



Rational Inquiry

Dare
to
think

VOLUME 10, ISSUE 3

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER, 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.



SDARI Needs You

By Richard Uhrich

Our June speaker, Dr. Bruce Flamm, told us in detail how through years of perseverance he had managed to get a bogus article retracted from a supposedly peer-reviewed journal. He summed it up as not just a personal victory, but as a victory for the integrity and credibility of science. He then said that he hoped the departure of SDARI's current president (me) would not lead to the end of SDARI itself! I was stunned by the thought, then I felt concerned and guilty.

This country is descending into its own Dark Ages. Scientific truth and science policy are increasingly dictated by religious and political dogma. Evidence is becoming irrelevant, and rational thinking is quaint. Even history is faith-based; the supreme law of the land is not the Constitution, but what

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THANKS RICHARD UHRICH

By Keith Taylor

If a hard charging, gung ho person were to seek the most challenging job in town, that person might well start with being president of any volunteer group. The pay is worse than terrible. It's nonexistent. More often than not the president simply coughs up the shortage for small expenses. When things go wrong or a bad decision is made the slings and arrows are aimed at the guy atop the masthead. And don't ask about the hours!

It takes a lot of guts for a person to volunteer for such a position. One who did is leaving and he did himself proud.

I feel pretty good about it too because, a year and half ago, I first approached him for the job. I'd served four years as president. Then, under strong urging from my wife, stepped down. My successor, Todd Rockhold, was finishing up his second year and was planning on moving out of the area.

For some reason there is no long line of aspirants

seeking the most challenging, and far too often, least appreciated job in town. We had to go looking. I approached a fellow who attended every meeting in a wheelchair, and one who got in the middle of every Q and A session with the most insightful and penetrating questions.

I asked, "How would you like to run our group. We need a president."

My prospective president pointed out something that I hadn't realized. He was not only unable to walk he was a quadriplegic. "Could SDARI use a president so handicapped?"

He was forthright and deserved a forthright answer. I didn't know. So, before making any further overtures, I passed the buck on to the Board of Directors. We determined that his handicap wouldn't affect his most important attribute, his obvious ability to think rationally.

Richard Uhrich has been

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July's Meeting

More BS

Perhaps more than anything else SDARI fights BS, and we're not talking about bachelor-of-science degrees. BS, the classic euphemism, is rife in our country, particularly in the media. Thus it's appropriate that a media outlet in the form of the outrageous Penn and Teller take a whimsical look at it.

For our next meeting, July 24, we will present a few more of their out-

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we are told the authors **really** meant — never mind the Federalist Papers, Anti-Federalist Papers and other contemporary documents. The American Taliban wants to legislate belief, and sees this as no conflict with freedom of speech or religion.

I'm preaching to the choir of course. We generally do, with our fascinating lectures, our publications and our SDARI Yahoo! Group. We have about 120 members, about what we did when I was elected. Thirty or forty show up each meeting. San Diego has over a million people, and most read little, watch TV infotainment "news" and consider themselves informed. We are a small candle.

After that meeting, Walt Carver came up to me and said the most reassuring thing he could have: "If SDARI needs me, I'll do anything necessary." We can't fail with that attitude. I hope he runs for office.



June's Meeting

An Entanglement of Prayer, Stonewalling, and the Ivy League

By Keith Taylor

On June 27 SDARI members heard an irate professor of medicine take on an icon of science, Columbia University, or at least a department of that university. The department sponsored a bizarre study of how prayer could affect the efficacy of a heroic medical method to facilitate becoming pregnant. It was not only prayer, it was in vitro fertilization-embryo transfer. IVF without prayer has never been considered divine intercession. In fact, IVF is forbidden by the Catholic Church.

But is IVF enhanced by prayer? Well, yes, if you believe the study.

Dr. Bruce L. Flamm didn't. He is a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UC Irvine. He long recognized the study as shoddy science. He tried to get answers, but was stonewalled by the participants in it and by the publisher, the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*.

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a fine president. With his leadership we had a couple programs that might have folded because of what looked like insurmountable difficulties. We hosted the most prominent defender of teaching science, not religion disguised as science in our classrooms. Dr. Eugenie Scott gave a lecture at an out of the way auditorium on a rainy Monday night and we nearly filled the joint. We also overcame all sorts of snags to bring a major CFI conference to San Diego — raised ten

It took an investigation by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services to bring the attention of the case to the public. Of the three folks who authored the "peer reviewed" article, one admitted he had no part in the study at all and hadn't heard of it until at least a half year after it was done. One was neither a doctor nor a scientist but a lawyer, and a slippery one at that. The third was indeed a scientist but also a born-again Christian and hardly unbiased. The lawyer was suspected of fraud at the time of the study, and was later convicted.

One bit of valid evidence was gleaned from the lecture. Even prestigious institutions, such as Columbia, are not immune from pseudo science. If members ever feel the need for groups like SDARI they should simply look at the claptrap foisted off on the public by that Ivy League school. □

grand for CFI too.

As a past president of four years, let me tell you that wasn't easy. He has promised to remain a member and will investigate starting a skepticism chapter in the Beaver State.

Thanks Richard. You were the right guy at the right time and I'm glad I didn't know the extent of your handicap when I first asked you to become president.

I might not have done it and we would have been the loser.



Rational Musings by the President

The phrase “separation of church and state” does not appear in the Constitution, I’m often reminded. Neither are the words “God,” “Jesus,” or “Christian.” (“We forgot,” Alexander Hamilton once explained.)

At the time of the Revolution, most Colonies had established religions. But the Declaration of Independence says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. —That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” A Creator’s unalienable rights are mentioned, but “Governments are instituted among Men” to secure these rights.

The Constitution, the supreme law of the land, begins with “We the people....” Article VI; Clause 3 states, “The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

Jefferson’s three greatest achievements, in his opinion, were authorship of the Declaration of Independence and of the Virginia Statute for

Religious Freedom, and being Father of the University of Virginia. The very first Amendment to the Constitution was a succinct statement of that Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

How should this terse clause be interpreted, and by whom? Since *Marbury v. Madison* in 1803, the Supreme Court has the final word on interpretation and Constitutionality, based ideally on the original intent of the Founders. Ironically, insight into original intent on religious freedom comes from then President Jefferson’s reassurance to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, who feared that some later President might abuse their religious freedom..

Jefferson’s reply to the Danbury Baptists contains the wall metaphor: “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.”

In 1947, in the case *Everson v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court declared, “The First Amendment has erected a wall between

The First Musings

Ed. This is a reprint of the first Musings article by our president. I’m sure you will agree with me that SDARI has been well served under his leadership.

As the new president of SDARI, I plan to fill this space in each issue of the newsletter with personal thoughts on rational inquiry. In this edition I will introduce myself and summarize my perspective on rational inquiry.

I am an engineer, or more accurately, a retired engineer. I retired three years ago after 37 fascinating years with the Navy research laboratory now known as SPAWAR. During essentially all those years I worked on undersea robots for deep-ocean search and recovery. I have also been handicapped for 35 years because of a drunk driver. I married my nurse, Shirley.

I have always been a science nut, and I am a strong skeptic—so skeptical I can hardly believe it,” as Penn Jillette of Penn and Teller once said. These two characteristics shape my attitudes on rational inquiry. As science nut, I enjoy reading an eclectic range of popular science books, magazines, and Internet sources. Since retiring, I have time to really study whatever subject interests me. A former instructor of mine wrote, “An unfortunate corollary of having a small minority knowing more and more about less and less is a large majority knowing less and less about more and more.” I am trying to counter this corollary by learning a little bit about a lot of things. Because of my interest in and general

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Friday-the-13th Event

Dipsey Dumpster on TV

church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach.” Jefferson’s “wall of separation of church and state” metaphor had become so familiar that it was considered synonymous with the First Amendment establishment clause.

Richard Uhrich



By Dipsey Dumpster

There I was on TV, looking as serious as a guy wearing a name tag reading both “Dipsey Dumpster” and “Keith Taylor” could look. Andrea Nakano, Channel 8’s news reporter, was doing a slot on our program, “Challenge Your Superstitions.”

SDARI was holding an exhibition spoofing some of our most outra-

geous beliefs, on Friday the 13th no less!

As usual we had the Joyce Beers community Center for the event. And as usual, when something out of the ordinary comes up things go wrong.

The San Diego Astrology Society booked the room for the same time. It would have been a cosmological wonder if a group teaching the position of the stars holds the answers to mankind’s problems shared a room with a group that contends that astrology has failed every single scientific test. A ruckus was in the offing.

I hate ruckuses. So does Barbara Hemmingsen. Using a large dose of common sense and the wisdom that makes a good science professor, Dr. Hemmingsen simply suggested that we move outside and let the astrology folks use the room as they’d planned.

And lo a miracle came to pass. Two groups as divergent as possible coexisted in the same area, if not in the same room. We even got along amicably.

Despite our high hopes it was a disappointing evening. Most of our visitors were those folks heading for the astrology lecture. They were polite but few wanted to break a mirror or walk under a ladder. The hordes we expected stayed away.

Then, a miracle! Channel 8 showed up. The reporter, Nakano, said, “Take me to your leader.” The other SDARI folks all pointed at me.

Letters to Editors

Leading Skeptic Succumbs to Official Story

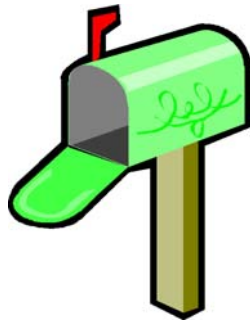
This letter was sent to the editors of Scientific American magazine. To date, the letter has not been published.

To the Editors,

What a disappointment to see the shabby article in your June issue by Michael Shermer [“Fahrenheit 2777”]. Shermer, the leading authority on skeptical thinking, belies that reputation by demonstrating how not to be a critical thinker.

Shermer apparently decided going in that the 9/11-truth movement is nothing but a classical urban legend at work. He then cherry picked some of the more outlandish propositions that are out there to cast ridicule on the whole mass of contrary thought that has grown against the official 9/11 story.

One of his points is that surely at



least one of the thousands of conspirators needed to pull it off would have come forward as a whistleblower who would go on TV or write a tell-all book. Pure

rhetoric in my opinion. Who is to say it would take thousands of conspirators? And what are the chances any whistle-blower would be taken seriously, while risking severe personal economic repercussions in the process?

Please have someone that is more dedicated to critical inquiry look into some of the more important discrepancies. I would rather have an explanation as to how an unskilled terrorist pilot could have performed an extremely difficult flying maneuver to cause a large civil transport to strike the Pentagon, than hear what a would-be film maker thought might have happened to flight 77.

Dwain Deets
Leucadia, CA



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June's Meeting

SDARI Introduced to the Nones

By Dwain Deets

At the May 22nd meeting, I introduced the audience to the Nones, pronounced NUNS. These are those who, when asked their religion, answer NONE. Although quite a few charts were presented, one that drew many audience comments is shown below. The numbers shown in this chart were published by retired sociologist/statistician Otis Dudley Duncan in *Free Inquiry* (February 2004).

The solid arrow flowing clockwise depicts one generation of Nones. Starting at the top at "Starters," which represents a population that were raised in a family having no religion. The width is proportional to the number of these people. One generation later, when the band wraps around to the big solid arrow labeled "New Level," the number of

Nones has doubled. (This is representative of the doubling of the Nones that actually occurred in the decade of the 1990's).

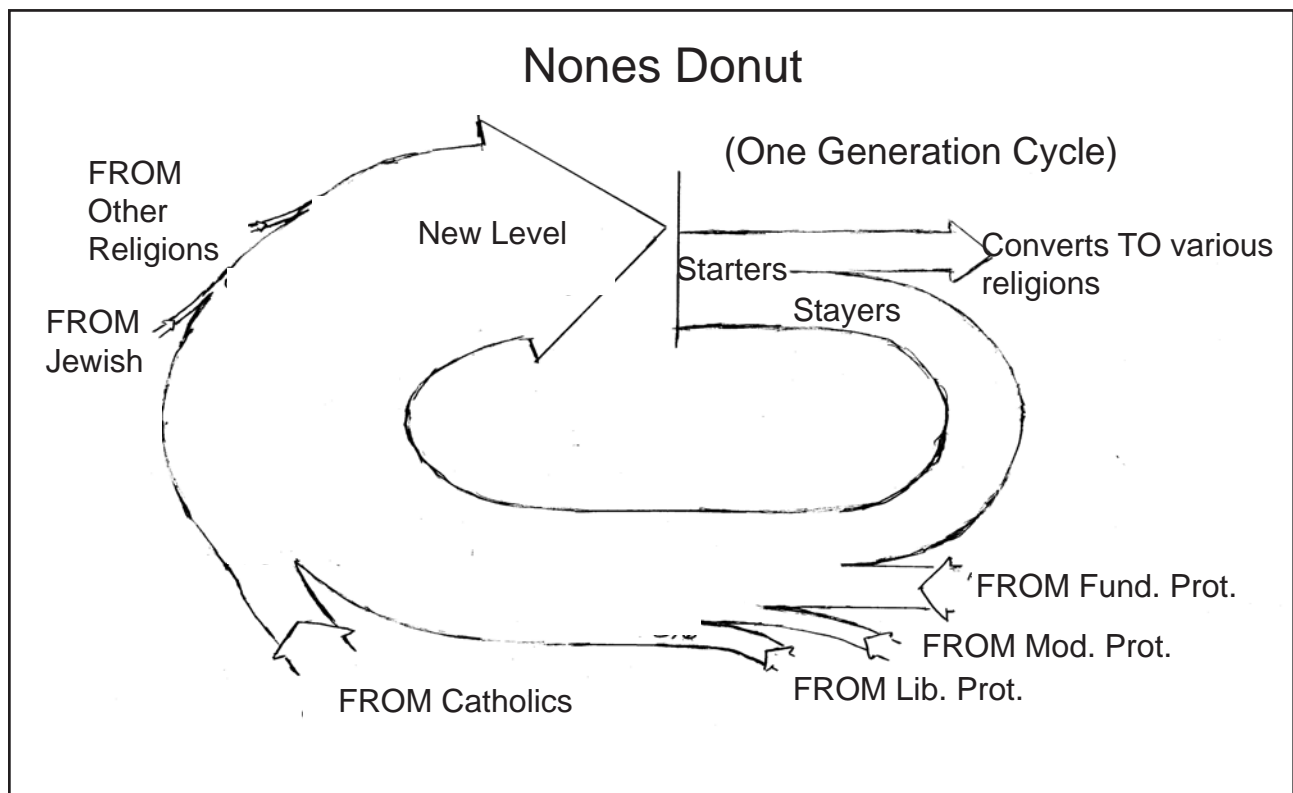
Returning to the beginning of the cycle, 58% of the Starters continue as Nones as they grow to adulthood, labeled Stayers. The remainders convert to one religion or another.

Across the bottom are shown the converts from the major religions. The widths of the "onramps" are proportional to the numbers of new Nones. The converts from fundamental Protestantism and Catholics represent the two largest additions to the Nones. Much smaller in size are the additions from moderate Protestantism, liberal Protestantism, Jewish, and other religions. Most of the variations in sizes are because of the relative sizes of the various groupings of religions, but there are

interesting differences in rates of conversion among the religions as well.

Most interestingly, the net converts from Catholicism to Nones represents 47% of the overall net increase to Nones. If the number of Catholics that convert to Nones is divided by the number of Nones that become Catholics, that ratio is an interesting metric. For those with at least one year of college, the ratio is 17 to one. Though the number is dramatic in a direction favorable toward non-religious worldviews, there are a number of indications it represents people who want to disassociate themselves from the Catholic Church because of all the negative publicity and/or political ramifications. This disassociation doesn't

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I escorted the young lass through the hurdles. She, like the astrology folks, refused my invitation to walk under a ladder. She wondered about the exhibit where one could toss a black cat in a hat. I explained, "Oh that? We just made it up, but believe me it's just as valid as the other superstitions."

The young reporter was reluctant to have her fortune told by SDARI's amazing psychic sock puppet, actually a zany gal sitting under a table poking the sock puppet up through a hole in the hole. The reporter's reluctance didn't matter to Zany. As soon as the young reporter and her cameraman got near she shouted, "For heaven's sake don't ask me about your job future!"

Perhaps intrigued (or worried?) Nakano tentatively asked about her love life. The sock puppet moaned, "Oh God, that's even worse."

We moved on. The reporter didn't want to smash a mirror. I even promised that if she did not have bad luck in seven years she'd get double her money back. Finally I paid the fee.

All visitors were given a choice of horoscopes. One was computer generated. Another we made out of whole cloth. Both were equally valid.

Loch David Crane, one of San Diego's top magicians, read her mind, told her fortune and made his billfold burst into flame. The billfold made a great shot on TV, Nakano's mind didn't.

Then she interviewed me standing under a ladder. I was hoping I'd look about 45 or so (I didn't). She asked if I wasn't nervous standing

there.

"Why?" I asked.

She said, "Suppose something bad happens."

I said things like, "Bad things will happen. I will get old and die. Pseudo science will be taught alongside science and kids will not learn the difference. But, those things all happen for a reason, not because of something paranormal. We have enough real problems to worry about without making up stuff. Bad things happen according to the law of averages."

She asked if we weren't just making fun of people through.

"I hope it's more than that. We are serious people using humor to make serious points. That lady you just talked to is the Professor Emerita of Microbiology at San Diego State. The head of Biosystems Research Institute in La Jolla just left. He holds two scientific doctorates and is a member of the National Academy of Science. We are very serious and we really want people to think."

My line "Bad things happen according to the law of averages" made it on TV.

Still we made it and I hope we really induce folks to think. This world is confusing enough without substituting silly ideas for science and rational thought.

Ed.: This article originally appeared in VoiceofSanDiego.org



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necessarily translate into a change in their personal beliefs.



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knowledge of science, I am particularly sensitive to claims that either attack science or try to co-opt it with pseudo science.

My strong skepticism can be illustrated by a discussion I had in an Internet news group. An acquaintance argued that in the absence of evidence for or against a claim, no matter how extraordinary, the only rational response is to withhold judgment. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, right? I used an analogy to illustrate my opinion that the rational default opinion of such claims is disbelief. Most parents encounter the question of whether there are monsters under a child's bed. We have no evidence of children being lost to under-bed monsters, but we can't actually prove there won't be an exception tonight. So do under-bed monsters exist? Until or unless someone produces convincing evidence, I say it is rational to believe they do not.

But I could be wrong.

Richard Uhrich



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rageous programs and discuss them. We will avoid rerunning those we ran earlier and, for good measure, those shown at a recent Humanist meeting. They will be all new.

Please join us. You'll get a chance to voice your opinion

The presentation is courtesy of SDARI member Paul Wegner, and we appreciate it.



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: _____

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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



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

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!

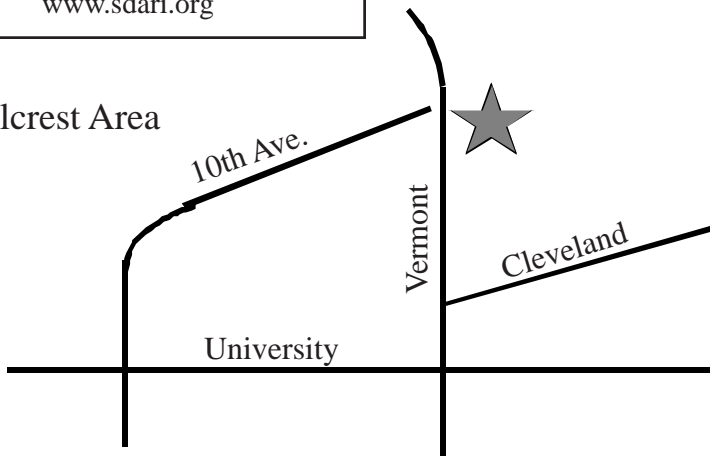
Please renew your membership. It costs to print and mail this newsletter and promotional fliers, award Science Fair prizes, and occasionally, to defray a small expense for the speaker. SDARI has been granted federal tax-exempt status. Donations are deductible under section 170 of the Internal Revenue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

Hillcrest Area



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We are on the Web!
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Up-coming events:

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

Sunday July 24, 2005, 7 p.m. Penn
& Teller tapes, followed by discussion.

Sunday August 28, 2005, 7 p.m.
Speaker to be announced.

Sunday September 25, 2005, 7 p.m.
Speaker to be announced.