



# Rational Inquiry

Dare  
to  
think

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 1 *The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Newsletter* WINTER, 2007

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.

## 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.**



## Philip Paulsen He Took Nothing on Faith

By Keith Taylor

Phil Paulson died of cancer on October 25. The Humanist Association of San Diego held a memorial in his memory on November 18. I was honored to say a few words on behalf of my friend.

Phil Paulson and I were friends for a long time. I was once head of SDARI, our city's only skeptics group, and Phil was the world's greatest skeptic. It was a perfect match. Like so many of you I'd chat with him on the phone, often for an hour or more. He had an idea on everything that went on in the world, and his understanding of "everything" was the result of reading, studying, and thinking. I think a proper epithet for him might be "he took nothing on faith."

We both felt his life was so important it ought to be recorded. After all, he went through the hell he didn't believe in right here on earth, and he felt it was important the world know who he was and why he stirred up such a fuss.

Unfortunately we hadn't got more than a few hundred words on paper before he called with the terrible news. The cancer he thought he had beaten had returned and the doctor told him he only had a few months.

Now it was urgent and we tried to get his story down, but it was impossible. Chemotherapy and the accompanying medications would knock him for a loop for a couple days at a time and there weren't that many days to work with. Also he had important things to take care of. A man facing the end of his life doesn't have the luxury of putting stuff off as do those of us whose end is not a mere few weeks ahead. Still

we tried and I learned enough about his first thirty years to get a great insight into the life of a great man.

Everybody tells of his sense of humor, and everybody has a story to tell about it. And his funny bone didn't stop working just because he faced death, not a bit. One day I was interviewing him by speaker phone when my wife interrupted me with a chore that had to be done, and "I don't mean tomorrow."

Naturally he overheard it. I said to my friend, "And you think you have problems."

There are only a handful of people I would dare try such a thing with. The one I did laughed and got me laughing until both of us cried. It wasn't the last time Phil Paulson made me cry. I didn't think guys my age would still do that until Jim McElroy called with the bad news on October 25th.

But what a life he had! What things he did! What a wealth of experience he picked up during his nearly six decades! Anybody with a sense of adventure would envy his riding freight trains, being a roughneck on oil rigs in Texas, helping build the Navy's newest Assault Aircraft Carrier, helping build the J. Edgar Hoover FBI building in Washington, being a photo journalist, teaching college. — all this before the most important thing he did back in 1989.

And courage! Anybody who has a healthy fear of religion run amok must be grateful we had a man with the courage of Phil Paulson. Ironically about the only place where Americans praise courage is on the battlefield.

More than most of us who also

wore our country's uniform, he faced death many times and he did it without the crutch of a promise of eternal bliss if things went wrong.

Still although he was easily as patriotic as they come, he didn't wear his patriotism on his sleeve as did the San Diego talk show hosts who denigrated him constantly. He, unlike them, actually served and fought in the war they each found a reason to avoid.

Phil emphasized that he fought for two things, to survive and to help his buddies survive. He did that through some of the fiercest battles of the war. In one, a place called Dak To, his company started with 200 men. Only 40 walked off hill 875. He carried many of the wounded personally. Some died in his arms.

I once wrote that the cross on our mountain, Mt. Soledad, should be replaced by something that represents every veteran no matter his religion or even if he had none. I said they should erect a statue of Phil Paulson. He, of course, thought that was a joke, and I suppose it was. Of course both of us knew it would be the last thing to happen in San Diego. After all we are not Alabama where they tolerate a statue devoted to Atheists in Foxholes.

I was among the few who suggested he be honored. The Army didn't. Its chaplains hounded him to go to religious church and stop being a "bad example" for those who believed in things Phil couldn't bring himself to pretend were real. He should have been given a medal for his acts that day at Dak To, but he was not given any personal decorations, or promotions, not then, not at any time during his two consecutive tours in country. We can only infer the reasons.

*(Continued on page 2)*

**Philip Paulsen***(Continued from page 1)*

But courage? Being resolute while marching out of step with society takes more courage than all but a few of us possess, and Phil Paulson showed that for seventeen years. He persisted despite being reviled in every manner by people who claimed to be speaking for a loving God.

He persevered in acknowledging his atheism when it is so easy to simply pretend the word only belongs to others. He was a returning veteran with the same nightmares as had so many others. He sought the camaraderie of his fellow veterans at an American Legion post in northern Wisconsin. When he asked about pledging allegiance to God he was told to just say the words. He was told it didn't matter.

And perhaps it doesn't. So few of us refuse to bend the truth! Standing up for what we believe, or in our case, what we do not believe, comes at a high cost. Phil Paulson paid the price for us. Even the American Legion rubbed it in by joining in the lawsuit against his cause. The Legion, like so many others, insists that a cross on a mountain represents all of us even though we don't believe in, and feel threatened by, what that cross represents.

It takes more guts than all but a few possess to do what Phil Paulson did. While I'm here eulogizing my good friend, I'd also like to salute another good friend, Steve Trunk. Steve signed on to the lawsuit to ensure its continuing after Phil died.

And his attorney, Jim McElroy, who has also suffered the vituperations of those who dislike like him for doing his sworn duty by representing his client! I salute you also Jim. When you finally prevail in this case you'll have the gratitude of a small but very concerned group of Americans. We are not many, but we have the smartest ones on our side.

Thank you both for protecting this legacy of a man who gave seventeen years of his life to our cause.

It's for good reason we admire him. Can anything be nobler than what he did? Can those of us who are non believers, and there are so many more than admit to it, ever pay enough respect to such a man? Will those of us who, ourselves, want to be respected for what we know and what we think rather than for what we believe ever find such respect? Will we ever be trusted because of our insistence that we solve problems by thinking not by superstition?

A huge man, huge in every respect, opened the door a bit for us. Now it's up to us to push it all the way open. We must insist that people, at least those who make

decisions for us, depend upon thinking, not dogma in making their decisions. The future of the world depends upon it. No politician ever had a greater cause or pur-

sued it more in the face of such adversity than Phil Paulson.

*Keith Taylor is the secretary of SDARI*

## Rational Musings by the President

At [www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org) you will find The 2007 Edge Question, "What Are You Optimistic About? Why?". 160 world-class thinkers responded, and I think that a look at some of their responses is a great way to start the new year.

Michael Shermer, author and publisher of Skeptic magazine, takes "the historian's long view", and declares, "I am optimistic that science is winning out over magic and superstition." He argues that, although today many people still believe in things like ESP, astrology, and ghosts, a few hundred years ago almost everyone believed in sorcery, werewolves, hobgoblins and the like. Many of yesterday's superstitions have been replaced with natural explanations. His essay contains an interesting quote from historian Keith Thomas: "If magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it."

Human genome decoder, J. Craig Venter, and NYU professor Clay Shirky, sing the praises of "evidence-based decision making". "For most scientists the evidence for evolution, regardless of its origins, has been overwhelming. The fossil record was sufficient evidence for most, but now with genome sequencing information from all branches of life, including from some of our closest relatives like Neanderthals, chimps, and rhesus monkeys, the results should be clear cut for anyone whose thinking is not overly clouded by a 'belief' system", writes Venter. Shirky writes about Galileo's test of Aristotle's claim that heavy things fall faster, and how we learned as schoolchildren that evidence proved that Aristotle was wrong. "Surely the power of evidence over authority is obvious", concludes Shirky. While he concedes that progress has been slow, Shirky predicts that our rapidly improving skills at gathering and understanding evidence will lead us to apply evidence-based decision making "everywhere".

"Had the question been, 'What are you pessimistic about?' I would have

answered: If there is any progress in human wisdom (and, yes, I suppose there is) it is pathetically slow, while ever faster technological advances provide the means for self-righteous, unwise people with power, wealth, or charisma to cause greater and greater havoc. I don't alas have any equally broad and compelling reasons to be optimistic about the future of humankind. Humans, however, are full of surprises, many of them excellent, arousing new hopes every day", writes scientist and author Dan Sperber. He then goes on to discuss altruism on the World Wide Web. "A vast array of technological, intellectual and artistic creations, many of them of outstanding quality, are being made freely available to all according to their needs by individuals working according to the best of their abilities and often seeking self-realization even more than recognition", he writes. A brief discussion of the economics of information follows.

"Restless creatures that we are," writes philosopher Barry Smith, "we seek out variety and difference, opportunities to extend the scope of our thinking and to exercise discrimination and taste. This may make us hard to satisfy, but, ultimately, it is this lack of satisfaction that leads to progress and spells the end of hegemonies in ideology, religion, or science." Over time, our experiences with the superficial, the quick and the gimmicky, make us better judges of worth and quality. Our hunger for new and better, argues Smith, in the long run dooms all attempts to control our tastes, media, politics, or morality. I don't know if he is right, but it is an interesting argument.

Professor of Astrophysics Piet Hut thinks that the strength of science is that scientists allow the scientific method to change, slowly and carefully, and that the success of science is due to "its unique combination of progressive and conservative elements". As I interpret his argument, he is suggesting that scientists are progressive in coming up with new ideas and methods, but conservative, without being dogmatic, in accepting these new ideas and methods. "My optimism is that other areas of human activities can learn from science to combine conservative and progressive approaches," Hut writes, "taming the usual black-white duality in a collaborative dance of opposites." He also argues that

*(Continued on page 3)*

pure science is superior to applied research, “that long-term research should not focus on goals, but rather it should let the scientific method follow its own course”. He feels that the greatest breakthroughs, such as quantum mechanics, happened because scientists were free from goals and they broke the rules of the scientific method as it was understood at the time. The progressive and conservative elements then fight it out until a consensus is reached.

“I’m optimistic because there’s a core decency in people that even the worst machinations of governments can’t entirely hold down,” writes author David Bodanis. He tells us of a London children’s hospital with a giant atrium in the middle. The window cleaners dress up as superheroes, and the “children in bed—many with grave illnesses—delight in seeing Superman and Spiderman dangling just inches away from them”. He concludes, “The government has wasted a fortune on consultants, bureaucracy and reorganizations of the NHS. It’s always defended in cold management-speak. This simple arrangement with the window cleaners cuts through all that. Everyone I’ve mentioned it to recognizes that—and in that recognition lies our hope.”

Author and psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman writes, “I am optimistic that God may come at the end.” But he’s not talking about a supernatural God. He recalls an Isaac Asimov short story called “The Last Question”. Scientists ask a giant computer if entropy, the heat death of the Universe, can be reversed. The computer can’t answer the question, but considers the problem over the millennia as it is enlarged and fed more data as humanity explores the cosmos. Eventually the stars burn out and all life disappears, and the computer continues searching for the answer. Finally the computer discovers the answer to the question, but there is no one left to hear it. The answer, however, solves that problem. And the computer says, “let there be light!” Seligman suggests that the ultimate goal of science is omniscience, the ultimate goal of technology is omnipotence, and the ultimate goal of our institutions is righteousness, and he is optimistic that we are a part of a process that will someday reach these goals. Wow!

I’ve given you a small taste of these eight essays. I recommend you check them out for yourself, it will be worth it.

Paul Wenger

## From the Editor’s Desk

**Yin, Yang or Scalpels.** During a two-week trip in China last year, my wife and I were amazed about the speed with which modernization is occurring in that country. There was much evidence to show that our Western culture was displacing traditional ways of life, with emphasis placed on developing science and technology as well as a modern infrastructure. The Western influence was very apparent among young people who are hard working and determined to get the best education they possibly could afford in order to move into a more modern way of life.

The dynamism we experienced and observed seemed to be pervasive nearly everywhere we visited. Many published statistics from the country confirm that this is the case. For many years, science and technology have been fueling the development of China’s industry and educational system. In more recent years, science has invaded other fields, most notably medicine. One example illustrates this. Since 1949, the number of doctors using traditional Chinese medicine has fallen by nearly half to 270,000, while those using Western type science-based medicine have jumped twenty-fold, to 1.7 million. And these trends are accelerating despite the fact that the Chinese constitution mandates that the two types be given equal representation and value.

This contrasts sharply to what is happening in our country. Here, various forms of alternative or supplementary “medicine” are given more prominence by support from insurance companies, public and tax-exempt private funds, and many medical schools, the lack of efficacy and other problems notwithstanding.

The U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt recently went to China to trade lessons on how to integrate Chinese and Western medicine. Not a good omen from the administration in Washington. Is it going to be even more chi, yin, yang and herbs for us, and more science-based, effective treatments for them?

**How Times Change.** It was not long ago that the constitutionally mandated separation of state and church had some respect. In a campaign speech in Houston on September 12, 1960, presidential candidate Jon F. Kennedy made a point.

He said: “I believe in an America where the separation of church is absolute;

where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote -- where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference . . . I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials. . .”

JFK never wavered from this view.

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**What we don’t know.** About ten years ago, a book by John Horgan was published with the title *The End of Science*. The book made the preposterous claim that all basic scientific problems had been solved. It got widespread exposure in the media and may well have fueled anti-science sentiments. He was dead wrong. Humans are far too curious to allow science to come to an end. Certainly we know how many things work, but there are vast territories in science which have been barely touched. From the birth of science to now we have made incredible advances in our knowledge, but it may well be pale to the advances future generations will make.

Some examples of unknown puzzles that are driving basic research now were listed in the July 2005 issue of *Science* magazine. They are, in part:

What is the Universe made of? What is the biological basis of consciousness? Why do humans have so few genes? To what extent are genetic variation and personal health linked? Can the laws of physics be unified? How much can the human life span be extended? What controls organ regeneration? How does the Earth’s interior work? How and where did life on Earth arise? What determines species diversity? What genetic changes made us human? How are memories stored and retrieved? Can we selectively shut off immune responses? Is an effective HIV vaccine feasible? How hot will the greenhouse world be? How much can the world population continue to grow?

Does anybody think that we know everything there is to know?

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## Book Review

**Blind Faith. The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine.** Richard P. Sloan, 2006, St. Martin's Press, New York, 295 pp.

The practice of medicine has never been an exact métier. Not only are the human body and psyche very complex, but natural spontaneous remissions of disease, the placebo effect, and other intangible factors often perturb efforts to identify and treat maladies. Yet, modern medicine based on scientific research has made enormous strides in improving diagnostic and therapeutic procedures that have greatly increased the human lifespan and health related qualities of life.

But patients expect a perfection in medical treatments that rationally cannot be attained. This has led many patients to seek alternative and supplementary ways to attempt to solve their health problems, and has, in turn, led to a huge very profitable industry that provides the products, even though they have little or no value, and certainly lack scientific proofs of their effectiveness.

Religion has to an increasing degree been added to this hotchpotch of beliefs. The more notable developments are the claims that being a religious person will keep you healthier and allow you to live a longer life, and that prayers can be used to heal illnesses and cure diseases.

Delusive faith healing in one form or another has been with us for millennia, from ancient primitive societies to our modern cultures. What is new is that there are organized efforts from religious groups and politicians, facilitated by public funds, to legitimize faith healing, and bring it into clinical medicine as a healing tool. These efforts are aided by so-called scientific studies, funded by wealthy private organizations and mostly published in journals which with a few exceptions have no scientific credentials.

In his book, *Blind Faith, The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine*, Richard Sloan looks at many aspects of this intrusion of religion into the general practice of modern medicine. Sloan, who is professor of behavioral medicine at

Columbia University, examines several of these studies which claim that religious activities, such as church attendance and praying, are beneficial for health.

These types of studies usually require comparisons of groups of people using epidemiological techniques that can be very difficult and are full of pitfalls for the unwary. In the well publicized studies that Sloan analyzes he finds none of them stand up to scientific scrutiny, even those few that have made it into respected journals. They simply do not meet the accepted standard that would make them scientifically credible. Among the typical flaws are poor selection of groups, erroneous use of statistics, subtle or blatant bias, and ignoring factors that inherently will affect the outcome.

A simple example. One study concluded that persons who regularly attended church services had a lower death rate than those who did not attend. Actually the only conclusion that could be drawn is that poor health is linked to both low attendance and increased mortality, nothing more. Substituting movie theater visiting for church services no doubt would yield the same result.

Another example (published in the prestigious *The Lancet*) deals with the effect of distant praying on patients. More rigorous scientific protocols were used in this study, though some debatable premises were made at the outset. Absolutely no healing effect from the praying was found; a conclusion to which the authors fully concurred. Only when on-site music, images and therapeutic touch were applied with the praying, a small effect was discerned, for "unknown reasons", as stated by the authors.

Sloan's debunking is convincing, and would be very difficult or impossible to counter. His arguments are presented in a clear prose that non-specialists outside the fields of science and medicine will have no difficulties in absorbing.

Sloan does not reject the notion that religion may have a role in medicine, such as being of comfort to many patients. But he wants the religious aspects to be the responsibility of the family and the ordained clergy, not the physicians in their medical practice. Apart from the fact that efficacy has not been demonstrated, he is concerned that involving physicians in religious matters would

seriously interfere with their efforts to provide normal medical aid and support especially under the time constraints of today.

The book has a large section that gives an excellent overview of the scientific method directed at the general public. I have encountered few presentations more elucidating than this one. The book is terrific reading for anybody who prefers to use facts and not faith and fantasies to solve problems. The author should be thanked for his efforts to bring into the public arena an important problem that many may not be aware of, and which has not yet been debated much. The new direction of medical practice, if it were allowed to evolve, could have a very negative impact on the health system in the future. It is unsettling to know that more than half of the medical schools in this country provide some training on the role of religion in medicine.

*Edvard A. Hemmingsen*



## CFI in Orange County.

The Center for Inquiry-West regularly provides excellent speakers to their chapter in Orange County. The group meets in the **Costa Mesa Community Center on the third Sunday of the month at 4:30 p.m.** The Community Center is located at 1845 Park Ave., at the merger of Highway 55, Harbor Blvd. and Newport Blvd. We recommend taking Interstate 5 North to tollroad 73 (\$3.75). Go to Hwy 55 and then go West. Alternatively, take 405 to 55. On Sundays, it typically takes an hour and a half to get there by car from San Diego.

On **January 21**, the lecture by Dr. Marty Klein will be *America's War on Sex: Why the Christian Right is Obsessed with Your Sexuality*.

On **February 18**, the lecture by David Koepsell will be *They Satirized My Prophet, those Bastards! Blasphemy in "South Park"*.



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.

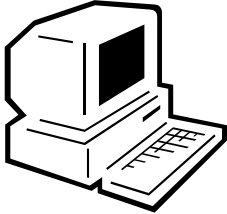
Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

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  
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**We are on the Web!  
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*Up-coming events:*

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

**Sunday January 28, 2007.**

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

**7 p.m. Lecture:** Donald Albright, *What is Geothermal Energy and Can It Help our Energy Problems*. Albright is a science teacher and educational specialist at the San Diego History Museum.

**Sunday February 25, 2007.**

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

**7 p.m. Lecture:** To be announced.

**Sunday March 25, 2007.**

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

**7 p.m. Lecture:** To be announced.

