



# Rational Inquiry



VOLUME 10, ISSUE 2

NEWSLETTER

SPRING, 2005

The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry is dedicated to the encouragement of rational thought in all areas of human affairs. Composed of citizens from every walk of life, and with a variety of technical, scientific, legal, and humanistic backgrounds, the association strives to encourage rational discourse in the life of San Diego. For more information, see page seven.



April's Meeting

## Meet Tomorrow's Scientists

After a talk on earth warming and the speaker's hint of dire events followed by a conference entitled AMERICA IN CRISIS it's only fitting that we change course a bit and present something optimistic.

The April meeting will feature not one, not two, not even three, but five scientists. And we are so proud to bring them to you. They're the winners of our annual Science Fair program. There is no age requirement to being a scientist. These young folks have shown a commitment to critical thinking, unbiased observation, and a determination to follow through. Thus we will welcome them to the world of science.

At press time we hope to have Dr. Elie Shneour, head of the Biosystems Research Institute moderate a program featuring

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## CFI, TRANSNATIONAL ROAD SHOW

By Keith Taylor

After several fits and starts, the Center for Inquiry, Transnational in Amherst, N.Y. finally made it to San Diego with their "Road Show." It was a two-day affair, April 2 and 3. The road show was held at the Holiday Inn by the Bay, and SDARI was privileged to host the affair. I'm particularly pleased that I was not only chosen to give the official welcome but I also served as master of ceremonies. CFI is to be commended for its courage in entrusting such a duty to a guy who writes under the pseudonym "Dipseyp Dumpster."

Dipseyp Dumpster or no, this was a serious affair as indicated by its title, Crisis in America. The program, part of a series of programs also held in Austin, San Francisco, Tucson, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis and Boston, raised questions on a variety of subjects, all of concern to freethinkers.

Another SDARI member, Elie Shneour, gave a talk en-

titled Authority Tops Reason. Elie gave several examples. My favorite: "If any UFO were real, some of the 50,000 US amateur astronomers who scan the sky would have detected them in a walk. Just as two such astronomers on 23 July 1955 independently discovered a tiny comet then more than a billion miles away and 18 months from its closest approach to earth." He summed it up with: "Science is based on reason, but authority continues to trump reason and explains why this is a crisis in the U.S."

CFI sent a couple of its top guns from Amherst. One was David Koepsell, the Executive Director, for the Council for Secular Humanism. Koepsell brought us up to date on the workings of CFI and how a new program is aimed at bringing together skeptics, humanists, and other men and women of reason across the spectrum of issues under siege.

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May's Meeting

## No Nuns in the Nones

At our regular meeting on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Dwain Deets will be speaking on "The Nones." The Nones (rhymes with RUNS) are those who answer "None" when a pollster asks, "What is your religion?" The percentage of Americans in the "None" category has doubled in the past decade. Not much information has been available in years past on the views within this group, primarily because pollsters don't tend to probe

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The top 10 skeptical books (according to an e-Skeptic poll)

1. *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan
2. *Why People Believe Weird Things* by Michael Shermer
3. *Flim Flam! Psychics, ESP, Unicorns and Other Delusions* by James Randi
4. *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* by Martin Gardner
5. *How to Think About Weird Things* by T. Schick and L. Vaughn
6. *The Faith Healers* by James Randi
7. *How We Believe* by Michael Shermer
8. *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe Watcher* by Martin Gardner
9. *The Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen Jay Gould
10. *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud* by R. L. Park

## A Workshop on Communicating Skepticism to the Public

By Barbara B. Hemmingsen

Prior to the start of The Amazing Meeting 3, January 13, 2005, with James Randi and Michael Shermer on stage, Andrew Mayne defined skepticism as the use of the scientific process to understand the world. We must counter the popular image that skeptics are cynics who are inherently negative on various issues. We do this by invoking the scientific method, because it allows us to gain evidence for or against all testable ideas. We need to present evidence to support our statements. For example, in discussing UFOs

demonstrate, don't state how easy it is to fake photos of UFOs. Society benefits from the scientific mindset because our time and money will be spent on solving and understanding rational issues and problems.

The individual skeptic can make an impact. If you possess expertise because you are an academic, a scientist, an educator, a writer, a professional, a skilled hobbyist, or a survivor of the negative effects of an unscientific idea, find a way to communicate your skepticism to the public. Use blogging to put skeptical commentary on the Internet. Write articles for magazines on a topic related to the focus of the magazine. Offer to give lectures to local clubs and groups. Organize events that encourage skepticism. Use the meeting rooms at libraries to discuss, for

example, the top 10 books on science or to show science documentaries followed by discussions. Visit your local library and check out skeptical books (see box); the demand will keep them out of storage. Write critical letters to the editor when a newspaper or magazine is not skeptical enough, and positive letters when a well-researched scientific article is published. Write reviews of

Visit your local library and check out skeptical books; the demand will keep them out of storage.

books; the book review section of [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) provides a way to get the skeptical viewpoint in front of potentially millions of people. Participate in on-line fo-

rum but stick to the facts and avoid/ignore personal attacks. Most of all, avoid working in a vacuum. Find like-minded people to review your ideas and give you honest criticism. This very important part of science leads to the skeptic organization in your town.

Activities of local clubs can be organizing lectures, testing claims, sending out press releases, sponsoring awards and grants to science students, donating science and skeptical materials to schools and libraries. Once the group is active, cover new ground as this keeps the group vital. UFOs and Bigfoot have been done over and over. There are many lively debates in science and society that are worth presenting. Put on public events (e.g., Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>

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## Rational Musings by the President

Last fall several SDARI members were among those who attended a debate at a local Evangelical church. The pastor, who was host and co-moderator of the debate, was introduced as a man whose objective in life is to become a martyr! He explained that Jesus died for all of us, and he hoped to be able to return the favor. He also mentioned his intention to take a group of young missionaries to a certain Muslim country where proselytizing is illegal and apostasy is a terrible sin. He bragged that they would pose as tourists but smuggle Bibles in their luggage. I found it disturbing that a man with aspirations to martyrdom intended to lead young followers into danger. Jim Jones, David Koresh, and Heaven's Gate come to my mind.

In defending the death penalty, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia has said that "for the believing Christian, death is no big deal." (The leader of his Church would disagree with this assertion, and non-Christians might ask what Scalia's religious opinion has to do with interpreting the Constitution.) Andrea Yates felt she was a bad mother, so as a believing Christian she drowned her five children so God would take them. "Death is no big deal," thus came the order during the Crusades, "Kill them all! God will find his own." And the alleged witches and the heretics of Medieval times, after thorough torture, were mercifully given last rites before being burned slowly at the stake.

Sam Harris begins his book *The*

*End of Faith* with the suicide mass murders of 9/11. He describes a hypothetical ceremony wherein the families of the 19 hijackers gather to honor them, not in grief but in celebration! Neighbors bring food and congratulate the parents, for their sons are now martyrs for Allah. With ethnic suicide murders and religious wars, this life is insignificant compared to a reward in paradise.

Jon Krakauer's fascinating *Under the Banner of Heaven* explores the circumstances that led Ron and Dan Lafferty to the very bloody murder of their sister in law and her infant daughter. God told them to do it. The victim refused to let her husband practice plural marriage, so God told Ron to kill her. I saw a death row interview with Dan a few years ago. He was asked whether he ever felt remorse for the deaths. Dan seemed startled at such a naive question, then patiently explained that it would be disrespectful to feel remorse for obeying God. How could one disagree with that?

Many Apocalyptic True Believers are not satisfied to await the second coming of Christ. After nearly 2000 years of waiting, they have decided God needs their help. They consider it their sacred duty to precipitate Armageddon and the Rapture, the bloody fulfillment of End Time prophecies as they interpret them. They believe the Muslim mosque on Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock must be destroyed so the Jewish Temple can be rebuilt, an objective shared by many Orthodox Jews. Israel has thwarted many suicidal attempts to blow up the mosque, at least one by a Fundamentalist Chris-

## SDARI at the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair

By Barbara Hemmingsen

Judges Edvard Hemmingsen, Walt Carver, Paul Wenger, Mary Jane Moore, Harry Sutton, Walter Pagels, and myself took 3 hours total to review the junior and senior projects that had been picked, based on their titles, as potentially within the scope of the SDARI award (rational testing of pseudoscientific claims; discrediting irrational thinking; testing claims of authorities). After the initial screening (done without the presence of the students), about 10 of the junior projects and 2 of the senior projects remained. On re-entering the exhibit hall, the students were all present and the energy level was high. We examined these exhibits and talked to the students. It was unanimously decided that one of the senior projects: "Efficacy of Western and Native American Medicines" by Carly Pandza merited a 2<sup>nd</sup> prize. In the junior division, two 1<sup>st</sup> prizes were awarded: "Mind Control: Could it Happen?" by Dustin Byer and "Genetically Modified Plants: Are Your Foods Wearing Designer Genes?" by Sarah Levin. Also in the junior division, two 2<sup>nd</sup> prizes were awarded: "Are Child Resistant Bottles Safe?" by Courtney Hartung and "Support Democracy: Design Fair Ballots" by Lauren Fratamico.

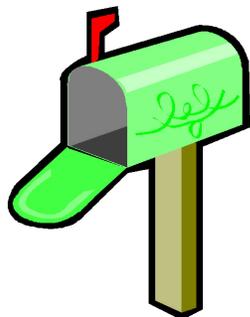
The winners and their guests have been invited to attend the April 24<sup>th</sup> meeting to tell us about their projects and to receive their prizes. Please come to congratulate these fine

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Letters to Editors

## Note: Scopes Didn't Win Until Decades After Trial



ence” and required that it be taught beside evolution. But in the 1987 case of *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the Supreme Court (Justice Antonin Scalia and Chief Justice William

*Ed. note: This letter was published in the “San Diego Union Tribune” on January 8, 2005*

Lionel Van Deerlin’s excellent column on evolution, “Slowing the advance of learning” (Opinion, Jan. 5) might leave readers with the mistaken impression that evolution won a legal victory in the 1925 Scopes trial. In fact, Scopes lost the case and was fined for teaching evolution.

On appeal, the Tennessee Supreme Court threw the case out on a technicality; it took another 43 years, until the 1968 case of *Epperson v. Arkansas*, before it was ruled that laws against teaching evolution violate the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.

Since teaching evolution could not be outlawed, Louisiana declared the creation story of Genesis a “sci-

H. Rehnquist dissenting, Justice Clarence Thomas not yet on the court) ruled that the purpose of creation science is “clearly to advance the religious viewpoint that a supernatural being created humankind.”

Now intelligent design advocates claim to see evidence that life had an “unknown” designer. As with creation science, intelligent design is not science: its purpose is also to advance a religious viewpoint. Of course, this fact will become legally irrelevant if five justices on a reconstituted Supreme Court so choose. Science education may lose again.

Richard Uhrich  
President, San Diego Association  
for Rational Inquiry

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young people and to encourage them in rational thinking.

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this group with further questions. Several polls over the more recent years are beginning to provide some insight into the makeup of the Nones. One noticeable change has been a movement by some people away from any religious identification, but without giving up what they consider a spiritual connection.

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Courtney Hartung, Lauren Fratamico, Carly Pandza, Dustin Byer, and Sarah Levin—teenagers all. The youngsters will present their projects, tell you how they came to their conclusions and answer questions. They will be the stars of the program.

The Science Fair is one of our special projects, and one can all take a great deal of pride in. Let’s make it a big event. We’re treating the winners and their parents to pizza and sodas at 6. They will also use the extra hour to set up their projects. You are encouraged to join us.



## Friday, the 13th Party

In May, following close behind our optimistic Science Fair meeting on April 24 we intend to have a serious but lighthearted look at the world of superstition, our aperiodic Friday 13th party.

Plans are a’builidin for a gala event. We have contracted a magician and a bona fide ersatz fortune teller. You will be able to break mirrors and be guaran-

teed your choice of bad luck. The shorter folks will enter by walking under a ladder. People taller than 6’ 11 1/2 “ must walk around because bad luck increases exponentially with height.

We will also have some very bright folks who will try to explain away what other folks think is magic.

Meantime we need volunteers. Contact Keith Taylor at 619 421 5844 at your own risk.

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obstacle course) that show the undecided an attractive alternative to nonsense.

Randi's guidelines for "The Media Skeptic: encouraging a skeptical attitude in the media" are: (1) establish a list of media persons and offices that you can contact because their previous statements indicate their sympathy for the skeptical point of view; (2) make sure they know

make yourself interesting so that when they need to know, they will call

how to contact you; (3) make a list of academics and authorities to whom you can refer reporters; (4) make a list of web sites they can go to; (5) send letters and make calls to media outlets that tout

pseudoscience; (5) make yourself interesting so that when they need to know, they will call but don't let them use you for comic relief; (6) wave the Randi million dollar prize at them by pointing out that psychics, spoon-benders and all sort of pseudoscientists have not tried for the prize despite their claims; (7) suggest how the reporter can properly test the claims being made and point out that this will add depth to their story; (8) keep a record of the psychic's "predictions" and remind the press when the "predictions" do not come true.

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Book Reviews

*Out of Gas*

*Out of Gas: The End of the Age of Oil* by David Goodstein; W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004, ISBN 0-393-05857-3, 140 pages

Reviewed by Dwain Deets

The author's credentials are among the highest. As vice provost and Grank J. Gilloon Distinguished Teaching and Service Professor at the California Institute of Technology, Goodstein combines the teaching of physics with an application of utmost importance. After reading this book, I don't know if the clear explanation of the laws of physics was more impressive, or his explanation of the momentous energy problem that

faces humankind, together with the physical possibilities of various fixes.

It is probably best to lead with his description of the energy problem. Goodstein recounts that geophysicist Marion King Hubbert who assembled various predictive techniques back in 1956 foresaw that a peak would be reached around 1970 in the oil that could be extracted from the lower 48 states of the U.S. For holding such a pessimistic outlook, Hubbert was ridiculed by nearly all experts in the oil industry. But as 1970 came and went, the peak did occur pretty much as predicted. This Hubbert Peak, now applied on a global basis, predicts a peak some time in this present decade.



Although not all geologists agree with Hubbert's methods, those that do also agree with several corollaries attached to his analysis. One is that a crisis comes when the peak in production is reached. This means a worldwide crisis can be anticipated within a few years.

Goodstein takes the reader from this point of crisis to consider various implications on global phenomena, as we know them today. For example, can we anticipate a beneficial cooling effect as we are forced to cut back on our use of fossil fuels in what otherwise would be a continuation of global warming?

In the last chapter, Goodstein considers a wide range of possible technological fixes that might help to mitigate a devastating impact on our global economy.

Each of the possible technological fixes is examined from the standpoint of some physical principal that either rules out the candi-

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Deets combines his interest in communicating clearly that he gained through Toastmasters, with his interest in systematic analysis that he gained through a career as a flight research engineer with NASA, to provide an interesting approach to this topic. Deets is editor of the SDARI newsletter, *Rational Inquiry*, and is the leader of the San Diego North County Brights which meets in Encinitas.



**CFI** from page 1

And under siege we are. Scarcely a day passes but what some new outrage against reason comes from on high in our government.

Also from Amherst was Joe Nickell. Many of our members may remember his last visit in October 2001. SDARI had been asked to acknowledge the Star of India as an authentic ghost site. We agreed to do so if the Maritime Museum would produce a ghost, and if it could be verified by scientific means. Then we arranged for the world's leading investigator of things paranormal to look for it. Alas, Joe wasn't convinced that cool breezes blowing across the oldest active ship in the world were really ghosts. For the road show, Joe showed us many equally interesting and, almost convincing, claims of paranormal activity.

But Joe showed us why he wasn't convinced.

Jim Underdown, the Executive Director from CFI, West compared the ten commandments from the Bible (at least one of the versions) with his own eleven commandments. You can be sure that Jim's version won't be part of the curriculum of any Sunday School class, but it was much more interesting.

Eddie Tabash, once a speaker for SDARI took ill and couldn't make it. David Koepsell, also an attorney, filled in for him talking about CFI's First Amendment Task Force.

We were disappointed that Paul Kurtz, the driving force behind skepticism and secular humanism for so many years, didn't make it. But he did in a sense. He had pre-

pared a slide show entitled "Humanist Ethics: Can You Be Moral Without Religion?" I read the prepared script based on a similar theme in a couple of Paul's books. Had a bit of trouble with some Greek guy's name, but otherwise I made it through.

The program went well and, as promised, it also served as a fund raiser for CFI. They are adding an extension to their headquarters. At last count our group added ten thousand dollars to their fund.

I pronounce it a weekend well spent, even if I had to listen to Dipsey Dumpster.

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When making public statements, it is important to protect yourself from lawsuits. For example, it is better to say: "Many people believe that Xyz can bend spoons, but in my opinion he cannot" rather than "Xyz cannot bend spoons." If your interview is being taped and you misspeak, make the sequence unusable by the editor by saying the "f" word or by calling the interviewer by the wrong name.

A list of 50 things you can do to encourage critical thinking was compiled by Andrew Mayne and handed out at the workshop. You may obtain a copy by writing to SDARI.

*Barbara B. Hemmingsen is the Treasurer of SDARI.*

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date solution as a viable alternative, or offers some considerations that

most likely would come into play. In conclusion, he finds there to be no magic bullet that will allow our civilization to transition gracefully away from its dependence on fossil fuels.

**The Otherside  
Coffeehouse Chat**

The weekly Freethought Koffee & Konversation now meets on Sundays at 2 p.m. at The Otherside Coffeehouse, located at the Corner of 30th Street and Polk in North Park, two blocks north of University Blvd. This informal get together, sponsored by HASD, is to be held every Sunday except the third Sunday of each month when both HASD and HFSD have their monthly meetings. It is open to everyone who has the price of a cup of coffee, who has a free mind and doesn't mind sharing it.

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tian cult. Needless to say, peace in the Middle East is not the highest priority of these terrorists.

A definition of humanism is "concern with the interests, needs, and welfare of humans." Theistic humanism is not necessarily a contradiction; I believe most theists want to make life better for all. But as with the Lafferty brothers, logic based on faulty premises can lead to very faulty moral judgments. Absolute certainty that life is just a prelude to eternity can lead to the devaluation of life — to the belief that "death is no big deal."

Richard Uhrich

# Membership Application

I would like to join the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. Enclosed is my annual membership fee of \$20 (\$12 for students, seniors, and disabled people, \$6 if younger than 18.)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip+4: \_\_\_\_\_

Special interests: \_\_\_\_\_

Expertise: \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry      Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
P.O. Box 623  
La Jolla, CA 92038-0623      Email: \_\_\_\_\_

For more information contact Keith Taylor at 619-421-5844, or check our website at [www.sdari.org](http://www.sdari.org)



Visit the webpage of SDARI to get the latest information on lectures and other events sponsored by the Association. You also will find other interesting facts and links to other organizations with goals similar to, or related, to ours.

The Webmaster is Harry Sutton.

[www.sdari.org](http://www.sdari.org)

## Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

Public lectures are held at 7 p.m. on the fourth Sunday of the month (except December.) The location of the meetings is the Joyce Beers Community center, at the intersection of Vermont and 10th Ave. in the Hillcrest area, near Ralphs and Trader Joe's markets (in Uptown District shopping Center.)

The lectures are free, but a donation of \$5 is suggested.

## We need your support!

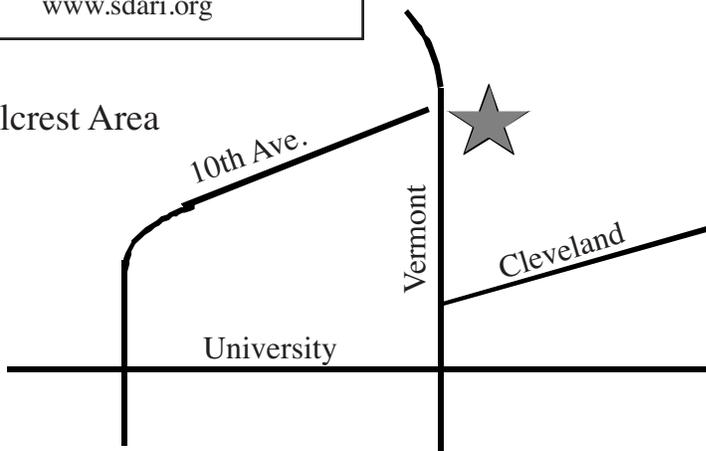
Please renew your membership. It costs to print and mail this newsletter and promotional fliers, award Science Fair prizes, and occasionally, to defray a small expense for the speaker. SDARI has been granted federal tax-exempt status. Donations are deductible under section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code.

## Submission of Manuscripts

Articles, essays, book reviews, letters to the editor, cartoons, and other written material may be submitted to *Rational Inquiry*. Pertinent announcements and clippings are welcome also. The submissions are subject to editing and abridgement. The approval of the author(s) will be sought for changes that materially affect the content. Published material becomes the property of SDARI unless copyrighted by the author. Submitted articles that contain copyright material must have the permission from the copyright owners before publication. Such permission must be submitted to the editor in writing. Anonymous material will not be considered.

Please send material for publication to the editor at [dad2wrk@cox.net](mailto:dad2wrk@cox.net).

Hillcrest Area



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We are on the Web!  
[www.sdari.org](http://www.sdari.org)

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## San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry

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Vice President	Harry Sutton
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## *Up-coming events:*

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In the **Joyce Beers Community Center**  
(see p. 7 for directions):

**Sunday April 24, 2005, 7 p.m.** Science Fair winners will present their projects.

**Friday May 13, 2005, 7 p.m.** Friday the 13th Party.

**Sunday May 22, 2005, 7 p.m.** Dwain Deets will speak on "The Nones," (those who answer NONE when asked their religion).

**Sunday June 26, 2005, 7 p.m.** Speaker to be announced.