



Rational Inquiry

Dare
to
think

VOLUME 11, ISSUE 2

NEWSLETTER

SPRING, 2006

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.



May Meeting

Search for the Historical Jesus

Christianity is the pervasive religion of the western world, and Jesus Christ is the focus of that religion. But what do we really know about the life of Jesus? The canonical Gospels tell a story which is widely believed but in some respects inconsistent. What do non-Gospel sources have to say and how do they related to the Gospel stories? What do we really know about the historical Jesus? Our speaker for May 2006 will discuss these questions posed by various books and other sources.

Harry Sutton is a past President of SDARI and former Christian with a deep interest in investigating the beliefs of Christianity. While not himself a biblical scholar, he has read extensively about this subject. His presentation will be as objective as possible, but is certain to be controver-

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U.S. SCIENCE IS AT RISK

By Elie A. Shneour

SDARI members who participate in the informative fourth Sundays meetings are well aware of the problems that increasingly affect the dominance of the United States in scientific and technological issues. But first, it is useful to remind the reader that the words science and technology that are used interchangeably are two quite different matters: Science is a way of thinking while technology is a way of doing. To be sure, these two are interconnected and inhibiting science will affect technology and vice versa. For example, the development of chromatography, a wide range of chemical and biological separation technologies, made major scientific discoveries possible, such as how photosynthesis (the absorption of solar energy by green plants to produce sugars, starches and oxygen, among other substances) works. Of course, all of this cost a ton of money, but the taxpayer got his

money's worth and then some. It is no longer certain that this will continue unabated. India and China in particular are poised to move ahead of us.

Since it is primarily the government that funds research through the National



Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense and a host of other agencies, scientists are to some extent constrained to pay the piper. After World War II and the huge success of a wide variety of technologies to win that war, including penicillin, the electronic computer, the development of nuclear energy, manned and unmanned spacecrafts, scientists for a

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Rational Musings by the President

Our EarthFair booth did very well, we had a good location and many visitors. Many young people and many women expressed an interest in our group. Most of the visitors applauded our efforts to promote reason and critical thinking, but expressed skepticism that we could succeed in this culture. My feeling is that much of their doubt is caused by the current political climate.

Both *Skeptic* (Skeptics Society) and the *Skeptical Inquirer* (CSICOP) donated magazines and promotional materials that we handed out. *The Humanist* (American Humanist Association) mailed me a box of material that never arrived, but they were very helpful and e-mailed me some materials that I printed out and distributed. I received no response from *Free Inquiry* (Council for Secular Humanism); I'm assuming that my letter to them was lost because they were very generous last year.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) were our neighbors, and we are going to try to convince author and *Free Inquiry* columnist Sam Harris to speak at one of our groups. I saw several of our members at the last AU meeting and, as many of you know, I actively promote interaction and cooperation between the many freethought groups, and any group with which we share goals and philosophies.

Another one of our neighbors at

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SDARI Judges at Science Fair

by Barbara Hemmingsen, Chair,
SDARI Science Fair Committee

SDARI showed an enthusiastic presence at the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair on March 29, 2006. Judges Edvard

presence of the students), about 20 of the junior projects and 5 of the senior projects remained. On re-entering the exhibit hall, the students were all present; the energy level could light up a city. We examined



Hemmingsen, Walt Carver, Paul Wenger, Mary Jane Moore, Harry Sutton, Jim Rockoff, Meredith Fidler, Diane Holland, Dwain Deets, Dee Deyanat-Yazdi, Kate Hunter, Mike Cleary, Richard Payne, and myself took 1 hour 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 this initial screening (done without the

the chosen exhibits and talked to the students. It was unanimously decided that one of the senior projects: "Effects of Magnetic Pole Reversals on Mealworms" (Samuel Spevack, Valhalla High School) deserved the Ernie Ernisse Award, the first time this 1st place prize has been awarded. Two 2nd prizes went to senior projects: "The Mozart Effect and Spatial Temporal Reasoning: Revisited for Verification" (Hoa Truong, Mt. Miguel High School)

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Two Travel Adventures that should Tweek Your Interest...

The Amazing Adventure: Escape from the Bermuda Triangle



Join James Randi, Michael Shermer, Banachek and Hal Bidlack from August 27 through September 2nd, 2006 for an exclusive cruise

through the Bermuda Triangle, and then on to Key West, Cozumel and CocoCay! Dine and chat with the guests throughout the entire cruise, attend private lectures, and attend the Bon Voyage party at the

JREF.

In the off hours, the ship provides an endless array of activities including everything from cooking demonstrations to rock wall climbing.

James Randi Educational Foundation

an educational resource on the paranormal, pseudoscientific and the supernatural

And...

Galápagos Adventure - - May 9-19, 2007 Following in the Footsteps of Darwin

The Center for Inquiry is pleased to announce an exciting and memorable travel opportunity for 2007. Beginning May 9, we will be embarking on a most fascinating journey to the Galápagos Islands with host Paul Kurtz and his guest, Richard Dawkins. Aboard the *M/V Santa Cruz*, chartered exclusively for our unique adventure, participants will explore the lands that are home to flora and fauna not found anywhere else in the world, environments unparalleled in beauty. For a glorious ten days we will follow in the footsteps of one of the most important

scientists of all time.

Visiting the Galápagos Islands is like visiting no other place on earth. This unmatched archipelago is a world away from the mainland, providing an isolated crucible for the mechanism of natural selection wherein organisms are adapted to the environmental pressures of each island.

Just as the Galápagos captured the curiosity of Charles Darwin, providing the catalyst for developing the theory of evolution by natural selection, visitors are inspired and forever altered by all they encounter, learning firsthand how Darwin's ideas came together.

Please join us from May 9th to the 19th for an exclusive adventure in the Galápagos Islands, uniquely prepared for skeptics and secular humanists.

For more information and for reserving your spot for the Center for Inquiry's Galápagos Adventure, please contact 1-800-398-7571 or email cruise@cfiflorida.org.



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the EarthFair was the Clean Elections group. It occurs to me that all of the issues that our members are concerned about; global warming, ID and creationism, separation of church and state, investigating 9/11, and promoting science, to name a few, all of these issues depend on clean elections. I wonder how many Americans don't vote because they don't trust our election system? It's claimed that Stalin said, "The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything." According to polls, most Americans support many of our views, and if this is true, putting these issues to a vote is the most direct way to take action.

The April 20 eSkeptic newsletter (see it at skeptic.com) has an article that examines the skeptical criticism of the current TV shows that contain supernatural elements, shows like *Lost*, *Medium*, and *Ghost Whisperer*. The author agreed that when TV presents supernatural events as being factual, our criticisms are reasonable and justified. But he is concerned that skeptics risk being perceived as elitist and condescending for suggesting that the public is too stupid to know the difference between fact and fiction.

There are many stories of people who believe fictional characters are real people, and actors often report being assaulted by people who have confused them with the character they play on a TV show. And we know, from polls and surveys, that a majority of Americans have some supernatural beliefs. My opinion is that the people who assault actors

are stupid, but that most Americans are just ignorant of the facts. Is TV just a lapdog that tells people what they want to hear, what they already believe, or is TV teaching the public falsehoods that serve their, and their advertisers, bottom-line? Is the public ignorant, or are they willfully ignorant, that is, do they want to be lied to? What do you think?

Should we, the skeptics, seek to eliminate all supernatural references from movies and TV, or would we be losing more than we would gain? My experience is that these programs can enrich and inform our lives. Even the bad ones can be fun and entertaining.

As long as they don't claim to be based on reality, which I find insulting and completely unnecessary, I enjoy movies and TV shows that contain supernatural elements. *The Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone* were and still are very popular because they are not reality. They were promoted as fiction and fantasy, and that is why we love them. When I watch the movie *Them*, I enjoy it more knowing that, in reality, I will never be attacked by giant ants! Who wants to live in a world where Jason and Freddy could really exist? Or the world of the *Final Destination* movies, where the Grim Reaper hunts people down and kills them with gruesome Rube Goldberg-like contraptions? But my tastes are not your tastes, and there clearly are people who enjoy the possibility that monsters, ghosts, and the supernatural could really exist.

When I watch episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, I can feel how appealing it is to want to believe in

March Meeting Report

Science Under Siege

Kevin Keenan, the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of San Diego and Imperial Counties spoke on "Science Under Siege." Keenan narrowed in on three areas where federal government interference is preventing policy from being properly informed by science findings. One is the failure to approve the use of Plan B as a over-the-counter contraceptive. A second is the limitations of federal government sponsorship of embryonic stem cell research. The third is the restrictions placed on scientists from reporting publicly their findings from NASA research regarding climate change.



some of the fantasies—that good always wins, that believing in something can make it true, that the meek will inherit the earth—and this does concern me. But the joy and the pleasure and the lessons learned make it more than worthwhile. Remember the episode where Art Carney becomes Santa Claus, or the one where a woman with a bandaged face dreams of becoming normal, or the one where a Nazi torturer is brought to justice by the ghosts of his victims, or the one where Civil War soldiers are moving down a road past an old Southern mansion, with Confederate and Union soldiers helping each other but always moving forward. All of these episodes teach important les-

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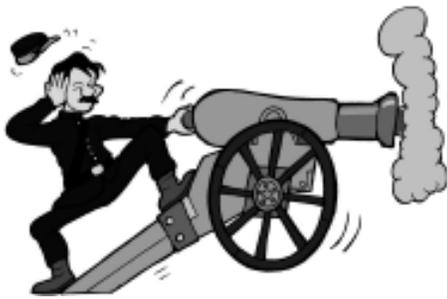
Letters From Members

“Mystery Booms”

This yet-to-be-published letter to the San Diego Union Tribune editor was dated April 24, 2006.

To the Editor,

There is a simple-enough way to solve the problem of the “mystery booms” (April 23, page 1), assuming that a widely-heard one occurs



again. Surprisingly, a “big boom” is heard at quite different times throughout the metropolitan region, because the speed of sound is relatively slow (about five seconds per mile). People who have highly accurate “atomic clocks” (watches or clocks that reset themselves via radio) simply need to note the exact time, where possible to the second, that the boom was heard. Across the region, some of these times will be minutes apart. Knowing the speed of sound, just three accurate time measurements should pinpoint its origin precisely.

Robert Sheaffer



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sons about caring for others, superficiality, vigilance against cruelty and injustice, the brutality of war, and more. It’s probably just my perception, but it seems that inspiration is getting harder to find as the media appeal more and more to the lowest common denominator.

(Trivia question: what fictional character has been played by Robert Redford, Brad Pitt, and Jason Alexander?)

My favorite episode, *The Changing of the Guard*, is about a suicidal professor who is visited by the ghosts of his former students, who all died performing selfless acts. They tell him how his lessons inspired them, and one boy recites part of a poem by Howard Arnold Walter:

I would be true, for there are those who trust me;

I would be pure, for there are those who care;

I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;

I would be brave, for there is much to dare...

I dare anyone to watch this episode without being moved. I would love to see these episodes used to stimulate a discussion of ethics and morality among young people. I think they could be very effective—they worked on me.

To sum up, my experience has been that, as long as they don’t lie and claim to represent reality, shows with supernatural themes can amuse, entertain, educate, enrich, and inspire.



SDARI Yahoo Group

The SDARI yahoo group continues to spew forth thought provoking discussion. If you haven’t experienced the give and take of that group, try it out. Here are the top



subjects over that past several months, as measured by the number of responses. In some cases, there is singing to the choir. In others, strong differences of opinion are a more accurate characterization.

Top on the list was the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, with 21 responses to the original post. The large number of back-and-forth responses was due to some rather strong differences of opinion. Next on the list, at 17, dealt with the religious right. Also tied at 17 was mystery booms. Danish Islam Satire Cartoons came in at 15. Crop circles came in at 10 responses, and 60 Minutes on Global Warming had 9 responses.

These topics give a sampling of subjects that are on the minds of SDARI folk. Contact Harry Sutton if you wish to be added to the group.



Sparking Some Interest in Rational Thinking

By Dwain Deets

These comments come from my brief experience as the marketing guy for Camp Quest West. Generating interest in rational thinking is no doubt similar to trying to start a campfire without a match or log lighter. If only I could get that first spark of interest, surely a blazing fire will follow shortly thereafter.

My initial effort has been directed toward rational thinking groups, as well as other organizations in the freethought community. Surly, if I can stir up their interest, some potential campers will shake out of their trees. But generally what I hear from these groups is they don't have any young people. "Why don't you go talk to organizations with young people?"

My next effort was to try and reach people on the outside. Maybe get an article or two in the newspaper, and that may reach people that otherwise have hardly heard of a secular kind of camp.

However, the first advice that comes my way tells me the media will only be interested if I hook them with the atheist word. Anything else is too bland. It won't sell. I found similar advice from a number of people. In fact, the national Camp Quest was setting out to advertise on the web, and had settled on the website kidscamps.com. Much to my surprise, our own people wanted to list our camps only under the atheist label. I argued for some time to list it under critical thinking, but my argument went nowhere.

Later on, I probed some of those

long time veterans of Camp Quest. Why the insistence on listing it only under the atheist label? After all, the original Camp Quest advertises itself as the first secular camp.

What do you think was the candid answer? Because the reporters are, deep down, looking for something that would put atheists in bad light. Now, then there would be a story! "Atheist camp defaces monument at inspiration point!" That would bring in the readership!

I say this mostly in jest. We have had a great example recently where an atheist became newsworthy largely because he was so level headed and easy to talk to. I'm referring to Hemant Mehta, the atheist that sold his time (1 hour in church for each \$10 of the winning bid) on eBay. The headlines heralded out, "Atheist Sells his Soul for \$504..." Hemant didn't object. He was good-natured about it, and has developed quite a following ever since.



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while could do no wrong and got pretty much the run of the funding. But that was unsustainable, and eventually Congress and the President placed an increasing number of political constraints on what scientists could do, how they could do it and more recently what they could publicly say about it. Unfortunately, political control over the scientific enterprise has reached its nadir un-

der the current Bush administration and now risks unraveling some of what took so long to accomplish on behalf of the entire nation. In March 2004, the Union of Concerned Scientists published a landmark report entitled *Scientific Integrity in Policymaking – An investigation into the Bush Administration Misuse of Science* that documents some of the most egregious assaults on the scientific endeavors in the United States. That report is worth reading, and its full text is available on the Web under www.ucsusa.org. It documents some of the abuse on the integrity of scientific work performed under government sponsorship, and the distressing environment that exists in laboratories doing research particularly in subjects that have a heavy political or religious connotation, such as in climate change, mercury emissions, air pollutants, abstinence-only education, reproductive medicine, stem cells, air born bacteria, endangered species, forest management, OMB rulemaking, and drug abuse. Other civil rights organizations, in particular the ACLU, have been able to successfully challenge some of the government manipulation of scientific conclusions. In a report entitled *Science Under Siege: The Bush Administration's Assault on Academic Freedom and Scientific Enquiry* (June 2005), the ACLU extends the evidence for the widespread restriction of the civil rights of academic scientists. SDARI should be proud of its continuing contribution to the protection of free and rational inquiry in the United States.



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

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and “DNA Barcoding and Bushmeat: A Novel Approach Towards Taxonomy” (Khoa Tran, High Tech High School). We awarded 1st prizes in the Junior Division to projects entitled “Can You Believe Your Eyes?” (Dannielle Noble, Madison Middle School) and “Anti-Bacterial Longevity” (Paul Tran, Preuss School). Second prizes in the Junior Division went to projects “Traffic Light Safety and Improvement” (Michelle Dewez, Marshall Middle School), “Do EMF’s Affect Yeast Growth?” (Ashley Elder, Marshall Middle School) and “How Does Velocity Affect an Electromagnetically Charged Flashlight?” (Brian Templeton, Pershing Middle School).

The winners and their guests were invited to attend the April 23rd

meeting to talk about their projects and to receive their prizes. All responded to the invitation, bringing their project displays and many parents along. They all did an excellent job presenting their projects and answering questions from the audience. Elie Shneour served as master of ceremonies for the event. This opportunity to congratulate these fine young people and to encourage them in rational thinking is one of

the most important activities that SDARI sponsors.



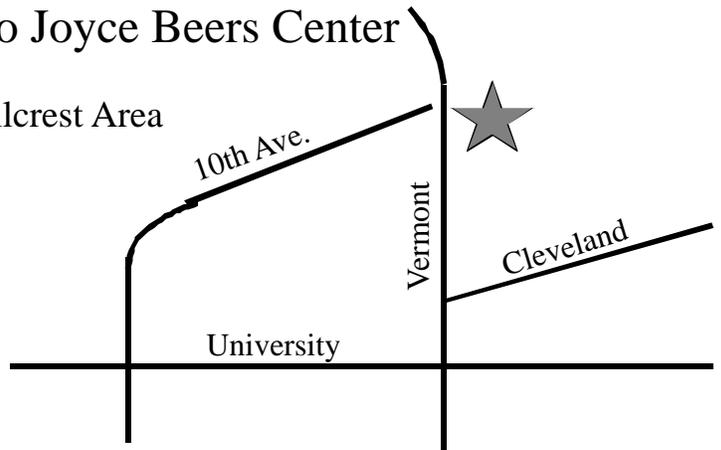
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sial. We invite you to join us in a rational inquiry of this important facet of our lives.



Directions to Joyce Beers Center

Hillcrest Area



The San Diego Association for Rational
Inquiry
P.O. Box 623
La Jolla, CA 92038-0623



We are on the Web!
www.sdari.org

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Up-coming events:

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

Sunday May 28, 2006

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour

7 p.m. Harry Sutton; Topic: "Search for the Historical Jesus."

Lecture Times 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.