Energy
- Tapping Vortexes in Sedona and Beyond
- Advanced Soul & ESP Materials

I am going to guess that Pete Sanders' primary source of income is his lecture fees and training seminars. He advertises the following:

- New Advanced DVD for Living AS a Soul
- *Access Your Brain's Joy Center* Plus NEW Combo PTSD Relief DVD [\$17.50]
- Connect with ALL Your Angels Free Soul's 30th Winter Retreat

Plus some more.

Pete Sanders will have to forgive me, but I am going to attempt to summarize my notes from his talk. Here is what it's all about.

Vortexes are sources (or not) of spiritual energy. Upflows are positive sources and inflows are energy sinks. Mesas (flat-topped geological formations) are upflow sites. The Grand



Disregard the CLOSED sign. Another sign says a reader is available now.

Photo by John Blanton

Canyon to the north of Sedona is the most powerful inflow site in the United States. Machu Picchu and Mount Shasta are powerful upflow sites.

The human limbic brain is the source of our negative feelings, and enhanced energy sites help us to soar and get over the energy horizon.

And that's about it. We anticipated receiving some sort of scientific explanation of vortexes. We were disappointed. We were not surprised.

It's hard (read "impossible") to loiter around Sedona for more than a few minutes without coming face to face with the town's industry in the paranormal. Way out west there are a lot of rocks and fossils, and every place has a few rock shops. Crystals are popular items, and it is inevitable that magic crystals are also for sale in Sedona. A partial list of businesses in the region will include:

- Aromatherapy
- Crystal power
- ESP
- Psychic readings
- Reflexology
- Vortex tours
- Yoga

Sedona and the Red Rock region are spectacularly beautiful and worth the trip. I let my camera roam and capture some images of that beauty and also a touch of the woo-woo business.



Lynn Margulis

by John Blanton

And what does this have to do with the Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC)?

Lynn Margulis was a rebellious and at the same time respected evolutionary biologist. She was also the former wife of Carl Sagan. Her death at the age of 73 was announced in November by her son Dorion Sagan.

Here is what the CSC had to say:

Margulis was no proponent of intelligent design and as far as I'm aware, she was a materialist. But she was a materialist who was critical of the orthodox neo-Darwinian viewpoint, and she took a lot of heat for that. At the very least, for this Dr. Margulis should be admired as a scientist who was courageous enough to say what few others have been willing to say.

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/11/lynn_margulis_a053421.html

Margulis was famous for her proposal that much evolutionary progress has been made by the marriage of divergent organisms. Specifically, bacteria have invaded eukaryotic cells and become part of their life process, lending their own DNA to the eukaryotic cell's tree of life.

She is one of the people who, if you believe the CSC's story line, should have been *Expelled*. The theme of the video by that name is that those who speak out against Darwinian

evolution, including respected scientists, need to fear expulsion from the scientific community and even loss of employment.

The video depicts Guillermo Gonzalez, an astronomer who was unable to obtain tenure at the University of Iowa, where he was then an assistant professor. Gonzalez was a strong advocate of Intelligent Design and had co-produced a video *The Privileged Planet* that argues for the careful design of a universe suited for human life. He is currently a senior fellow of the CSC.

Expelled also cites Richard Sternberg. Sternberg was previously editor of a respected scientific journal, *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*. Without the knowledge or the involvement of others on the journal staff he published a paper advocating Intelligent Design by Stephen C. Meyer, one of the CSC founders. Reaction and condemnation of the paper and Sternberg's actions followed, and the CSC asserted this resulted in Sternberg's leaving the journal and losing his office space at the Smithsonian Institution.

Expelled cites other cases, and the full story has been laid out by the National Center for Science Education. See the following link:

<http://www.expelledexposed.com/>

In any event, Margulis should have featured prominently in *Expelled*. But she was not, and there is a reason. Even though Margulis put forward some outlandish ideas and various radical proposals, she taught biology at Boston University for 22 years and was on the University of Massachusetts at Amherst faculty since 1988. At no time was she *Expelled*.

Apparently her trick to avoid expulsion was to stick to the facts as she knew them. She did not come into the class room to promote an agenda derived from political or religious

ideology. Where the CSC fellows seem short on sincerity, Margulis put forward ideas based on earnest scientific research. Besides, much of her work produced results that led to useful knowledge and a better understanding of her science. Nothing of the sort has ever come from Intelligent Design.

I have to wonder, then, why the CSC chose to bring up the Margulis case. I am guessing they are forgetting their erstwhile support of *Expelled* and the make-believe stories of persecuted creationist heroes. Else they think *we* have forgotten.

My thinking is they will support anybody or anything that shows opposition to Darwinian evolution in the belief that the fall of *Darwinism* will leave an opening for the supernatural in the study of science. In this opposition to Darwinism sincerity and consistency are the first casualties. Intellectual integrity is another. These supposed pillars of religious morality are at the base liars. They can proceed in no other way.



Skeptical sources

by John Blanton

A benefit of working up items for the Web site is researching the many skeptical resources available on the Internet. Here is a short list, in no particular order. Have fun.

Pharyngula: I have previously mentioned PZ Myers' blog. PZ is a notorious skeptic, taking on creationists and other purveyors of pseudo science with a relish. His intense atheistic bent is overt in many of his postings.

<http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/>

Evolution News: This is the blog of the creationist Center for Science and Culture sponsored by the Discovery Institute. You will see posts by famous creationists here and all manner of defenses of Intelligent Design.

<http://www.evolutionnews.org/>

The Panda's Thumb: This has been around in one form or another since nearly the dawn of the Internet. This is the go-to site for debunkers of creationism.

<http://www.pandasthumb.org/>

Respectful Insolence: "Orac is the *nom de blog* of a (not so) humble pseudonymous surgeon/scientist with an ego just big enough to delude himself that someone, somewhere might actually give a rodent's posterior about his miscellaneous

verbal meanderings, but just barely small enough to admit to himself that few will."

<http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/>

Thoughts from Kansas: "Joshua Rosenau spends his days defending the teaching of evolution at the National Center for Science Education. He is formerly a doctoral candidate at the University of Kansas, in the department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. When not battling creationists or modeling species ranges, he writes about developments in progressive politics and the sciences."

<http://scienceblogs.com/tfk/>

National Center for Science Education: This group has been around for at least 25 years, supporting the teaching of sound science and especially opposing the teaching of creationism in the public schools. Subscribe to their free, weekly e-mail newsletter.

<http://ncse.com/>

Robert Park: Bob Park is an emeritus professor of physics at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is "former Director of Public Information at the Washington office of the American Physical Society." He is a profound skeptic, and he has been blogging since before the concept had a name. We periodically reprint choice selections from his *What's New* blog in the newsletter. His too thin book *Voodoo Science* is a must read.

<http://www.bobpark.org/>

The North Texas Skeptic: Yes, we try to make this newsletter a useful source of skeptical information. Our Web site contains practically all past issues. There is also a Web News page containing skeptical news extracts from Internet sources going back over 10 years.

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

and

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news.htm>

Skeptical Analysis: I have started posting skeptical extracts from pieces I have previously contributed to the newsletter in addition to items that will never see print anywhere else. The site is not pure rational skepticism, but also deals with current politics, religion and daily life.

<http://specularphoto.com/blog/>

Skeptical readers should forward to me suggestions for additions to this list:

skeptic75287@yahoo.com



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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.

The alternatives: symposium examines quack cures.

Sadly, the death of Steve Jobs from pancreatic cancer came just a month before the Lorne Trottier Public Science Symposium, Alternative Medicine, Under the Microscope was held 7&8 Nov 2011 at McGill University in Montral, Canada. Although its unlikely that alternative medicine contributed directly to Jobs death, his delay in seeking effective treatment probably did (WN 23 Oct11). Not a scientist, Jobs initially turned to alternative medicine rather than face surgery. The four symposium speakers, Harriet Hall, Paul Offit, Bob Park, and Edzard Ernst, are well-known debunkers of alternative medicine. Free to the public, the symposium was funded by McGill alumnus and benefactor Lorne Trottier. He co-founded Matrox, a computer graphics corporation.

Cancer and causality: Einstein didn't have a cell-phone.

Of the world's 7 billion people, an incredible 5 billion have cell phones (mobiles in most countries). The safe use of mobiles is therefore a global health concern. The response of the World Health Organization was to conduct a huge epidemiologic study aimed at demonstrating a link between cell-phone radiation and brain cancer. The effort was seriously misguided: no such link exists. The study served only to raise widespread public alarm over a nonexistent hazard. Epidemiology, which is the study of health patterns in

populations, is important, but it's not a substitute for science. Science is the organization of knowledge into testable laws and theories. It has been known for more than 100 years that electromagnetic radiation at frequencies below the ultraviolet is non-ionizing, and thus cannot create the mutant strands of DNA that constitute incipient cancers. In 1905, Einstein's miracle year, he theorized that electromagnetic radiation consists of discrete units of energy, now called photons, which are equal in energy to the frequency multiplied by Planck's constant. It marked the origin of wave-particle duality and earned Einstein his 1921 Physics Nobel Prize. His theory is verified every time a cell phone works.

Bob Park can be reached via email at whatsnew@bobpark.org

Another voice stilled

He initially opposed the US entry into WW2, particularly getting involved in another European war. Then he went there in uniform as a writer for *Stars and Stripes*, and he saw the unmitigated evil we were fighting. He was with the troops when they liberated the first of the Nazi death camps and saw the height of inhumanity.

The historical revisionists who want to deny the Holocaust ever happened or that it was justified or that it was greatly exaggerated rejoice every time another eye witness dies and another voice is stilled. Soon there will be no more eye witnesses, and it will be up to those of us remaining to call these deniers what they are—liars and apologizers for atrocity. We should never back down.

Andy Rooney died on 4 November at the age of 92.



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