



Rational Inquiry



VOLUME 11, ISSUE 4 *The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Newsletter* FALL, 2006

The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry (SDARI) 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.

Dare to Think

By Keith Taylor

Ah, the things we could learn from people who think, and the things we miss because we refuse to think. George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." Sam Rayburn gave us the more pragmatic "To get along, go along."

A look at the past suggests most of us will follow Rayburn's dictum. It's a confusing world out there and folks generally opt for the easy answer. There is comfort in easy answers. Believing in them puts you in the majority. Then, if we collectively repeat egregious mistakes from the past and things go completely to hell, the blame is spread around among a lot of people who can say, "Hey, everybody said it was so."

Does anybody have a problem with such sloppy thinking? Sure

they do, and I can give you a list of more than a hundred San Diegans who refuse to accept something just because "everybody says it's so."

They would be the members of the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry, located at www.sdari.org on the Web. SDARI is a group dedicated to rational thought and the use of the scientific method of learning what's what.

But just what is this scientific method? I asked that of Barbara Hemmingsen, professor emerita of Microbiology at San Diego State University. She gave me some criteria. First, you come up with an idea. At this point it's merely a hypothesis; then the scientific method demands you try to prove your hypothesis wrong. If it meets every test, you pass it on to some-

one else who is knowledgeable in the field. That person then tries to prove the idea wrong. If he can't, you publish the idea and let the entire world take a shot at it. If it fails any test — as hypothesis or theory — it has to be withdrawn or modified. That's why scientists believe in evolution and relativity. They have met every conceivable test.

When was the last time you heard of soothsayers John Edward, James Van Praagh or Sylvia Brown testing their claims of clairvoyance in such a manner? Indeed when is the last time you heard a theologian try to prove anything without interjecting the idea of faith in there somewhere. Remember that the next time a faith healer tells you to throw away your pills and rely on his hand-waving while calling down the powers of the universe to cure you.

SDARI has been around since 1995. I joined early on and

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Editor Needed!

We are looking for a person who is willing to become editor. The position is presently vacant. The newsletter has been published quarterly in the past, and we would like to maintain this schedule.

Death Penalty, Right or Wrong?

The death penalty is embedded in our laws and appears to have strong public support. Yet, lawyers and groups of citizens frequently have been able to persuade judges to stop the death penalty from being carried out in individual cases. On constitutional grounds, the challenges to this law or to how it is carried out have become increasingly effective. Among citizens and their politicians, the justification for the death penalty has been the subject of hot debate for ethical, moral and rational reasons.

SDARI believes that this is an important subject, and has invited San Diego's and Seattle's former police chief, Norm Stamper to talk about it at our meeting on November 12 at 2 p.m. Norm Stamper has had a distinguished career in law enforcement and is the author of a challenging book, *Breaking Rank: A Top Cop's Expose of the Dark Side of American Policing* (Nation Books, 2005). His book has gotten good reviews which praise Stamper's forthrightness and his

role as a pioneer in progressive policing.

Stamper's lecture and the subsequent discussion should be a very interesting and informative event. We encourage everyone to attend.

Please note: The *DATE* (November 12) and *TIME* (2 P.M.) are different from those of our usual meetings. **THERE WILL BE NO MEETING ON NOVEMBER 26!**



Dare to Think

(Continued from page 1)

have served variously as president, program chair and enthusiastic member. We have made special awards to media members for serious thinking and for specious thinking. Letters of congratulations go out to reporters who manage to look askance at claims presented without any sort of proof. Awards for credulous thinking go to those who report claptrap with scarcely a disclaimer.

We manage to get some recognition. Stacy Taylor of radio station KLSB regularly touts our programs and often interviews our guest speakers. Some time back then President Richard Urich, appeared on Channel 10 to provide a bit of balance to a “news” show about exorcists. I once appeared on Channel 4 (the Padres’ channel) trying to hold up the light of reason to a Carlsbad woman’s claims that she could think real hard and learn what someone, somewhere far off, was thinking.

Roseanne (Barr, et al.) had me on her nationally syndicated TV talk show and gave me a few seconds to provide balance to a guy who for an hour held forth claims that he had been abducted and painfully seduced by aliens some 150 times. Perhaps not too painfully though. He didn’t remember the encounters until he was hypnotized.

Mostly though, SDARI considers itself an educational group. We have monthly meetings with speakers on subjects ranging from the Museum of Hoaxes, to unidentified flying objects, to stem cell research, to earth warming, to therapeutic touch, to intelligent design, to drug laws, to the death penalty.

Our speakers range from world renowned scientists to local folks who have some special knowledge about paranormal claims and rational thinking.

While we have lots of top flight scientists as members, we’re not all educated in the discipline. Take me for example: My highest formal education was at a tiny school in northern Indiana, and that was more than 50 years ago. My understanding of the world has changed a tremendous amount in this last half-century, and you can’t imagine how much of that came after I started following SDARI’s motto: Dare to Think.

I recommend thinking to everybody.



A Challenge to SDARI

By Keith Taylor

The judge looked right at me and said, “I’m going to give you a challenge.”

Egads! This was not Judge Judy or Judge Wapner. This was a real life judge, a conservative one appointed by a conservative governor, and he looked like he meant it.

Then Orange County Superior Court Judge James Gray said, “We have here some of the smartest people in town. My challenge is for you folks to work ten hours a day for seven days and try, just try, to come up with a worse plan for combating drugs than the plan we have now.”

At least I was off the hook, our speaker was not talking just to me, hence the “smartest people” comment. I was just grateful that he included me among the luminaries of SDARI. There were about the 55 of them in attendance at our September 24 meeting.

I think most of us agreed with the judge. Our national drug plan is a terrible mess. Gray ticked off the statistics politicians don’t emphasize but which we are becoming familiar with. We have more people in jail than any developed country in the world, and are building more and more to house even more and more prisoners. All this is because we are fighting a losing war on drugs, and it’s costing us a fortune — no, a million fortunes.

For all that we see more people using illegal drugs. This includes many of our young people, people whose lives are ruined before they get a good start.

One of our larger crowds showed up for the bravura performance by Judge Gray. He feels the drug laws of our country are a disgrace and we only make it worse by electing politicians who know how to push our hot buttons by “getting tough on crime and protecting our children.”

We refuse to look outside our borders. Programs elsewhere have been successful and have spread to yet other countries. One was in Switzerland where users were provided with pure heroin at maintenance levels under strict medical supervision. The results were spectacular, e.g., reduction in crime. Why are

they ignored by our politicians?

We are still doing what never has worked, and our politicians are still bragging about “getting tough on crime.” A companion mantra is “helping people use drugs safely is sending the wrong message to our youth.”

May I suggest that the wrong message is “we will let you die rather than give up on a failed policy.”

Judge Gray ended his lecture with the admonition that we all become active in this fight against irrationality. We have an election coming up. How about if every one of us contacts at least one politician and urges that politician to take a stand against a program that isn’t working? You might mention SDARI, and also the Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, LEAP. Judge Gray’s comments were his own, but his talk was sponsored by them. <http://www.leap.cc>

Judge Gray has written a book on the subject, *How Our Drug Laws Have Failed and What We can Do About it*. It is available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and leading bookstores.



Book Reviews

We notice that many of our members are avid readers of books concerning philosophy, religion, politics, science and almost everything else. Opinions about the more interesting books are often brought out during our social gatherings. Some members are generous enough to bring their “collections” to our meetings for other to peruse or borrow.

We are encouraging these readers to take the time to write short book reviews for *Rational Inquiry* so that their opinions can be shared with a wider audience. We also like to remind our members that articles in the form of essays, as well as interesting notes and news items are welcome submissions. Without such contributions, the editor’s work becomes more difficult.

Rational Musings by the President

In this column, I'll share some recent media experiences, discuss some fallacies that annoy me, and enjoy brief visits with four skeptics, including two old masters. These were things that I found interesting, I hope you do, too.

I was pleased to find a column in the Sci/Tech section of the Sunday, September 24, issue of the *North County Times* newspaper singing the praises of science writer and skeptic Martin Gardner. I sent the columnist, Bradley J. Fikes, an e-mail thanking him, and telling him about SDARI just in case he was not aware of us. Here are a few gems from his column: "Since science is concerned with reality, those who reject science reject reality. And when politicians pander to anti-science, it also can endanger the health of entire nations. Denying or corrupting science threatens the essence of humanity itself. The modern world around us, with its comforts, benefits (and such irritations as beeping cell phones) is a creation of science. Without it, we would be just parasite-ridden naked apes grubbing for food and living in caves." Thank you, Bradley J. Fikes.

Last month, the History Channel aired a program titled "Psychic History". According to my TV program guide, medium John Holland uses his psychic ability to sense past events at historic locations. Huh?! He predicts the past? Did I ever tell you about my psychic power — I can look at the markings in books and magazines and interpret their meanings. Yes, it's true, I am a psychic "reader". There are so many amazing people in the world! (What's that smell? I think it's...sarcasm.)

On the Discovery Channel, I was bothered by a program called "What Really Killed the Dinosaurs?" Two groups of scientists had two different hypotheses about the formation of an 8 meter thick layer of limestone and sandstone at the KT Boundary, the layer of sediment that marks the end of the dinosaurs. Since one group's hypothesis says that this layer formed quickly and the other group claims that it took several hundred thousand years, clearly only one of them can be correct. A green substance was extracted from this sediment layer and both groups

analyzed it using the same tests and the same devices. Each group came up with test results that supported their hypothesis and disagreed with the other group's hypothesis. To a layman, that sounds like someone is either biased or cheating. What message does this send to the public, who are bombarded with anti-science propaganda and who are questioning whether scientists are reliable and trustworthy?

Logical fallacies and muddled thinking are partly to blame for people believing that skeptics and scientists are just as biased and dogmatic as everyone else. There's a popular fallacy that both sides of an argument are equally valid, or equally biased, or equally dogmatic. We skeptics hear this a lot from New Agers, astrologers, paranormal investigators, etc., but the fallacy is also popular in arguments about politics and religion. "You skeptics and scientists, you're just as dogmatic and closed-minded as the believers," they'll say, "all your evidence and proofs are biased by your own prejudice and beliefs." Or, "it's just another way of looking at the world, another point of view, there is no right or wrong, certainty is an illusion, objectivity doesn't exist." (Personally, I think this fallacy is more about obstruction and obfuscation than a genuine philosophical point of view, but that's just my opinion.)

These attempts to denigrate science and skepticism, objectivity and evidence, seem to me, at times, to be deliberately deceptive. If Sam claims that the Sun orbits the Earth, and Sally says that the Earth is in orbit around the Sun, are these just two different points of view, two equally valid opinions? Clearly, no. That the planets orbit the sun is as certain a fact as starlight. Every day, at work and at play, we all depend on a million certainties to get things done. Not for a second do we ever worry that today liquids will flow uphill, or that the laws of electricity, or magnetism, or thermodynamics will stop working. And that includes the people who claim not to believe in certainty. When smart people claim to believe things that are clearly not true, I get suspicious.

If you haven't yet discovered the Skepticity website, at www.skepticity.com, I recommend you start with Michael Shermer's interview with James Randi on September 24, 2006. An energetic and animated Randi discussed how self-

deception is the biggest human flaw, and that knowing that you can be deceived and knowing when you are out of your field of expertise is an important stride forward in a person's intellectual development. They also discussed the myth that science takes away from our sense of wonder at the universe. When a scientist looks at the beauty of a flower, he or she can have the same emotional experience as everyone else, and then the scientific viewpoint adds additional layers of wonder and understanding.

On Sunday, October 8, four of us from San Diego attended a Symposium where Sam Harris was one of the participants, and he reminded us of Bertrand Russell's teapot argument, with his own added interpretation. Russell's teapot argument was a response to those people who say that if it cannot be proven that something exists or does not exist, then it is as reasonable to believe the thing exists as it is to believe the thing does not exist. "If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit," wrote Russell, "nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes." Though it cannot be proven that such a teapot exists or does not exist, to believe the teapot exists is clearly irrational. And, as Sam Harris pointed out, given the lack of any positive evidence, even to be an agnostic about the orbiting teapot is not rational. This argument reminds us that some of our best arguments have been around for tens, hundreds, and even thousands of years.

Paul Wenger.

James Randi's *The Amazing Meeting 5* will take place at the Riviera resort in Las Vegas January 18-21, 2007. Registration for non-members is \$350. Rooms are available at Riviera Hotel for \$89 a night. These meetings are usually a sell-out. Early registration advised. The theme will be "Skepticism and the Media", and the event will feature a number of well-known personalities and skeptics, such as Michael Shermer, Adam Savage, Peter Sagal, Eugenie Scott, Penn and Teller, and Randi himself. See www.randi.org for more information.

From the Editors Desk

CFI to San Diego?

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) headquartered in Amherst, New York, informally has expressed an interest in establishing a CFI Community in San Diego, if sufficient local interest exists. CFI is worldwide in scope with affiliated offices in a number of countries, and regional hubs in five states, including a Center for the Western states in Los Angeles (CFI West). Quoting from their mission statement, the purpose of CFI “is to promote and defend reason, science, and freedom of thought in all areas of human endeavor. Through education, research, publishing, and social services, it seeks to present affirmative alternatives based on scientific naturalism. The Center is also interested in providing rational ethical alternatives to the reigning paranormal and religious systems of belief, [by] developing communities where like-minded individuals can meet and share experiences.”

So far, CFI Communities have been established in about a dozen different areas of this country. Virtually all of these groups are the product of local grass-roots secular humanist and skeptic movements, and draw entirely upon volunteers. They are governed by local boards that are advisory to CFI headquarters. Their operations are financed by fund raising, donations and rebates from membership fees paid to CFI. As a member, you become a *Friend of the Center*. The individual rate for annual membership would be \$60 per year. Membership benefits include free or discounted admission to lectures and other events sponsored by CFI.

If a CFI Community were established in San Diego, it would operate under the auspices of CFI West, and thus would benefit from speakers, legal protection, and other support provided by the mother organization. It should be very beneficial for local skeptics and humanists to have access to these resources.

I believe that there is considerable interest in the San Diego for creating such an organization. Currently, activities and resources are divided among smaller groups. This may be less effective in combating irrational thinking than a joint operation.

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Marvel Water

There were cases of them at our local Vons Supermarket, stacked neatly and prominently at the end of the aisle to catch attention. They did. The pint sized (500 ml) bottles are labeled *Penta, Ultra Premium Purified Drinking Water*, priced at \$1.79 each. Many brands “guarantee” purity, but this one is different. A promotional brochure claims that *Penta* is created using a 13-step purification process that includes a patented physics process that “gives *Penta* unique properties that help the body to function more efficiently.”

That got the attention of an old physiologist and biophysicist who spent many years studying some of the physical properties of water. Not surprisingly, *Penta* claims to be much better for the body than any other water; it would have to be to justify its \$13.55 per gallon price tag. But most remarkably, as claimed in the free CD placed next to the bottles, the patented special physics process involves changing the water structure and thereby creating water with a higher boiling point, a higher surface tension and a lower viscosity. What a breakthrough!!! The atomic forces operating over the last 15 billion years have been finally brought under control and used to modify water structure. We are not told how it is done, but presumably the Patent Office knows.

This is really great, better than the works of Newton and Einstein, combined. Now we just have to wait for the Nobel Prize in Physics to be awarded to the creators of *Penta*. When this happens, I will buy a case of this marvel water – if the supply has not been snatched up by eager scientists.

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Legal Neglect of Children

Last month I had the good fortune of becoming a grandfather to a little girl. She is a lucky child. Her well-educated parents will see to it that she has the best modern medical care should any health problems arise in her future.

That is not the case for all children born in our advanced country. We are all too aware that certain religious sects, most notably the Christian Scientists, continue to deprive their children of proper medical

care, because of religious beliefs. Frequently, this policy leads to the suffering and even death of young children. The parents grieve, blame themselves for not having faith enough, or praying hard enough, and society lets them get away with this child abuse.

Even though this is atrocious neglect of the child by the adults, the judicial system either declines to bring charges, or dismisses charges, acquiescing to the parents’ claims of religious freedom and rights.

This lack of legal protection of children recently got a new twist. About the same time as my granddaughter was born, the district attorney of nearby Los Angeles County decided not to file criminal negligence charges against a prominent HIV denier whose 3 year old daughter died of AIDS related pneumonia. The mother, who was HIV positive at the time of her pregnancy, did not take antiviral drugs during the pregnancy, breast fed her baby, and did not have her daughter tested for the virus at any time. She is the founder of “Alive & Well AIDS Alternatives”, a group that denies that AIDS is caused by HIV.

How can a reasonably intelligent person intentionally ignore overwhelming scientific evidence and general medical consensus, cause the death of her daughter, and get away with it without repercussions?

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SDARI Election of Officers

The Bylaws of San Diego Association of Rational Inquiry requires that officers of the corporation be elected once a year. The elections will be held at the November 12 meeting. Following tradition for minimum service, the current officers have been nominated by the Board at large to serve a second term.

Paul Wenger, President

Walt Carver, Vice-President

Keith Taylor, Secretary

Barbara B. Hemmingsen, Treasurer

Nominations for different candidates will be accepted from the floor before the election is held.

I believe that the current officers have done a splendid job. Why don’t you come and vote your approval.

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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 P. O. Box 623 La Jolla, CA 92038-0623 Phone: Email: For information contact contact Keith Taylor at 619-421-5844, or see our Website at sdari.org

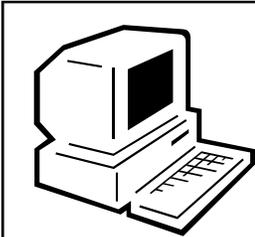
We need your support! Please renew your membership. It costs to print and mail this newsletter and promotional fliers, award Science Fair prizes, and occasionally, to defray a small expense for the speaker. The membership gives the moral support for our cause. SDARI has been granted federal tax exempt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

Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

Public lectures are held at 7 p.m. on the fourth Sunday of the month (except December). Note that the November 2006 meeting will be held on Nov. 12 at 2 p.m. The location of all meetings is the Joyce Beers Community Center, Vermont Street, 2 blocks north of University Ave., in the Hillcrest area. (The Center is near Ralphs and Trader Joe's markets in Uptown District Shopping Center. The parking is free).

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

Submission of Manuscripts Articles, essays book reviews 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. The Editorial Board, as appropriate, may evaluate each submitted work before publication for its suitability. 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 the material for publication (preferably on a medium compatible with Microsoft Windows) to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry P. O. Box 623 La Jolla, CA 92038-0623



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.

We are at sdari.org

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

We are on the Web!
sdari.org

**San Diego Association for
Rational Inquiry**

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Up-coming events:

in the **Joyce Beers Community Center** (See p. 7 for directions):

Sunday October 22, 2006.

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour. Bring your dinner.

7 p.m. Lectures: Hossein Azar and Elie Shneour, M.D. Ph.D, *Water, Water Everywhere, But is it Fit to Drink?*

Sunday November 12, 2006. (Note different date and time) NO meeting on Nov. 26th.

2 p.m. Lecture: Norm Stamper, *Death Penalty, Right or Wrong?*

***Join our meetings. Participate and be informed. Become a member of SDARI.
The membership is tax deductible.***